

April 18, 2019

The Honorable Mike Quigley  
Chair, House Appropriations Financial  
Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Kennedy  
Chair, Senate Appropriations Financial  
Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tom Graves  
Ranking Member, House Appropriations  
Financial Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Christopher Coons  
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations  
Financial Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20510

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

Dear Chairman Quigley, Ranking Member Graves, Chairman Kennedy, and Ranking Member Coons:

The 46 undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) write to voice opposition to the reauthorization or continued funding of the District of Columbia private school voucher program in the FY 2020 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill. 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 continue to allocate millions of taxpayer dollars to an unsuccessful and poorly managed program, and it should not allow this spending bill to include reauthorization of the program, as it has done in the past.

#### 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.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the two most recent Department of Education studies of the program

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 Ed., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report](#) (June 2010) (2010 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Ed., [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 Ed., [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 Ed., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Impact After 1 Year](#) (June 2007) (2007 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report).

demonstrate that students using vouchers are performing *worse* academically than their peers not in the voucher program.<sup>2</sup>

The recent studies have also found that the voucher program has no effect on student or parental satisfaction, or on parental involvement.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a study from the Urban Institute found that receiving a voucher does not increase D.C. students' college enrollment rates.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 controls<sup>7</sup> and failed to maintain adequate records on its own financial accounting.<sup>8</sup> The interim executive director of the Trust even admitted that “quality oversight of the program is sort of a dead zone, a blind spot.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

### 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.<sup>11</sup> It described one school that consisted entirely of voucher students as existing in just two classrooms in “a soot-stained storefront” where students

---

<sup>2</sup> 2018 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 19.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Gov't Accountability Office, [District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program: Actions Needed to Address Weaknesses in Administration and Oversight](#), 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](#), Pub. No. 08-9 at 26 (Nov. 2007) <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf> (2007 GAO Report).

<sup>7</sup> 2013 GAO Report at 19-26.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>9</sup> Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight, GAO Says](#), Wash. Post (Nov. 15, 2013).

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

<sup>11</sup> Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight, GAO Says](#), Wash. Post (Nov. 15, 2013).

used a gymnasium two miles down the road.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup> And program statistics reveal that for that school year, one-third of returning voucher students did not use their voucher and more than half of the new students who received a voucher did not use it.<sup>16</sup> 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 or continued funding of the D.C. voucher program in the FY 2020 FSGG Appropriations bill.

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)

---

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* (revealing details about Academia de la Recta Porta).

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

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* (discussing the Academy for Ideal Education).

<sup>15</sup> Phyllis W. Jordan and Kendell Long, FutureEd, [Vouchers In D.C.: Why Families Aren't Choosing Vouchers](#) (Aug. 2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 3.

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  
Freedom From Religion Foundation  
GLSEN  
Interfaith Alliance  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
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  
Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs