

National Coalition for Public Education

Washington, D.C.'s Voucher Experiment: Why the Pilot Program Should Expire

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. The five-year pilot program costs federal taxpayers just under \$15 million annually, with approximately 1,900 students participating.

Multiple federal reports released in 2007 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 has not improved student achievement.

Two years late, the U.S. Department of Education finally released the congressionally mandated academic evaluation in 2007 which revealed no significant differences in reading or math between D.C. private school voucher students and students attending D.C. public schools.¹ The 2008 report was equally disparaging to the program, again stating that there was no statistically significant difference in performance between D.C. private school voucher students and students attending

D.C. public schools.² Furthermore, the primary cohort of students for which the program was designed to benefit – those who previously attended struggling schools – showed no increase in test scores compared to their peers.

The voucher program is not publicly accountable.

A 2007 report³ from the U.S. Government Accountability Office documented several accountability shortcomings, including the following:

1. Federal tax dollars were spent on tuition at private schools that do not even charge tuition.
2. Many private voucher schools lack city occupancy permits, or only hold permits to operate as child care centers but not schools.
3. The program is not serving the intended target group. Under the statute, priority for vouchers is supposed to be given to students attending D.C. public or charter schools "in need of improvement" under the No Child Left Behind Act. However, in the 2006-07 school year, while 52 percent of D.C. public and charter students attended schools in need of improvement, only 24 percent of all voucher students had previously been enrolled in schools in need of improvement.
4. "Fewer students that reported having a learning or physical disability used (vouchers) than other students."⁴
5. Private voucher schools are "less likely" than D.C. public schools to have "a cafeteria,

² Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years, "Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2008

³ "District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2007

⁴ U.S. GAO, Nov. 2007, p. 30.

¹ "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2007.

Washington D.C.'s Voucher Experiment, *continued*

nurse's office, counselors, or special programs for either non-English speakers or students with learning problems.”⁵

6. The nonprofit grantee that operates the federal program did not have “sufficient accountability mechanisms to govern the use of the OSP (voucher) funds.”
7. Some private voucher schools indicated their teachers did not even possess a bachelor's degree.
8. 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.
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.”
9. GAO found problems with the voucher payments for 46 of 50 randomly sampled students (92 percent), including lack of authorizing signatures from private schools.

D.C. voters opposed creation of 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.⁶ The District's only congressional representative, Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC),

⁵Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2007.

⁶Zogby International poll for NSBA; Nov. 2002

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.⁷

Meanwhile, public school choice is available to every child in the District of Columbia, and the District also offers more charter schools per capita than any other school district in the nation, and magnet schools also have experienced high growth.⁸

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.

⁷ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2007

⁸ Ibid