

# The National Coalition *for* Public Education

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March 4, 2009

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The undersigned organizations of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) strongly urge you to oppose an amendment to be offered to the FY 2009 omnibus appropriations bill by Senator Ensign that would undo compromise language adopted last year prohibiting further funding of the Washington, D.C., private school voucher program absent a program reauthorization.

NCPE consistently has urged that the DC voucher program end, as was initially intended, at the close of the 2008-2009 school year. Throughout the life of this pilot program numerous evaluations have proven that the program is ineffective and that federal dollars should not be spent for such purposes. It is clear that the funding could have been spent in far more useful ways that would serve **all** students in the District of Columbia.

Under the FY 2009 omnibus appropriations bill, one additional year of funding (for the 2009-2010 school year) was provided with the stipulation that no funding beyond that would be provided without a complete reauthorization of the program. This was a carefully worded compromise that was negotiated between Senators Durbin and Brownback. The intent of this provision was to require that a full look at this pilot program will be undertaken before any future funding is considered. We believe that with a thorough examination, Congress will see the program's ineffectiveness and inappropriateness, which should ensure that it is not reauthorized.

The nearly \$15 million a year program provides vouchers worth up to \$7,500 for approximately 1,900 students. Created as a five-year *pilot*, it was scheduled to expire in 2008. The program's expiration, previously noted by members of both parties, should have come as no surprise to voucher proponents. And, despite proponents' claims six years ago that the vouchers would permit students to attend better schools, the congressionally mandated federal evaluation first released in 2007, and the evaluation for the second academic year that was released last year, both found no significant differences overall in academic achievement between voucher students and their peers in Washington, D.C. public schools.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the lack of academic evidence supporting the program, a U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report also documented several accountability shortcomings in the program. Examples include federal taxpayer dollars funding tuition at private schools that do not even charge tuition, schools that lacked city occupancy permits, and schools employing teachers without

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<sup>1</sup> "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2007. Second Year Report issued June 16, 2008.

B.A. degrees.<sup>2</sup> It also noted that children with physical or learning disabilities are underrepresented in the program compared to the public schools.<sup>3</sup>

NCPE believes that money should instead be invested in the public schools. We also note that despite receiving public money, the participating private schools are not subject to all federal civil rights laws, and do not face the same public accountability standards, including those in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that all public schools face. We also believe this program continues to raise problems under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

NCPE believes the objective evidence does not support the reauthorization or continued funding of the only federally funded school voucher program. We urge you to oppose Ensign amendment.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on this important issue.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Women  
American Association of University Women, Washington D.C. Branch  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees  
American Humanist Association  
American Jewish Committee  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Americans for Religious Liberty  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
Anti-Defamation League  
Association of Educational Service Agencies  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Interfaith Alliance  
International Reading Association  
National Alliance of Black School Educators  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Association of State Directors of Special Education  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Education Association  
National Parent Teacher Association  
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition  
National School Boards Association  
People For the American Way

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<sup>2</sup> "District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

House Committee on Appropriations

June 20, 2008

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Secular Coalition for America

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Women of Reform Judaism