



# WHY SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS WANT SCHOOL CHOICE

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The first thing you should know about me: I'm a very lucky guy. The second thing you should know is: I'm blind, and that's why I'm wearing these. I was born with retinal cancer and, at ten months old, I lost my left eye. At twelve years old, I lost my right. So, why am I so lucky then? I'll give you three reasons: I have a loving and supporting family; I play competitive golf, which I love; and I'm the long snapper for the University of Southern California, which I love even more.

But there's another reason why I'm lucky... and that's because, even though I'm blind, and even though I have special needs, I got a great education. There is six and half million public school students in the United States who, like me, have special needs. Some of them have more serious disabilities than I do; some of them, less. But most aren't as lucky as I am.

I went to Orange Lutheran, a private high school in Southern California. My school gave me a tutor that was able to help me through Calculus and other Advanced Placement courses. They gave me the same opportunities and expectations as any other student. And now, I go to a great college. But this was only possible because I was born into a family that could afford private school. In California, that's the only way special-needs students can be assured a good education.

Why? Because in California, and in most states, if you're a special-needs student, you don't have any choices. If you cannot afford a private school, you are stuck -- in going to the public school that the government chooses for you. I tried that at first, but right off the bat there were problems. All the special-needs students in my district were grouped into one class. Academic ability didn't matter; interest didn't matter; it only mattered that you had a disability. Even if I were to outperform other students, say, in Honors Chemistry, I couldn't take the class with them because I was blind. And this was in Orange County, California -- home to some of the nation's top public schools!

Imagine what it's like in less fortunate communities. But, thanks to my parents, I had options. So I left the public school and went to a private one.

But what about the millions of special-needs students in middle-to-lower income families? Don't they deserve the same opportunities that I had? Of course, they do! And that's why I'm for school choice. With school choice, the money follows the student. Every child receives funding that their parents can direct to the school that best fits their needs: public, private, charter, even homeschool -- no one is stuck in a school that doesn't work for them.

Twelve states already employ school choice programs for special needs students. And it works.

One great example comes from Florida. The McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities gives kids the choice to attend the public school in their district, a public school in another district, or even a private school. A study by the Manhattan Institute showed marked improvement in reading and math scores for the students in the program. Not surprisingly, this program is becoming more popular. In 2009, 20,000 special-needs students enrolled. In 2015, that number had grown to over 31,000.

But instead of trying to duplicate this success, teachers' unions, and the politicians in their pocket, cling to the old model, which benefits them – not students. In states like California, New York, and even Texas, they have managed to block school choice entirely.

But fortunately, they don't have the final say. More and more Americans believe that special-needs students deserve a quality education.

It shouldn't depend on whether you are lucky enough to be born into a family that can afford private school, or whether you are lucky enough to be born in the right district, or right state. It shouldn't depend on luck at all. No one sees this more clearly than I do.

I'm Jake Olson, for Prager University.