



October 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Blackwell, W. H., & Robinson, J. M. (2017). School Choice Vouchers and Special Education in Indiana Catholic Diocesan Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2101082017>

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## School Choice Vouchers and Special Education in Indiana Catholic Diocesan Schools

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*Catholic schools are now located at a crossroads of school choice voucher programs and special education services. With enrollment in Catholic schools declining over the past several decades, voucher programs that allow parents to use public funds for tuition at private schools – including tuition for students with disabilities – could possibly help to steady or even reverse this decline. This study examined the impact of Indiana’s statewide voucher program on Catholic schools, student enrollment, and special education services in three large diocesan school systems. The findings address issues related to enrollment growth, changing student population characteristics, special education services, and the professional development needs of teachers in these schools. The authors discuss the implications of the voucher program for the enrollment and education of students with disabilities in Catholic schools.*

### Keywords

School choice, vouchers, Catholic schools, special education

Since the first publicly-funded school choice voucher program was enacted in Wisconsin in 1990, voucher programs that allow parents to use public funds for tuition at private schools have increased significantly (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2016; Underwood, 2015). These programs typically operate by reallocating a portion of state funding for public schools to families in the form of tuition vouchers that cover all or part of a child’s private schooling costs. As of the 2015–2016 academic year, over 166,000 students were enrolled in voucher programs in 15 states and Washington, DC, and an additional 14 states offered other forms of financial incentives for students to enroll in private schools through scholarship programs and tax credits (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2016).

Proponents of vouchers argue that these programs will stimulate improvement in both the public and private school sectors through competition, as well as provide parents with increased autonomy to determine how tax dollars will be used for their children's education (Center for Education Reform, 2014; Etscheidt, 2005). Opponents of voucher programs cite concerns related to their constitutionality at both the state and federal levels, particularly as it relates to the First Amendment and the separation of church and state (Cunningham, 2015; Underwood, 2015). With these concerns at the forefront, several existing state voucher programs have been challenged in both federal and state courts. Voucher programs in Colorado, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin have all been ruled to be constitutional after several levels of court decisions, and multiple scholarship and tax credit programs in Arizona that permit parents to enroll their children in private schools have also been ruled as operating within the accepted parameters of the U.S. Constitution and state law (Cunningham, 2015; Underwood, 2015).

### **Voucher Programs and Special Education Services**

Additional concerns have been raised about the obligations that private schools have regarding the education of students with disabilities who participate in voucher programs (Underwood, 2015; Etscheidt, 2005). Opponents fear that these voucher programs will provide funds to schools that do not have the capacity and are not legally required to serve students with disabilities as outlined in federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Taylor, 2006). Of the 15 states with voucher programs, 11 states have programs that specifically target the enrollment of students with disabilities in private schools. Nine of these states have had the programs for multiple years, and two states (Arkansas and Wisconsin) have new programs for the 2016-2017 academic year (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2016).

There appears to be reasonable cause for concern. Citing existing policy documents and program guidelines, Etscheidt (2005) and Taylor (2005, 2006) raised potential issues regarding the extent to which voucher programs require private schools to adhere to the core principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including developing and implementing individualized education programs, providing services in the least restrictive environment, offering due process to parents when disagreements arise, and utilizing non-discriminatory assessment procedures. Cunningham (2015)

noted that each of the nine states with voucher programs specifically targeted toward the enrollment of students with disabilities had policies that required parents to forgo their rights under IDEA. Based on these analyses, it appears that voucher programs are requiring parents to forgo their substantive and procedural rights under federal disability law. However, there are no recent court decisions that examine the legality of voucher programs in regards to the requirements of IDEA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The existing case law on voucher programs has focused almost exclusively on issues regarding the First Amendment, the use of public funds for religious schools, and the extent to which voucher programs operate within the established bounds of states' educational laws (Cunningham, 2015; Underwood, 2015).

### **Catholic Schools, Voucher Programs, and Special Education Services**

Catholic schools are now located at a crossroads of voucher programs and special education services. Enrollment in Catholic schools has declined over the past several decades (Walch, 2003) and school leaders have responded by offering tuition incentives and other programs to help slow down this trend (Cunningham, 2015; Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2011). School voucher programs present a potential opportunity for Catholic schools to stabilize and possibly increase enrollment. According to data compiled by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (2016), annual tuition voucher amounts range from approximately \$1200 (Colorado) to over \$10,000 (Maine, Ohio, and Vermont), with a median of approximately \$5500 (Georgia). While Cunningham (2015) has correctly observed that vouchers are likely to benefit higher income families who have more disposable income remaining after tuition payments (and are therefore more likely to find the additional tuition costs beyond the voucher amount to be financially sustainable), the tuition offset provided by voucher programs should still function as an incentive for families from a range of income categories who want to enroll their children in Catholic education. With a number of court cases now having ruled voucher programs to be legal, this could be an enrollment opportunity that Catholic schools can look toward for stabilization and growth.

Another avenue that Catholic schools have become more engaged with is the provision of special education services to children with disabilities (Bello, 2006). Catholic dioceses have operated schools that exclusively served students with disabilities since the mid-1800s, but were initially reluctant to enroll large numbers of students with disabilities in typical parochial

schools (DeFiore, 2006). However, since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (now reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), Catholic schools have explored options for increasing the number and quality of services available for children with disabilities and their families (DeFiore, 2006; Scanlan, 2009). Catholic schools have worked to develop inclusionary service delivery models that address both the moral responsibilities set forth by Catholic social teaching and the legal responsibilities established under IDEA (Scanlan, 2009). These efforts have not been aided greatly by the current federal special education requirements. IDEA does not obligate Catholic schools to provide special education services and only earmarks a small portion of funds that public schools must use to provide direct or consultative services to students with disabilities who attend private schools (Burke & Griffin, 2016; DeFiore, 2006; Eigenbrood, 2010).

Recent data show that over 2 million students are enrolled in Catholic schools, which represents 38.1% of the overall private school enrollment in the United States (Snyder, de Bray, & Dillow, 2016). Prevalence estimates indicate that between 4%–7% of these 2 million students are identified as having a disability (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2007; McDonald, 2005; USCCB, 2005). By way of comparison, public school enrollment for students with disabilities is approximately 13% (Snyder et al., 2016). The majority of students with disabilities who attend Catholic schools have learning disabilities and/or attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, and a much smaller percentage have disabilities with more significant support needs such as autism spectrum disorders, emotional disabilities, or moderate to severe cognitive impairments (Bello, 2006; Bimonte, 2004). While many students with disabilities in Catholic schools are educated in self-contained special education classrooms, there has been a move toward more inclusionary service delivery models that have the potential to improve access to rigorous curriculum and instruction (Bello, 2006; Burke & Griffin, 2016; Scanlan, 2009; USCCB, 2005).

Increasing the capacity of Catholic schools to serve larger numbers of students with disabilities is a potential method for enrollment growth through both traditional enrollment pathways (e.g., families paying tuition on their own) and through voucher program enrollment pathways (e.g., families using a state voucher to offset a portion or all of tuition costs). The increased capacity would also help Catholic educators meet the growing demands of parents who would like all of their children—both with and without disabilities—to attend Catholic schools (Burke & Griffin, 2016; DeFiore, 2006), as well as

to answer the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' call to improve services for students with disabilities (USCCB, 2005). However, Catholic educators are faced with several barriers to increasing capacity for special education services. The research literature has identified barriers such as the limited funding earmarked in federal special education law for students with disabilities who attend private schools (Crowley & Wall, 2007; Durow, 2007), the need for increased professional development so that educators can provide the individualized and differentiated supports that comprise special education (Bello, 2006; Crowley & Wall, 2007), and navigating the traditional emphasis on high academic and behavioral standards that has served to discourage students with disabilities from attending and succeeding in many Catholic school settings (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Carlson, 2014). As special education services are becoming more readily available, Catholic educators are working to address many of these issues at both the individual school and diocesan levels (Bello, 2006; DeFiore, 2006).

### Context for the Study

In 2011, the Indiana state legislature passed House Enrolled Act 1003-2011, which created a school choice voucher program called the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program. The program was designed to provide eligible families with vouchers that could be used for the payment of tuition and fees at participating Indiana private schools (Indiana Department of Education [IDE], 2016). Although program participation was limited to 7,500 students for the first academic year in 2011-2012, it has since expanded into one of the largest and fastest growing voucher programs in the country (Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2016). For the 2015-2016 academic year, program participation consisted of 32,686 students in 312 private schools, out of which 15,574 students (47.6%) had previously attended public schools (IDE, 2016).

For the first two years of the program, participation was limited to students who had a family income equal to or below 150% of the amount needed to qualify for the Federal Free or Reduced Lunch Program and qualified under one of three enrollment pathways: a) students who were enrolled in two consecutive semesters of public school in the previous years, b) students who received a state school scholarship tax credit in previous years, or c) students who participated in the voucher program in previous years (IDE, 2016). Beginning in the 2013-2014 academic year, four additional program enrollment pathways were added. These consisted of (a) an expansion of the provisions

for students who participated in the voucher program in previous years, (b) students eligible to receive special education services, (c) students attending schools identified as “failing” by the state accountability system, and (d) students with siblings who participated in the voucher program (IDE, 2016).

The expansion of the enrollment pathways to specifically include students receiving special education services was an impactful change. For the 2015-2016 academic year, there were 3,204 students receiving special education services who participated in the voucher program, which represented 9.8% of the overall program population (IDE, 2016). As noted previously, private schools are exempt from adhering to the majority of the provisions in federal disability education laws (Etscheidt, 2005; Taylor, 2005, 2006). In an effort to ensure that parents and school personnel were in agreement as to the services provided, Indiana education officials developed the Choice School Education Plan (IDE, 2014). The plan is designed to function similarly to both the individualized education program (IEP) required under IDEA and the individualized service plan (ISP), which is the disability service plan option traditionally offered by private schools in Indiana as required by state regulation (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34). As with the IEP and the ISP, the *Choice School Education Plan* includes measurable annual goals, instructional and behavioral supports, assessment accommodations, and plans for monitoring progress. Parental consent is required to implement the plan and parents may revoke their consent at any point (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34).

When a student with a disability is accepted into a private school through the voucher program, the family has to designate a special education service provider. This decision is important, as it affects the type of service plan developed and how state special education funding is distributed. If a student and family designate the private school as the special education provider, a Choice School Education Plan is developed and special education funding (in addition to the voucher amount) goes to the private school (IDE, 2016). If the public school is designated as the provider, then an ISP is developed and the special education funding goes to the public school district. The school district then allocates a portion of these funds to private schools for special education services as directed by the state and federal proportionate share funding provisions (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34). In 2015-2016, a total of 593 students with disabilities (18.5%) designated the private school as the special education provider, resulting in a total of \$1.3 million in special education funding that was issued to the private schools (IDE, 2016).

### Significance of the Study and Research Questions

At the time this study was initiated, we (two research team members) were both highly involved with helping Catholic schools in Indiana to improve and grow their special education services. As professors at Catholic universities, we worked closely with families and educators to create new opportunities for students with disabilities to attend Catholic schools. Within this context, we worked with schools that were experiencing declines in overall student enrollment. The leadership in the dioceses felt that a combination of the voucher program and improved capacity for providing special education was one avenue to address enrollment challenges. However, based on the limited data and anecdotal information available, the diocesan school leaders and ourselves were unclear as to the impact of the voucher program on Catholic schools and special education services in Indiana. In particular, the diocesan school leadership and ourselves felt that there was a need for the perspectives of Catholic school principals as to the types and level of impact that the voucher program was having on their student enrollment, special education services, and the professional development needs of their teachers.

In response to these issues, the current study was initiated and conducted in three large diocesan school districts in Indiana (described in more detail in the Method section). The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. What are the population characteristics of students enrolled in the participating Catholic diocesan schools?
2. What is the impact (if any) of the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program on student enrollment in these schools?
3. What are the special education services provided in these schools?
4. What are the identified professional development needs (if any) of teachers resulting from student enrollment changes due to the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program?

Through this study, it was intended that the diocesan leadership and the researchers would gain a clearer picture of the ways in which the voucher program had impacted the participating schools. This information could serve as a guide for understanding the potential changes to student enrollment, improving special education services, and addressing professional development needs. Within the national landscape of Catholic education, it was hoped that this study might spark conversations and additional research about the ways in which voucher programs and special education services have intersected during a time of expanded school choice opportunities, enrollment challenges, and increased willingness to support students with disabilities in Catholic schools.

## Method

### Participants

The target participants for this study were principals in three Catholic diocesan school districts in central and northern Indiana. The dioceses were selected based in part on our ongoing relationships as professional development providers in the schools through our university affiliations. We hoped that utilizing existing organizational and personal relationships would increase the response rate due to familiarity and trust that had been established over time. A total of 81 schools were identified within the dioceses. Each principal was informed and asked to participate in the study through multiple channels and opportunities. First, the diocesan superintendents notified the principals at meetings, through e-mail, and through electronic newsletters. Second, a direct e-mail was sent to each principal explaining the purpose of the study and inviting participation through a web link to the electronic questionnaire. This process was repeated for non-participants after one month and again after three months.

A total of 34 principals (42.0%) responded to the questionnaire. The principals represented 25 schools (73.5%) that served pre-kindergarten through grade 8, four schools (11.8%) that served pre-kindergarten through grade 5, two schools (5.9%) that served pre-kindergarten through grade 6, and three schools that served grades 9-12 (8.8%). Of the 47 schools in the dioceses that did not have principals respond to the questionnaire, there were three schools (6.4%) that served pre-kindergarten through grade 6, 14 schools that served pre-kindergarten through grade 8 (29.8%), one school that served kindergarten through grade 3 (2.1%), three schools that served kindergarten through grade 6 (6.4%), 19 schools that served graded kindergarten through grade 8 (40.4%), one school that served grades 4-6 (2.1%), and six schools that served grades 9-12 (12.8%).

### Instrument

An electronic questionnaire was designed to collect information on the population characteristics of students enrolled in the Catholic diocesan schools, the potential impact of the Indiana Choice Scholarship program on student enrollment, the special education services provided at each school, and identified areas for professional development for teachers resulting from student enrollment changes due to the Indiana Choice Scholarship program. The questionnaire was drafted by the two researchers based on existing peer-

reviewed research and analyses of school choice voucher programs, as well as our own recent experiences working with Indiana Catholic schools and school choice policies. The questionnaire was then shared with the three diocesan superintendents and school principals for edits and suggestions. After multiple rounds of refinement between the research team, superintendents, and principals, the final questionnaire was programmed into an online format and disseminated to potential participants.

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. The results of responses to these sections is reported in the Findings section. In the *student population characteristics* section, respondents were asked to report the grade levels served by their schools and the total numbers of enrolled students by each of the following categories: disability status, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status. There were also asked to indicate the types of disabilities identified for students in their respective schools. In the *impact on enrollment* section, respondents were asked to report if they believed the Indiana voucher program had changed the overall student population of their respective schools. If they answered *yes* to this question, they were asked to indicate the ways that the student population had changed. Respondents were also asked questions regarding the enrollment pathways used by students with disabilities through the Indiana voucher program. The third section focused on special education services. The questionnaire asked respondents to provide information regarding the types of services and supports provided in their schools. The final section of the questionnaire asked respondents to identify areas for professional development for teachers resulting from enrollment changes due to the Indiana voucher program.

### Analysis

Data from the electronic questionnaires were exported into IBM SPSS Statistics v.22 for cleaning and analysis. Decisions related to finalizing the data set for analysis and for selecting appropriate statistical methods were based on guidance provided by Vogt (2007). It was determined that the use of descriptive statistics, analyses of variance, and chi-square tests were most appropriate for reporting the results of this study, as the intent of the research was to present an overview of current practices taking place within a population of schools that are all participating in the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program (Vogt, 2007).

## Findings

### Student Population Characteristics

The 34 participating principals provided information on the student population characteristics of their respective schools. Enrollment size ranged from 82–779 students ( $M = 286.44$ ,  $SD = 194.78$ ), with all schools serving at least one identified student with a disability (range 1–53,  $M = 16.67$ ,  $SD = 12.59$ ). Combined enrollment data for the entire sample indicated that 567 students with disabilities (5.8%) were enrolled across the 34 schools. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to examine the differences between school type and the percentage of enrolled students with disabilities. No significant interaction effects were found. The enrollment data are presented in Table 1.

Participants were asked to indicate the types of disabilities identified for students in their respective schools. In order to preserve confidentiality and encourage participation, individual student totals for each disability category were not requested. According to the responding principals, 30 schools (88.2%) enrolled students across a range of disability categories (e.g., both students with learning disabilities and students with autism spectrum disorders). The other four schools only indicated one disability area (e.g., only students with learning disabilities). Learning disabilities (30 schools, 88.2%) was the disability category that was reported by the highest number of schools, followed by ADHD and/or other health related disabilities (24 schools, 70.6%), and autism spectrum disorders (17 schools, 50.0%). Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between school type and types of disabilities identified for students. The only statistically significant finding indicated that high schools were more likely to enroll students with emotional behavioral disorders than the other school types ( $\chi^2(3) = 12.381$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The frequency and percentage of schools serving students with identified disabilities is presented in Table 2.

Table 1

*Student Population Characteristics (n = 34 schools)*

	Total # of students	%
Total enrollment	9739	n/a
PreK – 5 (n = 4 schools)	405	4.2
PreK – 6 (n = 2 schools)	283	2.9
PreK – 8 (n = 25 schools)	7199	73.9
9 – 12 (n = 3 schools)	1852	19.0
Disability status		
Identified disability	567	5.8
No identified disability	9172	94.2
Race/ethnicity		
African-American	328	3.4
Asian	162	1.7
Hispanic/Latino	1758	18.0
Multi-racial/Other	428	4.4
White	7063	72.5
Socio-economic status		
Receiving free/reduced priced lunch	2457	25.2
Not receiving free/reduced priced lunch	7282	74.8

Table 2

*Schools Enrolling Students with Identified Disabilities by Disability Category (n = 34 schools)*

	Total # of schools	%
ADHD and/or other health related disabilities	24	70.6
Autism spectrum disorders	17	50.0
Emotional and behavioral disorders	8	23.5
Learning disabilities	30	88.2
Mild cognitive disabilities	14	41.2
Moderate cognitive disabilities	4	11.8
Physical disabilities	6	17.6
Speech-language impairments	11	32.4
Sensory impairments	3	8.8

### **Impact on Enrollment**

Of the 34 participating principals, 21 (61.8%) indicated that they believed the Indiana voucher program had changed the overall student population of their respective schools. Several themes emerged within their comments in response to this question. The most common change related to student demographics, with participants citing increases in students from low-income households (eight schools), increases in Latino and African-American students (five schools), increases in students with disabilities (four schools), and increases in what respondents termed “diversity” (two schools). Enrollment among Catholic and non-Catholic families was also discussed. There were six participants who described the increase in students from non-Catholic backgrounds at their schools and another eight participants who indicated that the program allowed parish families who would not otherwise be able to afford tuition to send multiple children to their school. Finally, one participant stated that her/his school would “cease to exist” without the Indiana Choice Scholarship program. Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between school type and the reported changes in the overall student population at participating schools. The only statistically significant finding indicated that schools serving pre-kindergarten through grade 8 were more likely to report increases in students from low-income households ( $\chi^2(3) = 17.290, p < .001$ ).

Regarding the enrollment of students with disabilities, principals were asked to indicate how many of their students with disabilities were enrolled through the *special education pathway* option provided by the Indiana Choice Scholarship program. A combined total of 270 students with disabilities were enrolled through this pathway, which represented 47.6% of the total population of students with disabilities reported. These students attended 27 schools (79.4%) included in the sample, ranging from 1–29 students per school ( $M = 10.38, SD = 7.63$ ). The other 297 students with disabilities were enrolled through a different program option (e.g., the student had a sibling previously enrolled in the school or the student was transferring from an underperforming school as identified by the Indiana Department of Education’s accountability system).

### **Special Education Services**

Principals were asked to provide information on the special education services and supports provided to students with disabilities enrolled in their schools. There were eight schools (23.5%) that utilized the Indiana

Choice Scholarship program's designated *Choice Scholarship Education Plan* as the method for outlining services and supports. The other 26 (76.5%) of the schools provided services through the individualized service plan (ISP), which is the service plan option traditionally offered by private schools in Indiana as required by state regulations (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34). As for direct instructional supports and services, the most common service delivery type was within resource room settings for a portion of the school day (23 schools, 67.6%), followed by services within the general education classroom (17 schools, 50.0%). Speech/language services (27 schools, 79.4%) were the most frequently provided related service, and 21 schools (61.8%) offered consultative supports to general education teachers. Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between the types of disabilities identified for students and the special education services offered. The only statistically significant finding indicated that schools serving students with speech-language impairments were more likely to provide direct instruction supports and services ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.920, p < .05$ ). The data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Special Education Services (n = 34 schools)*

	Total # of schools providing service	%
Direct instructional supports and services		
Within general education classroom	17	50.0
Within resource room	23	67.6
Within self-contained special education classroom	5	14.7
Related services		
Occupational therapy	5	14.7
Physical therapy	2	5.9
Speech/language services	27	79.4
Specialized transportation services	2	5.9
Additional supports		
Tutoring/teaching assistant	9	26.5
Consultative supports to general education teachers	21	61.8

### Identified Areas for Professional Development

A final area of investigation for this study concerned the professional development needs of teachers in the participating schools. Principals were asked to identify areas for professional development for teachers resulting from student enrollment changes due to the Indiana Choice Scholarship program. There were several reported areas for professional development that related directly to the support of students with disabilities, including the need for professional development on differentiated instruction and classroom accommodations (each reported by 16 schools, 47.1%), behavioral or discipline issues (12 schools, 35.3%), and disability specific supports (9 schools, 26.5%). Principals also reported the need for professional development in other areas related to serving increasingly diverse populations of students, including issues related to economic status or poverty (13 schools, 38.2%) and cultural differences (11 schools, 32.4%). The complete results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Identified Areas for Professional Development (n = 34 schools)*

	Total # of schools	%
Behavioral or discipline issues	12	35.3
Classroom accommodations	16	47.1
Cultural differences	11	32.4
Differentiated teaching strategies	16	47.1
Disability specific supports (e.g., for students with LD)	9	26.5
English language learner supports	2	5.9
Family involvement	2	5.9
Issues related to economic status or poverty	13	38.2
Pathway for special education licensure	1	2.9
None	3	8.8

Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between the identified areas for professional development and two variables: (a) the types of disabilities identified for students, and (b) the principals' perspectives on how the Indiana voucher program had changed the overall student population in their respective schools. Regarding the types of disabilities and identified areas for professional development, a statistically significant relationship was identified between schools serving students

with mild cognitive disabilities and the need for professional development on behavioral or discipline issues ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.201, p < .01$ ). As for the relationship between principals' perspectives on how the voucher program has changed the student population and identified areas for professional development, statistically significant findings were identified for multiple variables. Principals who indicated increases in enrollment as a result of the voucher program in a) the number of non-Catholic families enrolling their children ( $\chi^2(1) = 9.917, p < .01$ ) and b) the number of parish families who would not otherwise be able to afford tuition to send multiple children to Catholic school ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.906, p < .01$ ) were more likely to report a need for professional development on family involvement. Similarly, principals who indicated increase in students from low-income households were more likely to report a need for professional development related to supporting English language learners ( $\chi^2(1) = 6.906, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

### Student Population Characteristics

The findings related to student population characteristics indicated that students with disabilities comprised 5.8% of the total enrollment across the sample. Although this figure is within the 4% - 7% prevalence estimate for students with disabilities in Catholic schools nationally (McDonald, 2005; Strizek, et al., 2007; USCCB, 2005), it is below the enrollment rate of 9.8% of students with disabilities for all private schools that participated in the Indiana voucher program in 2015-2016. Although the principal investigators hypothesized that the rates of student with disabilities would be higher among schools serving elementary grade levels, there were no statistically significant differences in the rate of enrolled students with disabilities by grade levels served by schools within this sample. One area for additional research would be an examination of the rates of students with disabilities served by participating private schools across all 15 states that have voucher programs.

The data on the types of identified disabilities served within each school showed that students with learning disabilities (enrolled in 88.2% of schools) and students with ADHD and/or other health related disabilities (enrolled in 70.6% of schools) were the most frequently enrolled disability populations. This finding is consistent with previous national studies of Catholic schools (Bello, 2006; Bimonte, 2004). Although the percentage of schools serving students with more significant support needs (e.g., moderate cogni-

tive disabilities and sensory impairments) may appear low, the percentage of schools enrolling students with autism spectrum disorders (17 schools, 50.0%) is much higher than earlier studies (Bello, 2006; Bimonte, 2004). This is a promising finding for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families, particularly considering the increased prevalence of autism spectrum disorders identified in the school-aged population in recent years (CDC, 2015). Additional research is needed in order to determine the extent to which the Indiana voucher program has had or will have an impact on the enrollment of students with autism spectrum disorders or other disabilities typically requiring significant levels of support.

### **Impact on Enrollment**

Considering that nearly two-thirds (61.8%) of principals indicated they believed the Indiana Choice Scholarship program had changed the overall student population of their respective schools, it does appear that the voucher program is having an impact on enrollment in the majority of schools within these dioceses. The enrollment impact appears to be focused on student characteristics extending beyond disability status. The increase in students from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds is consistent with the demographic trends across the three dioceses, and could also be reflective of the emphasis that the Indiana voucher program places on the enrollment of students from low-income households in private schools. All of the seven enrollment pathways include criteria related to family income, and the participating diocesan school districts serve communities with high percentages of unemployment and poverty among Latino and African-American residents. The program is also potentially increasing access to Catholic education for both Catholic and non-Catholic families, with 14 principals (41.2%) reporting increases in one or both of these populations. This is a promising sign for Catholic educators who feel that part of their mission is to make Catholic education more widely available and readily accessible for Catholic and non-Catholic families alike. This could also be an indication that the voucher program may help stabilize or reverse the declining enrollments experienced by many Catholic schools over the past 25 years (Walch, 2003). A principal's comment that her/his school would "cease to exist" without the program is further evidence of this potential impact.

The results regarding the enrollment of students with disabilities are difficult to interpret. There were 270 students with disabilities (47.6%) in the sample schools enrolled through the *special education pathway* option

provided by the voucher program. The majority of students with disabilities (52.4%) were enrolled through other pathway options (e.g., the student had a sibling previously enrolled in the schools or the student was transferring from an under-performing school identified by the Indiana Department of Education). Considering that only four principals (11.8%) reported that the Indiana voucher program resulted in increases in the number of students with disabilities, it could be that the impact of the program on the enrollment of new students is more closely related to student diversity regarding family income and the racial/ethnic make-up of the schools.

However, although there may not be a large influx of newly enrolled students with disabilities specifically through the *special education pathway*, it does appear that students with disabilities are participating in the voucher program through the other pathway options. Regardless of the enrollment pathway selected, the voucher program may provide enough of a financial incentive to encourage families to keep their children with disabilities enrolled in the Catholic schools as opposed to attending or returning to their local public schools. For Catholic school leaders and voucher proponents, this is a possible indication that the specific pathway selected for program participation is not a key factor in the decision-making process. Families appear to be interested in utilizing the voucher program for enrollment in Catholic schools regardless of which enrollment pathway that state guidelines direct them to use. One area for follow-up research is to investigate the decision-making processes that school leaders and families engage in when determining the enrollment pathway for the Indiana voucher program. Another area for additional research is to examine enrollment practices in the other 15 states with voucher programs to see if similar structures and issues exist.

### Special Education Services

Schools participating in this study provided direct instructional supports and services within both resource room settings (67.6% of schools), general education classrooms (50.0%), and self-contained special education classrooms (14.7%). These data are comparable to previous findings on special education in Catholic schools (Bello, 2006; Burke & Griffin, 2016). Considering that 50% of participating schools served students in general education classrooms and 61.8% of the schools utilized consultative supports to general education classroom teachers, there appears to be an emphasis placed on supporting students in typical academic classrooms. This is an indication that Catholic schools in this sample are providing more inclusive educational

opportunities for students with disabilities. This movement toward inclusive education aligns with the recommendations of disability advocates within both the public school sector (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012) and the Catholic school community (Bello, 2006; Burke & Griffin, 2016; Scanlan, 2009; USC-CB, 2005). Additional research is needed to determine if these service models are increasing access to rigorous curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities or if the students are not receiving the individualized supports that are a centerpiece of special education services (Bello, 2006; Crowley & Wall, 2007). There is also a need for additional research to identify strategies to provide guidance and supports for Catholic schools to implement effective service delivery models for students with disabilities.

An unexpected finding from the study involves the selection of special education providers by families and the special education support plans utilized by private schools. Program requirements stipulate that when a student with a disability is accepted into a private school through the voucher program, the family has to designate a special education service provider (IDE, 2014). When the private school is selected as the designated special education provider, a *Choice School Education Plan* is developed to outline and guide the disability-related services. The school is then eligible to directly receive special education funding from the state (IDE, 2016). In this sample, eight schools (23.5%) reported that they developed *Choice Scholarship Education Plans* for students with disabilities. This was higher than the state average of 18.5% for 2015–2016.

However, the majority of schools in the sample (26 schools, 76.5%) used the Individualized Service Plan (ISP) that is outlined in Indiana law (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34) for students with disabilities enrolled in private schools. There are two potential implications of the use of ISPs for special education services. From a funding perspective, this means that instead receiving special education funding directly from the state, the schools participated in the cost share agreements that are dictated by the state and federal proportionate share funding provisions (Indiana Administrative Code 511 IAC 7-34). Additional research is needed to determine if the use of cost share agreements has an impact on the overall funding provided to participating schools for special education services. From a service delivery perspective, this means that both the private school and the public school are involved in determining special education services. As with funding, additional research is needed to better understand the implications for service provision and how these issues could affect future enrollment decisions in regards to students with disabilities and the services that they receive.

### **Identified Areas for Professional Development**

Principals in the participating schools identified a range of professional development needs related to supporting both students with disabilities and an overall more diverse student population. Regarding special education services, the most frequently identified areas of differentiated teaching strategies, classroom accommodations and behavior/discipline align with professional development needs identified in previous research on special education in Catholic schools (Crowley & Wall, 2007; Bello, 2006). Beyond the areas related to special education, there were other professional development needs that related to broader issues associated with the changing enrollment of these schools, including addressing cultural differences, issues related to economic status or poverty, and increasing family involvement. It does seem evident from the results that the schools in these three Catholic dioceses have been impacted by the voucher program, and that the impact extends beyond the student population and into the areas of professional development and facilitating school environments that are responsive to a range of issues.

### **Conclusion**

According to the principals participating in this study, the Indiana Choice Scholarship Program has had an impact on enrollment, student population characteristics, and the professional development needs of teachers. Principals reported that the voucher program has impacted student enrollment, primarily related to increases in students from low-income and ethnically diverse backgrounds. Although their participation rates do not appear to be increasing rapidly, students with disabilities and their families are utilizing the voucher program and choosing to attend Catholic schools. In particular, students with autism spectrum disorders are participating in the program and attending Catholic schools at higher than anticipated rates. While the long-term impacts of the program remain to be seen, it appears that the voucher program offers a viable pathway for students with disabilities to access Catholic education. Additional research is needed in these dioceses, throughout Indiana, and throughout the nation in order to fully understand the impact that voucher programs will have on Catholic schools and special education services in these settings. Our current policy era of increased parental choice and opportunities to use public funds for private education presents both opportunities and challenges for Catholic educators, students with disabilities, and their families.

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