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**HEADLINE:** Let **vouchers** help kids, not pain schools

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**BODY:** Lanetta Estrada is a special education teacher in the public school system of Miami-Dade County, Fla.

She came to Georgia last week to tell state legislators why they should pass the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Act, which is being fought here by the alphabet-soup organizations that congregate to defend their public school turf.

She stood before a House education subcommittee as a teacher --- and as the mother of a 10-year-old autistic son. Her story of his journey through public school, and of her growing awareness that despite her "utmost respect and admiration" for her fellow teachers, "my school was not the best place for my son."

Like most special education parents, she devoted enormous time and effort to finding out what her son needed. Her research led her to the decision to remove her son, Lucas, from "the school I loved." She applied for one of Florida's McKay scholarships, the program on which the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Act is patterned. "I was scared," she said. "I loved my school. After all, this is my job. I prayed that this was the right decision." She enrolled her son in a private school specializing in disabilities. "At this school, he is now reaching his full academic and emotional potential," said Estrada.

"The bottom line is that the Florida McKay Scholarship program has been a blessing for me and my son and for 17,000 other children and families in Florida," she said.

Estrada was one of a string of teachers, parents, alphabet-soup lobbyists and others who argued for and against bills sponsored in the Senate by state Sen. Eric Johnson (R-Savannah) and in the House by schoolteacher and state Rep. David Casas, (R-Lilburn). Casas and Johnson have different ideas about the extent to which private schools should be subject to state regulation in taking special needs students on scholarships or

**vouchers**, whatever one prefers to call these and the HOPE stipends that currently go to private schools.

This effort, along with charter school legislation initiated by Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle and state Rep. Ed Setzler (R-Acworth) and a bill by state Rep. Earl Ehrhart (R-Powder Springs) to offer educational tax credits to individuals and corporations, marks this as the most reform-minded legislatures yet.

Nothing being offered is revolutionary in the sense that it is particularly daring. It's patterned, by and large, on programs elsewhere. It's noteworthy simply because Georgia has been so resistant to altering the status quo, except by the means endorsed by the traditional interests that dictate public policy --- the unions and alphabet organizations representing public school groups. None of them are bad people or bad organizations. They are, like every other industry confronted by a changed marketplace, eager to limit and manage the competition --- and for decades, they've done that.

The trick now --- and it was evident in last week's debate --- is to avoid planting poison pills in the special needs scholarship act. On regulation, for example, the alphabet organizations know that the quickest way to eliminate the appeal of scholarships to potential private sector competitors is to package them with paperwork, with rules and regulations that make it too time-consuming and expensive to admit scholarship kids. It's paper choice --- existing on paper, but not in reality.

That was part of the problem with No Child Left Behind's choice provisions, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings acknowledged here earlier this month. Parents of poor children in persistently nonperforming public schools could go elsewhere. They had choice, but some systems made that information difficult for parents to access or understand. Choice, then, was chance.

As the House and Senate work together to advance reform, it is essential that choice and scholarships for parents of special needs children not become, or be seen as, an indirect way of regulating private schools. The intent should be to actually give parents options and to trust them to buy the education services they believe their child needs from any willing and able provider.

It's up to the parents, not the government, to decide --- just as Lanetta Estrada did --- which approaches will best serve the needs of their children. The goal here is to empower parents, not to regulate the competition.

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