

# Vouchers Are Not the Solution for DC

The promise of equal opportunity begins with education. Only when every child has access to a high quality education can we all enjoy equal opportunities to work, achieve, and participate fully in our society. Nowhere should this promise of opportunity be truer than in our nation's capital. The way to ensure that every child has an equal and valuable education is to invest in our public school system. **Vouchers do the opposite.** Rather than improve public schools, vouchers would abandon them, by diverting needed resources and attention, and would ultimately condemn them to failure, leaving thousands of children behind.

## **Vouchers are not wanted in the District.**

The citizens of the District and their elected representatives have clearly expressed their opposition to publicly funded voucher programs. A survey conducted in November 2002 found that three-quarters of District voters oppose private school vouchers.<sup>1</sup>

Earlier this year, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, along with other congressional leaders, wrote to President Bush opposing any effort to impose vouchers on the District of Columbia. Council member Adrian Fenty recently wrote to the Washington Post that "vouchers would divert limited funds from public education while failing to help most students." And the District of Columbia Board of Education overwhelmingly passed a resolution opposing vouchers last summer.<sup>2</sup> Members of the clergy in the District have also denounced vouchers. The Rev. Trent of the Florida Avenue Baptist Church said, "We want nothing to do with vouchers." The Rev. Knutsen of Foundry United Methodist Church advised that, "Public money should be spent on our public schools, " not on private school vouchers. The Rev. Hagler of Plymouth Congregational Church of Christ warned that, "Vouchers could create a new form of

<sup>1</sup> National School Boards Association/Zogby International poll; Nov. 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Board Meeting, July 17, 2002.

'separate but equal' by steering D.C.'s African-American students toward private schools that aren't held to the testing and other standards in the No Child Left Behind Act."

It would contradict the principle of local control of education to impose on citizens who do not have a vote in Congress a program towards which they have expressed such strong opposition.

## **Vouchers are not needed in the District.**

There is no solid evidence that vouchers improve student achievement. The academic achievement of African American students who used a privately funded voucher to attend private schools in the District of Columbia was not consistently higher over three years than that of students who remained in public schools.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, proven programs have been implemented in District public schools, are working, and should be expanded. The Accelerated Schools program, for example, improves student learning through enriched curriculum and instruction and school organizational changes. Another program, the Center for Community Change has raised the graduation rate for high school students living in public housing from 40 percent to 80 percent by providing after-school tutoring and workshops on college and career preparation, and requiring community service.<sup>4</sup> Schools that fail to improve are closed, and reopened under new leadership.

## **Vouchers would not expand parents' options.**

A voucher would not necessarily expand the options currently available to parents. Public school choice is available to every child in the District,

<sup>3</sup> William Howell et al., "Test-Score Effects of School Vouchers in Dayton, Ohio; New York City, and Washington, D.C.: Evidence from Randomized Field Trials." Not enough students of other ethnic groups participated to make a reliable estimate of program effectiveness.

<sup>4</sup> *Program Succeeds in Helping Poor Youths to Stay in School*, Andrew DeMillo. Washington Post, June 28, 2001, page DZ13.

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and the District also offers more charter schools per capita than any other school district in the nation. Nearly 70,000 students are currently enrolled in District public schools. No universal voucher program has ever been proposed, so any voucher would by definition leave most of these children behind. Assuming, however, a parent was granted a voucher, they would then have to find a school willing to participate in a voucher program, and with capacity to accept voucher students. Only 32 private schools located within the District charge tuition of \$5000 or less, and space in those schools is limited to just over 4,000 students.<sup>5</sup> Space at affordable private schools in Maryland and Virginia is similarly limited, while these schools offer the additional burdens of the time and cost associated with transportation. Further, a voucher is no guarantee that the student presenting it will be admitted to the schools of his or her “choice.” That decision lies with admissions officers, who may deny admission to any applicant. Finally, vouchers do not necessarily cover the total cost of a private school education. Indeed, many parents of students awarded a privately funded voucher returned their children to public school because the additional costs proved unduly burdensome, and because many private schools lacked services taken for granted in public school, such as health services, special education and related services, and services for bilingual students and parents.<sup>6</sup>

### **Vouchers could authorize federally funded discrimination.**

Private schools participating in a voucher program could be permitted to discriminate in admissions and in employment on the basis of religion. Previous initiatives have also failed to prohibit participating private schools from discriminating against students based on disabilities. If accepted at all, these children could be denied needed services or accommodations. Previous voucher

initiatives also proposed to allow the use of voucher funds for sectarian educational purposes, thus requiring taxpayers to support instruction in religions other than their own.

**Vouchers lack accountability.** Accountability is the cornerstone of education reforms authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, PL 107-110). To send public funds to schools over which the public may exercise no oversight is inconsistent, and violates the principles of NCLB. Voucher initiatives may purport to hold participating schools accountable, but none proposed thus far require participating schools to adopt academic standards such as those required of public schools under NCLB, engage only highly qualified teachers as that term is defined in NCLB, or administer assessments identical to those required of students attending public schools in the District of Columbia. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of private schools advised the U.S. Department of Education that they would decline to participate in a voucher program that held them to the same accountability standards that apply to public schools<sup>7</sup>.

A voucher program in the District of Columbia would do nothing to improve public education or the opportunities available to most of the children who attend them, and could potentially do great harm both to education and to civil rights. These efforts must be stopped. Education reform must focus on improving the public schools where the vast majority of students will continue to be educated.

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<sup>5</sup> 21st Century School Fund, *Vouchers in the District of Columbia: Analysis of private and parochial school capacity*. 2003. Available at <http://www.21csf.org>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Vouchers: Characteristics of Privately Funded Programs*, GAO-02-752 (Washington, D.C. September 10, 2002).

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education. Planning and Evaluation Service (PES). *Barriers, Benefits, and Costs of Using Private Schools to Alleviate Overcrowding in Public Schools*, (Washington, D.C. 1998).