



RSC Policy Brief: **District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program** *June 17, 2008*

Today, the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Financial Services, which has jurisdiction over District of Columbia appropriations, is scheduled to mark-up the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Act. This appropriations bill has funded a District of Columbia (D.C.) opportunity scholarship initiative, known as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, since FY 2004 (authorized and funded through FY 2008). Unfortunately, according to press reports, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program—which received \$14.8 million in FY 2009—may not be fully funded this year.

The State of the DC Public School System

The D.C. school system's per-pupil allocation falls somewhere between \$13,500 and \$14,000, making it more than \$4,000 per student above the national average. Despite those statistics, it ranks near the bottom nationally in student performance. Interestingly, D.C. school systems rank first in the nation for percentage of budget spent on administration and last in spending on instruction. On the 2007 [National Assessment of Education Progress](#) (NAEP) exams, D.C. fourth and eighth graders scored lower than any other students in the entire country. According to the 2007 assessment, 61 percent of fourth-grade students scored “below basic” in reading and 51 percent scored “below basic” in math, while between 66 percent of the eighth graders scored “below basic” in reading, and 52 percent in math.

D.C. currently has 72 public charter schools, operating to, according to the Charter School Board, “provide quality public school options for DC students, families, and communities through: a comprehensive application review process; effective oversight; meaningful support; and, active engagement of its stakeholders.” Currently, 1/3 of the city's public school students (approximately 21,866 children) are attending one of D.C.'s 72 public charter schools—up from approximately 20,000 last year.

With a graduation rate of 59 percent, as many as 69,000 students have dropped out of D.C. public schools since 1981—making D.C. the number one school system in dropout rates. Furthermore, of those who graduate from D.C. schools and attend college, only 9 percent finish their undergraduate career with five years.

Background on D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

Created and appropriated in FY 2004, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) represents the first program in the nation to offer federal money for school vouchers for students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. According to program guidelines, scholarships are awarded to students from families with an annual income below 185 percent of poverty (which for a family of four is \$38,202.50). Scholarships are awarded in amounts up to \$7,500 for students to direct toward tuition costs of a D.C. private school. According to the [Washington Scholarship Fund](#), the average tuition cost of D.C. private schools, enrolling OSP students, in the 2007-2008 school year is \$5,775 for K-8 and \$10,312 for High School. The average tuition costs for D.C. private schools, including those schools that do not have OSP students enrolled, is \$10,273 for K-8 and \$17,116 for High School.¹ Most OSP students are not attending the higher priced institutions, but the more affordable private schools (as demonstrated by the first set of averages). Furthermore, while these are the average tuition costs for private schools in D.C., they do not account for other academic-related fees, including transportation, books, etc.—therefore the actual costs to D.C. families are even higher. Of the \$74 million that President Bush has budgeted to improve education in D.C., \$18 million has specifically been tagged for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. Currently, the program receives \$13 million in funding.

In order to apply for the OSP, students must meet the following requirements:

- Live in Washington, D.C.
- Currently attend a public or charter school
- Be five years-old by September 30th, 2008, or be entering Kindergarten through 6th grade for the 2008-2009 school year
- Have a household income at or below 185% of poverty, based on 2007 income

The 2007-2008 school year saw 1,903 kindergarten-twelfth grade students enrolled in 54 Washington, D.C. private schools. Those children receiving the scholarship come from families whose average income is \$22,736 (which is just above the federal poverty level for a family of four). At least 80 percent of the recipients of the scholarship are African American, and most of the rest of the recipients are Hispanic. According to information gathered from the Heritage foundation, most parents whose children received a scholarship visited an average of three private schools in D.C. before selecting one, illustrating strong parental support and involvement. Furthermore, more than 90 percent of the families express high satisfaction with the program.

Success of the D.C. Voucher Program

Success of the D.C. voucher program is not just evident from the many stories of children who are excelling in D.C. private schools, but from recent research done by Georgetown University. The [School Choice Demonstration Project at the Georgetown Public Policy](#)

¹ This average, calculated by the Washington Scholarship Fund, includes only the 55 schools in their program and does not reflect an overall average of private school tuitions in D.C.

[Institute](#) released its second qualitative report on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The report, titled “The Evolution of School Choice Consumers: Parent and Student Voices on the Second Year of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program,” provides responses from participating families indicating improvements in the program’s operations and progress in the number of parents acting as confident and well informed school choice consumers.

According to the Georgetown University Office of Communications, some of the findings in the report include:

- Families report being active, well informed school choice consumers. Parents actively utilize their school choice consumer skills to find the perfect match for their children when choosing schools;
- Parents reported greater involvement in their child’s education since entering the OSP, specifically in the areas of homework and parent teacher conferences. However, the vast majority of parents, say they do not formally participate in organized parent groups;
- Parents noted increased communication with their children since entering the OSP, including soliciting input and support from their children during the school selection process;
- Many parents expressed the view that OSP has resolved the concerns noted during the initial year of implementation, such as ambiguity about financial policies and student confidentiality;
- Parents share a growing concern that they will lose eligibility for the program for various reasons including an increase in earnings and the scarcity of slots at the high school level;
- A sizable majority of parents are satisfied with their school choice experiences, and approximately ninety percent of participants in the study indicated that they were certain to remain in the Program for at least another year.

In addition, there are numerous success stories from parents of children participating in OSP. Recent news articles have captured the views of many of these parents.

According to one [Washington Post](#) article,

Parents of scholarship recipients offer high praise for the program, crediting it with changing the direction of their children’s lives. Patricia William, whose son Fransoir, 11, is a sixth-grader at Sacred Heart, a Catholic school in Northwest, said his growth has been striking.

“He’s been developed in many ways, intellectually, emotionally and in his values,” she said. “I couldn’t ask for anything better.”

Wendy Cunningham said her daughter Jordan, who will be a senior, has thrived since entering Georgetown Day School two years ago and has had access to opportunities that likely would not be available otherwise. This summer, Cunningham said, Jordan will enter summer programs at Catholic University and San Francisco State.

“Other people should have the same opportunity and choices,” said Cunningham

According to an [op-ed](#) written by the former mayor of D.C., Marion Barry, the OSP program is giving parents hope for their children’s futures.

Moms, dads, aunts, uncles and other guardians in my community tell me that these programs are making a difference in their children’s lives and giving them hope they have never had. I salute them for working to make the right choices for their children. In March, I held a community meeting at the Southeast Tennis and Learning Center, where several families whose children have scholarships told me how much the program has done for them. One mom, Wanda Gaddis, has worked for a long time, including serving as a parent advocate at her daughter’s public elementary school, to make sure her daughter gets a great education. At the meeting, I learned that her daughter is attending a private school in Ward 8 through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Gaddis told me, “The schools in D.C. were not educating my child. At first I did not have a choice, but I am so thankful that I and so many other parents did get choice with the Opportunity Scholarship Program. I can’t begin to tell you how much my child’s education has improved since starting with this program. It is a program that is helping to educate our children so they can have better, more productive lives and in turn create better communities here in Ward 8 and across D.C.”

For further resources and articles quoting parents of OSP students, see below.

Opposition to D.C. Voucher Program

According to recent reports, Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D, D.C.) is working on a plan to phase out the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, adding that she regarded the program as being on its “last legs”. Del. Norton is [quoted](#) as saying, “We have to protect the children, who are the truly innocent victims here, but I can tell you that the Democratic Congress is not about to extend this program.” Del. Norton has also said that it is important to begin telling families who are recipients of the vouchers that they will not be receiving the funding indefinitely and warn them that Congress was working to end the program.

Many Democrats oppose vouchers as a threat to public school systems—as students who qualify for vouchers use their scholarship money to take them out of failing schools.

Support to D.C. Voucher Program

In direct opposition to Del. Norton are her own D.C. colleagues—including former mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), former D.C. Council member Kevin P. Chavous (D), former D.C. Board of Education president Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D).

- ✓ In [testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform](#) in 2003, former mayor Williams said, “I support the President’s desire to create a scholarship program in the District.”

- ✓ D.C. Council member Chavous is quoted in a [Washington Post article](#) in 2005 as saying, “Yes, the District’s choice program is young. It will take time to feel its full effect on our community. But that positive effect will come if we support the program. Most important, we must join to keep national political forces from getting between our kids and the opportunities they deserve.”
- ✓ According to Mayor Fenty (in a [Washington Post article](#)), “Political ideology and partisan gamesmanship should not be allowed to blow apart the educational hopes of hundreds of D.C. children. Congress must respect the judgment of District leaders in giving parents a choice in one of the most crucial aspects of their children’s lives.”

The President is fully supportive of such a program, making [numerous comments](#) highlighting the successes of school voucher programs—specifically in D.C.

Furthermore, this program has vast support from House Republicans. The following excerpts are from a Dear Colleague which was circulated this week by Representatives Boehner, Blunt, Hoekstra, McKeon, Davis, and Bishop.

“Hopefully Congress will focus on the kids, not the politics...”
Wall Street Journal Decries Efforts to Strip Low-Income Children in the Nation’s Capital of Educational Opportunities

Dear Colleague:

As the FY 2009 appropriations process gets underway, the lives of thousands of disadvantaged children right here in the nation’s capital are at a crossroads. Congress has a choice to make: Will we continue to offer a lifeline to the children who would otherwise be trapped in some of the nation’s most troubled schools, or will we cave to the wishes of special interest groups who put their own agenda ahead of what’s best for low-income children?

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was created in 2004 with strong bipartisan backing. The program – whose funds are allocated over and above the District’s education budget, ensuring funds are not drained from public school programs – provides \$7,500 scholarships to low-income children enrolled in underperforming schools to allow them to attend the private school of their choice. Although experts agree that it will take time for potentially significant achievement gains to be demonstrated, the program has proven immensely popular with D.C. children and families. Parents of scholarship recipients have reported high satisfaction levels, and demand for the scholarships continually outpaces the supply.

Yet despite all that, a campaign is underway among a small fringe of education reform opponents to shut down this bipartisan program and tear away the promise of educational opportunity in the nation’s capital. And stunningly, media accounts indicate that this effort is gaining traction. **We encourage you to read the attached editorial from today’s *Wall Street Journal*, which spells out in stark terms exactly what’s at stake.**

As D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty recently stated in a letter to Congress, this education package “will spur improved instruction and services, directly benefiting students in the classroom.”

To ensure children in the nation’s capital are given the educational opportunities they deserve, we must maintain strong support for the innovative D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program in the coming fiscal year and beyond.

Additional Articles and Resources

[Fate of D.C. Voucher Program Darkens](#)

[Putting Children Last](#)

“Many of the parents we interviewed describe the vouchers as a ‘Godsend’ or a ‘lifeline’ for their sons and daughters.”

[Editorial: Norton puts unions first, District students second](#)

“Studies of the program by the U.S. Department of Education and by Georgetown University found that parents were more engaged in their children’s education, more confident in their safety and more focused on academic performance. Yet unions invested in public school monopolies are so opposed to vouchers, and Norton is in such thrall to their dictates, that she ignores these studies and says the students are “victims” of an experiment that has barely been around long enough for its full benefits to be felt.”

[Choices for D.C. Parents \(By Marion Barry\)](#)

[Vouching For Vouchers](#) (Mayor Fenty testifying before Congress on school vouchers)

[Effort to Kill DC Voucher Program Underway](#)

[‘Standing Up for the Children’](#)

[Eleanor Holmes Norton Loves Government Schools, Kids . . . Not So Much](#)

[Op-Ed by Rep. Buck McKeon on School Choice in TownHall.com](#)

[Georgetown University Releases its 3rd Research Study about the DC Scholarship Program](#)

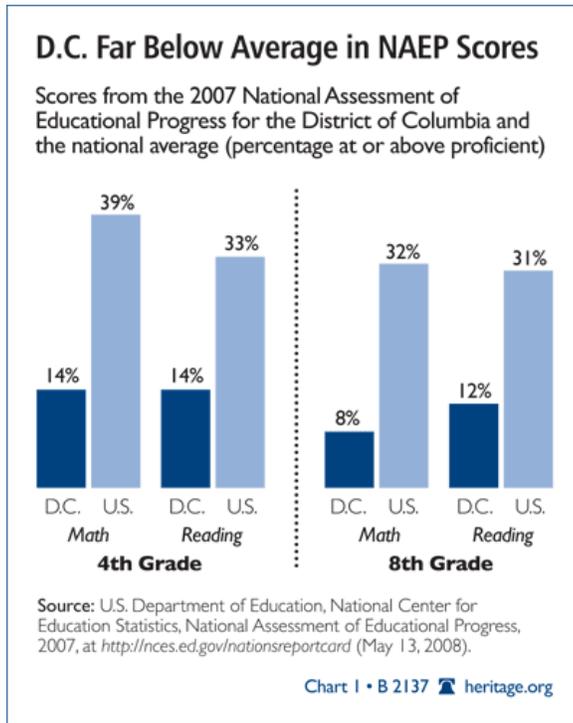
[Vouchers for District Schoolchildren—Letter from a Parent](#)

[Sorting Out School Choices—Letter from a Parent](#)

Heritage Foundation Resources (by Dan Lips, Education Analyst)

[Future of D.C. Scholarship Program Uncertain](#)

[Importance of School Choice \(including charts, citations, etc.\)](#)



[How Members of Congress Exercise School Choice \(includes charts, citations, etc.\)](#)

- Over 37 percent of Representatives and 45 percent of Senators responded that they had sent their children to private school;
- Over 23 percent of House Education and Labor Committee members and 33 percent of Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee members exercised private school choice; and
- Exactly 52 percent of Congressional Black Caucus members and 38 percent of Congressional Hispanic Caucus members sent at least one child to private school.

[The Future of D.C. School Choice](#)

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