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To: Members of the Assembly Education Committee
From: Ken Taylor, Executive Director
Date: May 2, 2011
Re: AB110 (school voucher program for students with disabilities)

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families has significant concerns regarding the health and educational outcomes for children with disabilities should this bill become law.

As you know, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as well as state law, students have the right to free and appropriate education, the right to education in the least restrictive setting, the right to transition services from student to adulthood, and the right to not be disciplined for 10 or more days or to be expelled for behavior related to their disability.

Under the law public school systems must address the needs of students with disabilities. **Private schools are not obligated under state or federal law to provide for the unique needs of students with disabilities.**

Much like other voucher programs, AB 110 would provide a “scholarship” amount be assigned to individual students based on his or her needs and that funding will be deducted from the public school district funding and given to the student’s school of choice. Since Wisconsin funds special education services, not individual students, it is unclear how this determination would be accomplished and what the resulting reduced funding might mean for services to students with disabilities remaining in the public school system.

Most notably, the bill provides **no accountability** or requirement that should a private school be chosen by the family, that school actually provide special education services to meet the special needs of the student as identified in the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Contrary to what a parent might expect, the result is that families choosing to make use of these vouchers will be **giving up their child’s rights** guaranteed under the IDEA. Furthermore, in our opinion it is unlikely, no matter how well intentioned the school may be, that sufficient funding would follow each student to create the capacity in most private schools to address the needs of students with disabilities.

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families urges you to oppose this bill. While there is certainly room for improvement in the current special education system, encouraging families to forgo their child’s educational rights as a matter of state policy is not in children’s best interest.