

February 25, 2019

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Government Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Gary Peters
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Government Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20510

RE: Do Not Reauthorize the Failing D.C. School Voucher Program

Dear Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member Peters:

The 44 undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) write to voice opposition to the reauthorization of the District of Columbia private school voucher program. We oppose this and all private school voucher programs because public funds should be spent on public schools, not private schools. The D.C. program, in particular, has proven ineffective and unaccountable to taxpayers. Congress should not allocate millions of taxpayer dollars to an unsuccessful and poorly managed program.

The Program Does Not Improve Educational Opportunities for Students

Multiple Congressionally mandated Department of Education studies of the D.C. voucher program have demonstrated that the program does not improve the academic achievement of students in the program.¹ In fact, the two most recent Department of Education studies of the program demonstrate that students using vouchers are performing *worse* academically than their peers not in the voucher program.²

The recent studies have also found that the voucher program has no effect on student or parental satisfaction, or on parental involvement.³ And, previous studies have indicated that many of the students in the voucher program are less likely to have access to key services such as ESL programs, learning supports, special education supports and services, and counselors than students who are not part of the program.⁴ Moreover, a study from the Urban Institute found that receiving a voucher does not increase D.C. students' college enrollment rates.⁵

¹ U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Two Years After Students Applied](#) (June 2018) (2018 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year](#) (June 2017) (2017 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report](#) (June 2010) (2010 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 3 Years](#) (Apr. 2009) (2009 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 2 Years](#) (June 2008) (2008 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 1 Year](#) (June 2007) (2007 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report).

² 2018 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 19.

³ *Id.* at 26, 30; 2017 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 18, 21.

⁴ 2010 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 20; 2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report at xxii, 17; 2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report at xviii, 16.

⁵ Matthew Chingos, Urban Institute, [The Effect of the D.C. School Voucher Program on College Enrollment](#) (Feb. 2018).

Having failed to improve the academic achievement and school experience of the students in the voucher program, the program clearly does not warrant continuation.

The Program Lacks Sufficient Oversight and Accountability

The program has also repeatedly failed to meet accountability standards. GAO reports from both 2007 and 2013 document that the D.C. voucher program has repeatedly failed to meet basic and even statutorily required accountability measures.⁶ The 2013 report concluded that the then-administrator of the program, the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation (Trust), had continually failed to ensure the program operated with basic accountability measures and quality controls⁷ and failed to maintain adequate records on its own financial accounting.⁸ The interim executive director of the Trust even admitted that “quality oversight of the program is sort of a dead zone, a blind spot.”⁹ These problems persist even with a new program administrator. In 2015, the new administrator of the program, Serving our Children, was unable to provide basic program information to this committee, such as what percentage of each voucher school’s population comprised students using a voucher.¹⁰

Many Participating Schools Are of Poor Quality

A special investigation conducted by the *Washington Post* found that many of the private schools in the program are not quality schools.¹¹ It described one school that consisted entirely of voucher students as existing in just two classrooms in “a soot-stained storefront” where students used a gymnasium two miles down the road.¹² Another voucher school was operated out of a private converted home with facilities so unkempt that students had to use restrooms in an unaffiliated daycare center downstairs.¹³ And yet another school, where 93% of the students had vouchers, used a “learning model known as “Suggestopedia,” an obscure Bulgarian philosophy of learning that stresses learning through music, stretching and meditation.”¹⁴

Poor quality schools have likely contributed to the D.C. voucher program’s declining enrollment rates. As of the 2016-17 school year, the program enrolled 30% fewer students than it did four years before, despite an overall increase in applicants.¹⁵ And program statistics reveal that for that school year, one-third of returning voucher students did not use their voucher and more

⁶ U.S. Gov’t Accountability Office, [District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight](http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658416.pdf), Publication No. GAO-13-805 (Nov. 2013) <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658416.pdf> (2013 GAO Report); US Gov’t Accountability Office, [District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations](http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf), Pub. No. 08-9 at 26 (Nov. 2007) <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf> (2007 GAO Report).

⁷ 2013 GAO Report at 19-26.

⁸ *Id.* at 28.

⁹ Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight, GAO Says](http://www.washingtonpost.com), Wash. Post (Nov. 15, 2013).

¹⁰ [Reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Hearing before the S. Comm. on Homeland Security and Government Affairs](http://www.washingtonpost.com), 114th Congress (2015) (testimony of Kevin Chavous, Serving Our Children).

¹¹ Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight, GAO Says](http://www.washingtonpost.com), Wash. Post (Nov. 15, 2013).

¹² *Id.* (revealing details about Academia de la Recta Porta).

¹³ *Id.* (discussing Muhammad University of Islam, which enrolled one-third voucher students).

¹⁴ *Id.* (discussing the Academy for Ideal Education).

¹⁵ Phyllis W. Jordan and Kendell Long, FutureEd, [Vouchers In D.C.: Why Families Aren’t Choosing Vouchers](http://www.futureed.org) (Aug. 2017).

than half of the new students who received a voucher did not use it.¹⁶ Declining enrollment rates are further evidence that the program's continuation is unwarranted.

The Voucher Program Endangers Civil Rights and Undermines Constitutional Protections

Despite receiving public funds, the private schools participating in the D.C. voucher program do not abide by all federal civil rights laws and public accountability standards, including those in Title VI, Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), that all public schools must meet. Students who attend private schools with vouchers are stripped of their First Amendment, due process, and other constitutional and statutory rights provided to them in public schools. Schools that do not provide students with these basic civil rights protections should not be funded with taxpayer dollars.

Conclusion

The findings of all of the above referenced objective reports do not support spending millions of dollars of public funds on the D.C. private school voucher program. For these reasons and more, NCPE opposes the reauthorization of the D.C. voucher program.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association
African American Ministers In Action
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA), AFL-CIO
American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO
American Humanist Association
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Association of School Business Officials International
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Center for Inquiry
Clearinghouse On Women's Issues
Council for Exceptional Children
Council of Administrators of Special Education
Council of the Great City Schools
Feminist Majority Foundation

¹⁶ *Id.* at 3.

Freedom From Religion Foundation
GLSEN
Interfaith Alliance
Learning Disabilities Association of America
NAACP
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Council of Jewish Women
National Disability Rights Network
National Education Association
National Organization for Women
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Collaborative
National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
Network for Public Education
People For the American Way
Public Funds Public Schools
School Social Work Association of America
Secular Coalition for America
Union for Reform Judaism