

Debunking Myths About the DC Voucher Program

MYTH: Voucher students get a better education than DC public school students.

FACT: The Department of Education issued reports analyzing the DC voucher program in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010. The findings in each of these reports demonstrate that the voucher program is not improving student achievement. These findings are consistent with studies of private school voucher programs in Milwaukee¹ and Cleveland,² which have all revealed that vouchers do not improve math or reading achievement.

The Department of Education studies of the DC program have concluded that the use of a voucher had no statistically significant impact on overall student achievement in math or reading³ More specifically, students from “schools in need of improvement” (SINI), which are the students targeted by the program, have shown no improvement in reading or math due to the voucher program.⁴

The Department of Education reports also found that many of the children who left the DC voucher program did so because the voucher schools did not provide the academic support they needed: Of the students who left the voucher program in the first year, 45% stated that it was because the “child did not get the academic support he/she needed at the private school.”⁵ The number shot to 54% in the second year and was at 39% in the third year.⁶

MYTH: The program is a great help to students from “schools in need of improvement.”

FACT: In this program, priority is supposed to be given to students attending SINI schools. Yet, a 2014 study by the Department of Education revealed that a full 35% of voucher recipients in districts zoned for “schools in need of improvement” did not actually use their vouchers, and that students in SINI schools were less likely to accept vouchers than those in non-SINI public schools.⁷ Similarly, a 2007 report by the GAO found these students to be “underrepresented” in the program: in the 2006-2007 school year, even though 52% of DC public school students attended SINI schools, only 24% of voucher students came from such schools.⁸ Plus, the 2007, 2008, 2009 and the 2010 Department of Education Reports all show that students who entered the voucher program from SINI schools have shown no improvement in academic achievement.⁹

MYTH: Improved graduation rates, as shown by the 2010 Department of Education study, justify continuing the program.

¹ Witte, Wolf, et al., *MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Second Year Report* (Mar. 2009); Witte, *Achievement Effects of Milwaukee Voucher program* (Feb. 1997); Witte, Stern, & Thorn, *Fifth Year Report Milwaukee Parental Choice Program* (Dec. 1995).

² Plucker, et al., *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Summary Report 1998-2004* (Feb. 2006); *Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program, Executive Report 1998-2002* (Feb. 2006).

³ US Dep’t of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report*, xv, xix and 34 (June 2010) (*Final US Dep’t of Educ. Report*).

⁴ *Final US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 34; US Dep’t of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years*, 34 (March 2009) (*2009 US Dep’t of Educ. Report*); US Dep’t of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years*, 34, 36-38 (June 2008) (*2008 US Dep’t of Educ. Report*); and US Dep’t of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year*, xvii, 44, & 46 (June 2007) (*2007 US Dep’t of Educ. Report*).

⁵ *2009 US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 25.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ U.S. Dep’t of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: An Early Look at Applicants and Participating Schools Under the SOAR Act*, (2014), available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20154000/pdf/20154000.pdf>. 2014 DOE study 21 (65 percent versus 73 percent).

⁸ 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, 28 (Nov. 2007) <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d089.pdf> (2007 GAO Report).

⁹ *Final US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 34; *2009 US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 34; *2008 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 34, 36-38; & *2007 US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at xvii, 44, & 46.

FACT: **Graduation rates without an improvement in educational achievement say nothing about improving the education of the student unless all of the schools have the same graduation requirements.** The study fails to indicate whether the voucher schools maintain the same, more difficult, or more lenient graduation standards. Thus, graduation rates are not a strong indicator of whether student education has been improved. In addition, the graduation study relies upon a survey of the mere 500 students who were forecasted to have completed the 12th grade by the summer of 2009. And, of those 500 phone calls, only 316 elicited responses. A phone survey of 316 students seems insufficient to justify a \$20 million a year private school voucher program.¹⁰

MYTH: **The DC voucher program is popular.**

FACT: The citizens of the District of Columbia did not ask for the voucher program—they opposed it. In 1981, DC voters soundly rejected referendum on a tuition tax credit (which is a different form of private school vouchers) with 89% opposed and only 11% in favor. DC citizens again clearly expressed their opposition to vouchers in an opinion poll conducted in November 2002—prior to Congress’ enactment of the DC voucher program. In that poll, 75% of District voters opposed private school vouchers.¹¹

Even in Congress, the program passed with the narrowest margin possible—one vote (209-208).¹² In the Senate, the voucher program was stripped from the DC Appropriations bill before it hit the Senate floor because it was clear the bill could not pass with the program attached.¹³ The voucher program became law, nonetheless, when it was later inserted into the conference report of a \$280 billion omnibus appropriations bill.¹⁴

After passing continuing resolutions for FY 2009 and FY2010 to maintain the program, which expired in 2008, Congress reauthorized it in 2011 for another five years through the Scholarships for Opportunity Results (SOAR) Act.¹⁵ Like in 2003, the 2011 reauthorization could not make it through the Senate. The SOAR Act only passed in 2011 as part of the FY2011 continuing resolution – a compromise to avert an imminent government shutdown. In short, the D.C. voucher legislation has never been able to garner enough votes in both the House and the Senate to pass on its own in a standalone bill.

MYTH: **Voucher students are safer than public school students.**

FACT: Although certain voucher advocates go so far as to argue that attendance at DC public schools leads students to join gangs,¹⁶ there is no evidence that voucher schools are safer than public schools. To the contrary, the 2007, 2008, 2009, and the 2010 Department of Education Reports all found that although participation in the voucher program had a substantial impact on *parents’*

¹⁰ *Final US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at 41-42.

¹¹ NSBA/Zogby International Poll, *School Vouchers: What the Public Thinks and Why* (2002).

¹² Spencer S. Hsu *How Vouchers Came to D.C.*, *EDUC. NEXT* (2004), available at <http://educationnext.org/howvoucherscametodc/>.

¹³ Robert Marus, *Republicans Add DC Voucher Plan to Unamendable Appropriations Bill*, *ASSOC. BAPTIST PRESS* (Nov. 20, 2003), <http://baptistnews.com/archives/item/2667-republicans-add-dc-voucher-plan-to-unamendable-appropriations-bill> (stating that “the majority of elected officials in DC oppose the voucher proposal”).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act (SOAR Act) of 2011, P.L. 112-10.

¹⁶ Jim Lovino, *Senator Draws Ire for DC Public School Gang Comment DeMint Relays Message from District Parents*, *NBC NEWS* (Mar. 6, 2009), http://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local-beat/Senator-DC-Public-Students-Are-Gang-Members.html?__source=Facebook (Former Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) stated: “Parents tell us . . . if they are sending their kids off to public schools, the chances are very good that they are going to end up in a gang rather than graduating high school”).

views of school safety, it did not have any impact on a students' actual school experience with dangerous activities.¹⁷

MYTH: Voucher schools increase student motivation and engagement.

FACT: According to the 2008 and 2009 Department of Education Reports, participation in the voucher program provided no statistically significant impacts on a students' "aspirations for the future"; "frequency of doing homework"; "time spent reading for fun"; "engagement in extracurricular activities"; or "attendance" or "tardiness rates."¹⁸

MYTH: Many of the students in the program go to the most expensive and elite private schools in DC.

FACT: Proponents of the bill like to tout certain elite private schools that are participating in the program. What they do not say is that "only 3 percent [of voucher students] attended the most expensive schools that charged \$20,000 or more."¹⁹

This is likely because most voucher schools charge tuition rates higher than the cap on voucher awards: during the 2011-2012 school year, 64% of participating voucher schools charged higher tuition rates than the voucher cap.²⁰ And, because tuition rates are only part of the overall cost of attending a private school, it is likely that an even greater number of participating schools were not attainable for those receiving vouchers.

MYTH: Voucher schools offer students better educational resources.

FACT: Students participating in the DC voucher program are significantly LESS likely to go to a school with ESL programs, learning support and special needs programs, tutors, counselors, cafeterias, and nurse's offices than students not in the program.²¹ And, students in the program experienced no increase in before-and-after-school programs.²²

MYTH: Voucher schools offer students better resources for students with special needs.

FACT: The 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 Department of Education Reports found that students in the program were less likely "to attend a school that offered special programs for students who may be academically challenged." Students in the program also "experienced a lower likelihood that their school offered special programs for students with learning problems," and "special programs for English language learners."²³

The 2010 Department of Education Report found that 21.6% of the parents who rejected a voucher that was offered to their child did so because the school lacked the special needs services that their child needed.²⁴ And, 12.3% of the parents who accepted a voucher for their child but then left the program cited a lack of special needs services.²⁵

¹⁷ *Final US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 43-47; *2009 US Dep't. of Educ. Report* at 44-45; *2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 42-43, 50; *2007 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xx, 53-55.

¹⁸ *2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 60-62; & *2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 57-58.

¹⁹ 2007 GAO Report at 31-32.

²⁰ U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: An Early Look at Applicants and Participating Schools Under the SOAR Act*, 9 (2014).

²¹ *Final US 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. The 2010 Report found a decrease in access to tutors, but no "significant" reduction in tutors. *Final US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 20.

²² *Final US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 20; *2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xxxii & 55-56; *2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xxvi, & 57-58.

²³ *Final US Dep't of Ed. Report* at, xxvii, 19-20; 55-57, 60; *2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xxii, 17-18; *2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xviii, 16; *2007 Dep't of Educ. Report* at 20-21.

²⁴ *Final US Dep't of Ed. Report* at 24-26.

²⁵ *Id.*

MYTH: Voucher schools have smaller class sizes and better facilities.

FACT: The 2009 and 2010 Department of Education Report found that participation in the DC voucher program had no significant effect on the “student/teacher ratio.”²⁶

A report conducted by the *Washington Post* concluded that many voucher school facilities are inadequate. The report described one school that consisted entirely of voucher students that existed in just two classrooms in “a soot-stained storefront” where students used a gymnasium two miles down the road.²⁷ 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.²⁸ Furthermore, because the program’s administrator has not properly enforced the SOAR Act’s requirement to record schools’ certificates of occupancy,²⁹ there’s an increased likelihood that students are crowded in subpar facilities with less access to their teachers.

MYTH: Voucher students get access to better teachers than students in DC public schools.

FACT: The teachers in many of the voucher schools actually lack the qualifications that public school teachers have. For example, the 2007 GAO Report found that “at least 3 of 52 schools that participated [in 2004-05] indicated that at least half of their teachers did not have at least a bachelor’s degree, and 6 schools indicated that about 10 to 20 percent of their teachers lacked at least a bachelor’s degree.”³⁰ In addition, students in the DC voucher program “rated their teacher’s attitude” no better than students who did not participate in the program.³¹

The *Washington Post*’s report also found that students in the voucher program are taught from questionable curriculum. At one voucher school, where 93% of the students had vouchers, teachers taught from a “learning model known as “Suggestopedia,” an obscure Bulgarian philosophy of learning that stresses learning through music, stretching and meditation.”³²

MYTH: The program gives DC students a “choice” of private schools.

FACT: To the contrary, not all public school students can even gain access to a voucher school, as voucher schools are permitted to maintain their admissions standards and, thus, can essentially reject any public school student they choose. Voucher schools can reject students based on prior academic achievement, economic background, English language ability, or disciplinary history. Also, under the program, all voucher schools can reject students on the basis of gender, and religious schools can discriminate against teachers based on their religion.³³ In contrast, public schools serve all students in DC.

Certain groups of DC students have less access to voucher schools than others. For example, students with special needs often cannot find a private school that can or want to serve them: The Department of Education reports show that a significant number of students had to reject their voucher because they were “unable to find a participating school that offered services for their

²⁶ *Final US Dep’t of Ed. Report* at 60; *2009 US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at xxxii.

²⁷ Lyndsey Layton, *D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight*, *GAO Says*, WASH. POST (Nov. 15, 2013), http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/D.C.-school-voucher-program-lacks-oversight-gao-says/2013/11/15/9bb8c35e-4e3d-11e3-be6b-d3d28122e6d4_story.html. (revealing details about Academia de la Recta Porta).

²⁸ *Id.* (discussing Muhammad University of Islam, which enrolled one-third voucher students).

²⁹ 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 at 21 (Nov. 2013) <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/658416.pdf> (nine of the ten schools investigated by the GAO still did not meet the certificates of occupancy requirement) (2013 GAO Report).

³⁰ 2007 GAO Report at 34.

³¹ *2009 US Dep’t of Educ. Report* at xxxii.

³² Layton, *supra* note 26 (discussing the Academy for Ideal Education).

³³ P.L. 108-199 Stat. 3 (2004).

child's learning or physical disability or other special needs."³⁴ Indeed, the 2010 Department of Education Report concluded that 22 percent of parents who were offered but declined a voucher, did so because they were "unable to find a participating school that offered services for their child's special needs."³⁵

High school students also have less access to voucher schools: "For the school year 2005-2006, only about 70 openings were available at the high school level."³⁶

Students seeking non-religious schools also "have a limited number to choose from, since most participating private schools are religious. In fact, in 2014 the Department of Education found that 62% of DC voucher schools were religious, and when that data was weighted by the number of students served in each school, the religiously affiliated schools rose to 81% of all voucher schools."³⁷

Furthermore, the 2008 study revealed that 8% of the students who left their voucher school did so because "religious activities at the private school made the child uncomfortable."³⁸ That same study found that 2% of students didn't even accept a voucher because they did not want to attend a school that provided religious instruction.³⁹ The 2010 report found that was true for 2.3% of students who never used the voucher offered to them.⁴⁰

MYTH: Voucher schools do not need to be accountable to taxpayers because they are accountable to parents.

FACT: The GAO has revealed that the voucher program is not even accountable to the parents of participating students. For example, in its 2007 report, the GAO criticized the DC voucher program's annual directory, saying that the program administrator "did not collect or omitted or incorrectly reported some information that would have helped parents evaluate the quality of participating schools."⁴¹ And, "[s]ome information [the administration organization] did provide to parents may have been misleading."⁴² In fact, it "incorrectly reported information on some schools that could have significantly affected parents' choice of schools, primarily the percentage of teachers who had at least a bachelor's degree and tuition rates."⁴³ The most recent GAO report found that six years later, the program still suffered the same flaw. That report found that the program's administrator did not even complete its 2012-2013 directory until nine months after that school year had already begun.⁴⁴

Even if the program were accountable to parents, however, that should not excuse the program from also being accountable to taxpayers. The 2013 GAO report concluded that the program's administrator has continually failed to ensure the program operated with basic accountability measures and quality controls⁴⁵ and even failed to maintain adequate records on its own financial accounting.⁴⁶ The interim executive director of the program at that time even admitted that "quality oversight of the program as sort of a dead zone, a blind spot."⁴⁷ It is simply bad

³⁴ 2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report at 22.

³⁵ Final US Dep't of Ed. Report at 24.

³⁶ 2007 GAO Report at 31.

³⁷ U.S. Dep't of Ed., *Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: An Early Look at Applicants and Participating Schools Under the SOAR Act*, 10, 29 (2014).

³⁸ 2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report at 23.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Final US Dep't of Educ. Report at xxv.

⁴¹ 2007 GAO Report at 36.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.* at 36-37

⁴⁴ 2013 GAO Report at 13-14.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 19.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 28.

⁴⁷ Layton, *supra* note 26.

government to fund a program without providing oversight and without requiring metrics, like student testing, that allow clear evaluation of the program.

MYTH: Money is better spent sending kids to private schools in the District.

FACT: DC public schools are improving, and funding should not be stripped from these schools as they begin to move forward.

It is counter-intuitive to funnel money away from public schools, when D.C. public schools (DCPS) are making significant strides in student achievement. In 2013, the DCPS demonstrated the “greatest growth of any urban school district in the country.”⁴⁸ Reports from the 2013-2014 school year revealed that students’ reading and math proficiency rates have increased steadily since 2007⁴⁹ across every demographic.⁵⁰ In fact, math performance rates for students in DCPS reached an all-time high.⁵¹ Moreover, DCPS’ graduation rate has increased 5 points in 4 years.⁵² Accordingly, DCPS has recently announced a budget increase for the 2015-2016 school year in an effort to continue these reforms.⁵³

⁴⁸ *Test Results Showing DCPS with Greatest Growth of Any Urban District*, D.C. PUB. SCH. (Dec. 18, 2013), <http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Press+Releases+and+Announcements/Press+Releases/Test+Results+Showing+DCPS+with+Greatest+Growth+of+Any+Urban+District> (showing the “greatest growth of any urban school district in the country on the 2013 Trial Urban District Assessment”).

⁴⁹ Emma Brown, *D.C. Students Reach New Heights in Annual Standardized Tests*, WASH. POST (July 30, 2013), http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-students-reach-new-heights-in-annual-standardized-tests/2013/07/30/1cda4984-f88b-11e2-afc1-c850c6ee5af8_story.html.

⁵⁰ DC CAS 2014 Results, D.C. PUB. SCH., <http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Files/DC%20CAS%202014%20-%20DCPS%20Press%20Deck.pdf>

⁵¹ *DCPS Students Continue to Demonstrate Growth*, D.C. PUB. SCH. (Aug. 8, 2014), <http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Press+Releases+and+Announcements/Press+Releases/DCPS+Students+Continue+to+Demonstrate+Growth>

⁵² Michael Alison Chandler, *Graduation Rats Up in D.C. Public Schools, Down for Charter Schools*, WASH. POST. (Mar. 17, 2015), http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/graduation-rates-up-in-dc-public-schools-down-for-charter-schools/2015/03/17/a8223424-cc0c-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?wprss=rss_Copy%20of%20local-alexandria-social&utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

⁵³ Letter to District of Columbia Public Schools Community from Kaya Henderson about the FY16 Fiscal Report Card, <http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Budget+and+Finance/FY16+Fiscal+Report+Card>.

