

**The National Coalition**  
*for*  
**Public Education**

## **FINDINGS OF THE 2007 GAO REPORT ON DC VOUCHERS**

U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations*<sup>1</sup>

### **Students in "Schools in Need of Improvement" Were "Underrepresented" in the Program.**

- Even though the program's goal is to help students from "schools in need of improvement," "low numbers of scholarship recipients came from such schools."
- Only "4 percent of students who were offered scholarships the first year were from schools in need of improvement, while about 11 percent of District students attended regular public and charter schools in need of improvement that year."
- "About 24 percent of students who were offered new scholarships for the third year were from schools in need of improvement." Yet, during year three, 52 percent of the District's schools were labeled as "in need of improvement."

Source: GAO Report at 23-24, 26, 28

### **Many Voucher Schools Lacked the Qualities Associated with "High Quality Education Programs."**

- "[A]t least 3 of 52 schools that participated [in 2004-05] indicated that at least half of their teachers did not have at least a bachelor's degree, and 6 schools indicated that about 10 to 20 percent of their teachers lacked at least a bachelor's degree."
- "Many of the schools were not accredited, and there is no evidence they submitted evidence of educational soundness."
- "Because District officials could not find any reports on file, they concluded several schools may not have submitted required annual reports of operation providing basic information on their curriculum, teachers' education, accreditation, and school facilities."

Source: GAO Report at 34.

### **No Entity Has Taken Steps to Ensure that "All Participating Schools Meet Basic Requirements for Operating Legally in the District of Columbia, and Some Schools Have Not Met These Requirements."**

- "[S]ome participating schools did not meet basic requirements to operate in the District. For example, a few had no certificate of occupancy on file with the District or had certificates that did not specify educational use."
- The Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) "relies on school officials to self-certify that they are operating lawfully, and the District had not reviewed any schools to determine whether they had met the District's requirements." Although WSF officials claimed to have made visits to "42 of the 58 schools with OSP [Opportunity Scholarship Program] students...only one written report documenting a visit to one of these schools" could be found.

Source: GAO Report at 34-35.

### **Payments Were Made to "Schools that Do Not Normally Charge Tuition."**

- "OSP is providing scholarship payments of \$7,500 per year to pay tuition for OSP scholarship children to attend [voucher] schools while the families of non-OSP students pay no tuition."

Source: GAO Report at 22-23, 33.

<sup>1</sup> Publication No. 08-9 (Nov. 2007), <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf>.

### **Parents Were Given Incomplete and Inaccurate Information about Voucher Schools.**

- Although WSF compiled an annual directory to help parents during the selection process, “it did not collect or omitted or incorrectly reported some information that would have helped parents evaluate the quality of participating schools.”
- “[S]ome information WSF did provide to parents may have been misleading.”
- “WSF incorrectly reported information on some schools that could have significantly affected parents’ choice of schools, primarily the percentage of teachers who had at least a bachelor’s degree and tuition rates.”
- WSF requested, but did not report information on, school accreditation status.

Source: GAO Report at 36.

### **Payments Were Made to Schools Without the Proper Authorization and Documentation.**

- In 23 of the 50 student files reviewed, the disbursement reports either did not identify the student identification number or the student identification or name was incorrect. Yet, the student identification number is the only way to connect the students in the program with the federal money being paid.
- For 39 of 50 student files reviewed, the fee approval forms were lacking signatures and/or dates from the participating schools, yet the money was disbursed anyway.
- The act authorizes the payment of fees for before-and-after-school programs only if they include academic support. Nonetheless, of the 25 schools in the reviewed sample that were reimbursed for such programs, 22 did not provide information indicating whether the programs included academic support.

Source: GAO Report at 20-22.

### **The WSF Did Not Ensure that the Voucher Schools Were “Financially Stable.”**

- “[F]or all 25 schools attended by the 50 students in [the GAO’s] random sample, [it] did not find certain documents that should have been submitted by the schools showing financial stability or that a financial audit had been completed.”
- During the school year 2006-2007, one school that enrolled 25 scholarship users announced closure due to bankruptcy.” In addition, two schools closed in school year 2007-2008 due to financial problems, but the 134 scholarship users affected by the closures were offered placements in other [Catholic] consortium schools.”

Source: GAO Report at 33.

### **The Voucher Program Does Not Offer Many Eligible Students Real “Choice”**

- “[I]n 2006-2007, more than half the scholarship students were concentrated in 19 schools.”
- “For the school year 2005-2006, only about 70 openings were available at the high school level.”
- “Fewer students that reported having a learning disability used the scholarships than other students.”
- “[S]tudents who desired a secular school had a limited number to choose from, since most participating private schools were Catholic or Protestant, and these schools offered the most openings. The remaining schools included some that were Afro-centric or Muslim, or offered only early childhood education.”
- “[O]nly 3 percent [of voucher students] attended the most expensive schools that charged \$20,000 or more.”

Source: GAO Report at 30-31.