

May 7, 2024

The Honorable Steve Womack  
Chair, House Appropriations, Financial  
Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen  
Chair, Senate Appropriations, Financial  
Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20510

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

The Honorable Bill Hagerty  
Ranking Member, Senate Appropriations,  
Financial Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20515

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

Dear Chairman Womack, Ranking Member Hoyer, Chairman Van Hollen, and Ranking Member Hagerty:

The 43 undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) write to voice opposition to the continued funding or reauthorization of the District of Columbia private school voucher program in the FY 2025 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill. The Committee should not continue to allocate tens of millions of taxpayer dollars to a program that is ineffective, discriminatory, unaccountable to taxpayers, and poorly managed. Public dollars should fund public schools that serve all students, not private schools.

At minimum, we urge the Committee to add language, as the House Committee has done in previous years, to require voucher schools to provide the same civil rights protections that public school students receive—including those under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)—to students in the voucher 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 participating students.<sup>1</sup> In fact, two recent studies demonstrate that students using vouchers are performing

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Dep't of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts Three Years After Students Applied](#) (May 2019) (2019 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); 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.](#)

worse academically than their peers who are not in the voucher program.<sup>2</sup> Evidence shows that using a D.C. voucher actually results in a learning loss in math that is on par with the educational impacts of Hurricane Katrina.<sup>3</sup>

The most recent study also found that the voucher program has no effect on parental satisfaction, perceptions of safety, or involvement.<sup>4</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, supports and services for students with disabilities, and counselors than students who are not part of the program.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, a study from the Urban Institute found that receiving a voucher does not increase D.C. students' college enrollment rates.<sup>6</sup>

Congress initially created the voucher in 2003 as a five-year pilot, contingent on students' results in the program evaluations. Having failed to improve the academic achievement and school experience of the students in the voucher program for nearly two decades, the program clearly does not warrant continuation.

### The Program Lacks Sufficient Oversight and Accountability

According to two GAO reports, the D.C. voucher program has repeatedly failed to meet basic and even statutorily required accountability measures.<sup>7</sup> And an investigation by *The Washington Post* found that participating private schools lack even basic quality controls: these schools were sometimes operated out of run-down storefronts or homes without proper amenities like restrooms and gymnasiums.<sup>8</sup> For example, at one school where 93% of the students had vouchers, students were taught from a "learning model known as 'Suggestopedia,' an obscure Bulgarian philosophy of learning that stresses learning through music, stretching, and meditation."<sup>9</sup> Even a prior administrator of the program admitted that "quality oversight of the program [w]as sort of a dead zone, a blind spot."<sup>10</sup>

These schools are of such low quality that more than 42% of those participating have had to shut down due to a variety of deficiencies, including fraud and financial mismanagement,<sup>11</sup> and failure

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[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).

<sup>2</sup> 2018 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 19; 2017 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 11.

<sup>3</sup> Nat'l Coalition for Public Educ., [Voucher Impacts on Academic Achievement](#) (2023).

<sup>4</sup> 2019 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 6-9.

<sup>5</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>6</sup> Matthew Chingos, Urban Institute, [The Effect of the D.C. School Voucher Program on College Enrollment](#) (Feb. 2018).

<sup>7</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); 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).

<sup>8</sup> Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight](#), GAO Says, *The Wash. Post* (Nov. 15, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* (Discussing Academy for Ideal Education).

<sup>10</sup> Lyndsey Layton, [Quality Controls Lacking for D.C. Schools Accepting Federal Vouchers](#), *The Wash. Post*, (Nov. 17, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Kirov Academy, a ballet school that accepted vouchers, hired a person to be its treasurer even though she had recently spent two years in prison for embezzling money. She stole \$1.5 million from the school over the course of nine months. The school was forced to close due to the ensuing financial difficulties. See Rebecca J. Ritzel, *A Ballet School Rehired an Embezzler. Then \$1.5 Million Vanished*, *The N.Y. Times*, (Mar. 16, 2020).

to achieve accreditation after more than a decade of attempts.<sup>12</sup> Of the 82 schools that have participated in the program since its creation, 35 have closed their doors.<sup>13</sup>

A program with such repeated and serious oversight problems should not continue to be funded by taxpayers.

### The Program Endangers Civil Rights, Undermines Constitutional Protections, and Perpetuates Segregation

Despite receiving public funds, the private schools participating in the D.C. voucher program are not required to abide by all central elements of federal civil rights laws — including Title VI, Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and school accountability standards of 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. It is even more important that voucher schools protect students' civil rights considering that most students in the D.C. voucher program attend private schools that are deeply racially segregated. More than 70% of D.C. voucher students are concentrated in private schools with student populations that are over 90% Black and Hispanic.<sup>14</sup> Schools that do not provide students with fundamental civil rights protections should not be funded with taxpayer dollars.

### Conclusion

For these reasons and more, NCPE opposes the reauthorization or continued funding of the D.C. voucher program in the FY 2025 FSGG Appropriations bill.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association  
AFT  
American Atheists  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Federation of School Administrators  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)  
American Humanist Association  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
Association of Educational Service Agencies  
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)

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<sup>12</sup> Two voucher schools described in the Post's investigation, The Academy for Ideal Education and Academia de la Recta Porta, closed after failing to receive accreditation despite participating in the D.C. voucher program for almost 15 years. See Layton, Quality Controls Lacking.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Lumpkin, House GOP Would Divert Funds for D.C. Public Schools to Voucher Program, The Wash. Post (Aug. 6, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Mary Levy, [Washington, D.C. Voucher Program: Civil Rights Implications](#), Working Paper for the UCLA Civil Rights Program (Mar. 5, 2018), 23.

Center for Inquiry and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science  
Central Conference of American Rabbis  
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF)  
Council for Exceptional Children  
Council of Administrators of Special Education  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Feminist Majority Foundation  
First Focus Campaign for Children  
GLSEN  
In the Public Interest  
Learning Disabilities Association of America  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools (NAFIS)  
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)  
National Center for Learning Disabilities  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)  
National Education Association  
National Organization for Women  
National PTA  
National School Boards Association  
Network for Public Education  
Pastors for Children  
People For the American Way  
Public Funds Public Schools  
School Social Work Association of America  
Southern Education Foundation  
The Arc of the United States  
The Secular Coalition for America  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Women of Reform Judaism