

# National Coalition for Public Education

## Washington, D.C.'s Voucher Experiment: The Pilot Program Should Not Be Reauthorized

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The promise of equal opportunity begins with education. The way to ensure that every child has an equal and valuable education is to invest fully in our public schools. Nowhere should this promise of opportunity for all be more true than in our nation's capital.

Turning that wisdom on its head, the 108th Congress created a 5-year Washington, D.C. school voucher "pilot" program in controversial fashion in 2004, making it the nation's first and only federally-funded voucher program. Vouchers are worth approximately \$7,500 per student. This fiscal year, the pilot program will cost federal taxpayers \$14 million, with approximately 1,900 students participating.

The FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Bill has extended funding for the program one additional year—through the 2009-2010 school year—for transition purposes. But, it also requires the reauthorization of the voucher program before it could receive additional funding.

The voucher program has failed and should not be reauthorized. Multiple federal reports released in 2007, 2008, and 2009 indicate the program has not lived up to the promises made by proponents and make the case for not reauthorizing or continuing to fund the expiring pilot program.

### **The Voucher Program Is Ineffective: It Has Not Improved the Academic Achievement of SINI Students.**

The U.S. Department of Education released congressionally mandated academic evaluations in 2007,<sup>1</sup> 2008,<sup>2</sup> and 2009.<sup>3</sup> All three reports revealed that students who entered a voucher school from a "school in need of improvement," ("SINI") demonstrated no increase in academic achievement, even though the program is purportedly aimed at helping such students.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, participating in the voucher program had

no impact on student safety, satisfaction, motivation, or engagement.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Voucher Program Lacks Accountability and Internal Control.**

The 2007 Government Accountability Office Report documented several accountability shortcomings, including the following:

- Federal tax dollars were spent on tuition at private schools that do not even charge tuition.<sup>6</sup>
- Many private voucher schools lack city occupancy permits, or only hold permits to operate as child care centers but not schools.<sup>7</sup>
- The nonprofit grantee that operates the federal program did not have "sufficient accountability mechanisms to govern the use of the OSP (voucher) funds."<sup>8</sup>
- The GAO was unable to determine if the non-profit grantee that operates the program verifies whether "before-and-after school care programs are tied to the student's academic program and part of customary fees charged by the school," a key stipulation for receiving voucher funds.<sup>9</sup>
- The GAO discovered that, for 22 of 25 schools in its sample, it could not determine whether before-and-after school care services "included any academic support activities. Absent this characteristic, before-and-after care would not meet the requirement that a fee must contribute to a student's academic success."<sup>10</sup>
- The GAO found problems with the voucher payments for 46 of 50 randomly sampled students (92 percent), including lack of authorizing signatures from private schools.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2007. ("2007 DOE Report.")

<sup>2</sup> "Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2008. ("2008 DOE Report.")

<sup>3</sup> "Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, April 2009. ("2009 DOE Report.")

<sup>4</sup> 2009 DOE Report at 35; 2008 DOE Report at 34-38; & 2007 DOE Report at 44, 46, & xx.

<sup>5</sup> 2009 DOE Report at xxvi, xviii, 35, 40, 44-45, 49-50; 2008 DOE Report at 42-43, 50, & 57; & 2007 DOE Report at xix & 1-4;

<sup>6</sup> GAO Report at 22-23, 33.

<sup>7</sup> "District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 27, at 34-35. ("GAO Report").

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 20-22.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 20-21.

### **The Voucher Program Does Not Even Serve the Students Targeted by the Statute.**

Under the statute, priority for vouchers is supposed to be given to students attending D.C. public or charter “schools in need of improvement,” (“SINI”) under the No Child Left Behind Act. Yet, according to the 2007 GAO Report, these students are “underrepresented” in the program: In the 2006-07 school year, even though 52 percent of D.C. public and charter students attended SINI schools, only 24 percent of all voucher students had previously been enrolled in such schools.<sup>12</sup>

### **Many Voucher Schools Lack the High Quality Programs and Resources Found in Public Schools.**

The 2007 GAO Report also found the following:

- Some private voucher schools indicated their teachers did not even possess a bachelor’s degree.<sup>13</sup>
- “Fewer students that reported having a learning or physical disability used [vouchers] than other students.”<sup>14</sup>
- Private voucher schools are “less likely” than D.C. public schools to have a counselors, tutors, special programs for either non-English speakers or students with learning problems, cafeterias, or nurse’s offices.<sup>15</sup>

The 2009 DOE Report found that participating in the program did not improve “how students rated their teacher’s attitude”; the “student/teacher ratio”; or the availability of before-and-after school programs.<sup>16</sup>

### **D.C. Voters Oppose the Voucher Program.**

The citizens of the District of Columbia and their elected representatives clearly expressed their opposition to publicly funded voucher programs. An opinion poll conducted in November 2002, prior to Congress’ enactment of the Washington, D.C. voucher program, found that three-quarters of District voters opposed private school vouchers.<sup>17</sup> The District’s only congressional representative, Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), along with other congressional leaders, strongly opposed the effort to impose vouchers on the District of Columbia. The creation of the Washington,

D.C. voucher program contradicts the principle of local control of education by imposing on citizens without a vote in Congress a program for which they and their elected representatives expressed opposition.

### **The D.C. Voucher Program Does Not Ensure Parental “Choice.”**

Private schools participating in the Washington, D.C. voucher program are permitted to maintain their admissions standards, meaning students who receive a voucher are not guaranteed access to the school of their choice as proponents claim. Further, voucher students wishing to attend a secular private school have limited options.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, public school choice is available to every child in the District of Columbia, and the District not only offers more charter schools per capita than any other school district in the nation, but its magnet schools also have experienced high growth

### **The D.C. Voucher Program Contradicts the Public Accountability Standards Faced by Public Schools Nationwide.**

Public accountability is the cornerstone of education reforms authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act. (NCLB, P.L. 107-110). To send public funds to schools over which the public exercises no oversight is inconsistent with, and violates the principles of, NCLB. The D.C. voucher program undermines the accountability provisions in NCLB because participating private schools do not have to hire “highly qualified” teachers, adhere to NCLB testing requirements and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), or disaggregate or publicly release student achievement results.

### **Ending the Program Does Not End Student Opportunities to Attend Private Schools.**

The Washington Scholarship Fund, which now runs the D.C. voucher program, existed before this federal program was created and it provided scholarships to D.C. students using private funds. The Fund could still provide scholarships with private funds. In fact, the Fund’s private donations for such scholarships have increased in recent years.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 26, & 28.

<sup>13</sup> GAO Report at 34.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 30.

<sup>15</sup> 2009 DOE Report at xxii & 17; 2008 DOE Report at xvii & 16; & 2007 DOE Report at 21.

<sup>16</sup> 2009 DOE Report at xxxii

<sup>17</sup> Zogby International poll for NSBA; Nov. 2002

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<sup>18</sup> GAO Report at 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 15; Washington Scholarship Fund – IRS Form 990.