

The National Coalition *for* Public Education

June 24, 2009

Representative José E. Serrano
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services and
General Government
B-300 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Jo Ann Emerson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and
General Government
B-300 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Funding of the DC Voucher Pilot Program

Dear Chairman Serrano and Ranking Member Emerson:

The undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) write to oppose the continuation of the already expired, failed DC private school voucher pilot program in the FY 2010 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill, which is scheduled for markup on June 25, 2009. Indeed, all four of the federal studies that have analyzed the program have concluded that the program is ineffective, leaving no justification for its continuation. We recognize, however, that the budget proposed by the Obama Administration includes \$12.2 million to allow current voucher students to maintain their voucher. Though disappointed in this decision, we are pleased that the President has rejected the idea of extending the program to new students. If the Subcommittee were to follow the lead of the Administration and continue funding the program, we would expect that that it would maintain the restrictions proposed by the Administration – limiting the program to existing voucher students —and reinstate the restrictions passed as part of the FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act—requiring schools to obtain certificates of occupancy and hire teachers with bachelor’s degrees.

The five-year pilot program was authorized to provide private school vouchers worth up to \$7,500 to approximately 1,700 students, at an annual cost of approximately \$14 million. Though the program was scheduled to expire in 2008, the FY 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act provided one additional year of funding (for the 2009-2010 school year). That appropriation stipulated that no additional funding would be available until Congress thoroughly examined the program and, by reauthorization, designated that the program warranted continued funding. The President’s proposal would extend funding without authorization for the 2010-2011 school year, but would limit funding to students who used a voucher in the 2009-2010 school year.

Despite proponents’ claims six years ago that the voucher program would permit students from “schools in need of improvement” (SINI) to attain greater levels of academic achievement, all three of the congressionally mandated Department of Education studies have concluded that the voucher program has had no effect on the academic achievement of these students.¹ Furthermore, the 2007 US

¹ U.S. Dep’t of Education, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years* (April 2009), http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/pdf/20094050_1.pdf; U.S. Dep’t of Education, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years* (June

Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report found that students from SINI schools are actually “underrepresented” in the program.² Having failed to improve the academic achievement of the students the program targeted, the voucher program should not be continued.

These federal studies further found that the voucher program had no effect on student satisfaction, motivation, or engagement, or student views on school safety.³ And, they revealed that many of the students in the voucher program were **less likely** to have access to key services—such as ESL programs, learning support and special needs programs, and counselors—than students who were not part of the program.⁴ Perhaps that is why students with physical or learning disabilities are underrepresented in the program compared to the public schools.⁵ The program’s failure to improve the school experience of students in the voucher program further cuts against its continuation.

In addition to the lack of academic evidence supporting the program, the 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 lack city occupancy permits, and schools employing teachers without bachelor’s degrees.⁶ Also, some of the information provided to parents regarding the private schools, including information that “could have significantly affected parents’ choice of schools,” was “misleading,” “incorrect,” and “incomplete.”⁷

NCPE believes that instead of sending federal money to private schools, 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, 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 demonstrates that the DC voucher program should not be continued. At a minimum, the voucher program should not be expanded to any new students and should require that the teachers at voucher schools have bachelor’s degrees and that voucher school buildings have certificates of occupancy.

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

Sincerely,

African American Ministers in Action
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Association of University Women, Washington D.C. Branch
American Civil Liberties Union
American Federation of Teachers

2008), <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20084024.pdf>; U.S. Dep’t of Education, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year* (June 2007), <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pdf/20074009.pdf>.

² US Gov’t Accountability Office, *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Additional Policies and Procedures Would Improve Internal Controls and Program Operations*, Pub. No. 08-9 at 26 (Nov. 2007) (GAO Report), <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf>.

³ 2009 *US Dep’t of Ed. Report* at xxvi, xviii, 35, 40, 44-45, 49-50; 2008 *US Dep’t of Ed. Report* at 42-43, 50, & 57; & 2007 *US Dep’t of Ed. Report* at xix & 1-4.

⁴ 2009 *U.S. Dep’t of Ed. Report* at xxii, and 17; 2008 *U.S. Dep’t of Ed. Report* at xvii, & 16; 2007 *U.S. Dep’t of Ed. Report* at 21.

⁵ *GAO Report* at 30.

⁶ *Id.* at 22-23, 33-35.

⁷ *Id.* at 36.

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 for Exceptional Children
Center for Inquiry
Council of the Great City Schools
Feminist Majority
Interfaith Alliance
International Reading Association
NA'AMAT USA
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 Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
People For the American Way
School Social Work Association of America
Secular Coalition for America
Union for Reform Judaism
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism

cc: Members of the Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government