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DC public schools moving in the right direction? Maybe

By: [Nicki Kurokawa](#)

Special to The Examiner

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DC Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee has been an outspoken advocate for school reform – often angering teachers unions along the way. She’s come under fire for [firing underperforming teachers](#) – a move likely to be [repeated again soon](#) according to the *Washington Examiner* – and her latest announcement is likely to antagonize entrenched interests even further. As *the Washington Times* reports, Rhee hopes to expand the use of school voucher programs for special education students.

As part of her reform package, Miss Rhee is considering using publicly funded vouchers for special-needs students whose parents opt out of the system and enroll their children in private schools. Miss Rhee also wants to build new facilities, provide high-caliber services and reduce the city’s reliance on private schools for special-needs youths.

Implementing those and other reforms is being determined by a feasibility study that will consider several options, including vouchers.

"DCPS would offer scholarship programs to families of students in need of full-time placements," Miss Rhee said when she unveiled her proposal earlier this month. "This program would allow parents who voluntarily opt out of DCPS programming to purchase special-education services from a network of pre-approved private schools."

Voucher programs for special needs students are nothing new – they are in place in a number of states across the country, including [Florida](#), [Georgia](#), [Ohio](#), [Utah](#), [Louisiana](#), and [Oklahoma](#). These programs are a [win-win for school districts and families alike](#); districts are able to concentrate their limited resources on the general student population (rather than minimizing funding for special needs programs, which happens all too often) while parents are able to use the funds that would have been used in a subpar program to place their child in the best possible alternative setting – public or private – for their needs.

Costs for special-needs education [vary by state](#), but parents of special-needs students routinely face high out-of-pocket costs; why not allow them to take advantage of money they’re already spending in the

form of their taxes? According to a [recent Cato Institute study](#), actual per-pupil spending in DC is \$28,170 (that's 44% higher than officially reported, in case you were keeping track). That kind of money could do a lot of good if it were spent wisely.

Some food for thought: as states face ongoing budget shortfalls, special-needs programs are often on the [chopping block](#). Rather than sacrificing the education of a few, it makes sense to allow schools to specialize, rather than being all things to all people. Rhee's plan is on the right track – let's hope that the teachers' unions and Vince Gray don't block this opportunity for some of DC's most vulnerable students.

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