

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 from 2007- 2010 and again in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The findings in these reports demonstrate that the voucher program has not improved student achievement. And, in 2017 and 2018,¹ the Department found that students using a voucher performed *worse* academically than students not in the program. These findings are consistent with studies of private school voucher programs in Louisiana,² Indiana,³ and Ohio,⁴ which have all revealed that vouchers have led to declines in student achievement.

The Department of Education reports also found that many of the students 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: Historically, 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

MYTH: The DC voucher program is popular.

FACT: DC voucher legislation has never been able to garner enough votes in Congress to pass on its own. The original legislation passed the House by the narrowest margin possible—one vote (209-208).⁹ 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.¹⁰ The voucher program became law, nonetheless, when it was later inserted into the conference report of a \$280 billion omnibus appropriations bill.¹¹

¹ U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Impacts Two Years After Students Applied](#), xiii, 19 (2018) (2018 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Impacts After One Year](#), xiii, 11 (2017). However, a study in 2019 found that the voucher program had no effect on student achievement. See 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).

² Morgan Winsor, [Louisiana’s Controversial Voucher Program Harms Poor Students, Lowers Grades, New Study Finds](#), Int’l Bus. Times (Jan. 10, 2016).

³ Mark Dynarski, [On Negative Effects of Vouchers](#), Brookings Inst. (May 26, 2016).

⁴ David Figlio & Krzysztof Karbownik, Fordham Institute, [Evaluation of Ohio’s EdChoice Scholarship Program: Selection, Competition, and Performance Effects](#) 32 (July 2016).

⁵ U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Impacts After Three Years](#), 25 (2009) (2009 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Scholarship Program: An Early Look at Applicants and Participating Schools Under the SOAR Act](#), 21 (2014) (65 percent versus 73 percent) (2014 Dep’t of Educ. Report).

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) (2007 GAO Report).

⁹ Spencer S. Hsu, [How Vouchers Came to D.C.](#), EDUC. NEXT (2004).

¹⁰ Robert Marus, [Republicans Add DC Voucher Plan to Unamendable Appropriations Bill](#), ASSOC. BAPTIST PRESS (Nov. 20, 2003), (stating that “the majority of elected officials in DC oppose the voucher proposal”).

¹¹ *Id.*

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.¹² Once again, the reauthorization could not make it through the Senate as a standalone bill and only passed as part of the FY2011 continuing resolution—a compromise to avert an imminent government shutdown. The program was again reauthorized in 2017 through a spending bill, and the most recent reauthorization of the SOAR Act was also passed by being tacked onto an omnibus appropriations bill in 2019.

Additionally, 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.¹³ Moreover, the DC Council has also opposed the voucher program. In 2017, eight Councilmembers wrote a letter to Congress asking to phase out the program rather than reauthorize it.¹⁴

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,¹⁵ there is no evidence that voucher schools are safer than public schools. The most recent Department of Education study shows no statistically significant improvement in parents’ perceptions of safety, and also shows that students who received vouchers actually had fewer school safety measures in place at their schools than students who did not receive vouchers.¹⁶

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.”¹⁷ And, the 2019 Department of Education report found that the program had no statistically significant impact on parents’ general satisfaction with the student’s school and had no a statistically significant impact on the involvement of parents in the education of their child after using a voucher.¹⁸

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

FACT: Proponents of the program like to tout certain elite private schools that are participating in the program. But an investigation in 2007 found that “only 3 percent [of voucher students] attended the most expensive schools that charged \$20,000 or more.”¹⁹ Moreover, during the school years from 2013-14 to 2015-16, the Department of Education found that 70% of participating voucher

¹² Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act (SOAR Act) of 2011, P.L. 112-10.

¹³ NSBA/Zogby International Poll, *School Vouchers: What the Public Thinks and Why* (2002).

¹⁴ [Letter to Representative Jason Chaffetz from DC Councilmembers](#) (Mar. 7, 2017).

¹⁵ Jim Lovino, [Senator Draws Ire for DC Public School Gang Comment DeMint Relays Message from District Parents](#), NBC News (Mar. 6, 2009), (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”).

¹⁶ 2019 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at 8 and A-11.

¹⁷ 2009 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at 60-62; U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Impacts After Two Years](#), 57-58 (2008) (2008 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report).

¹⁸ 2019 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at 6-7, 9.

¹⁹ 2007 GAO Report at 31-32.

schools charged higher tuition rates than the voucher cap, with the average difference being \$13,310.²⁰ 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.

The discrepancy between the voucher amount and total cost is likely a contributing factor to students being unable to use their vouchers. A 2017 study found that from 2011-2016, the number of students applying to the DC voucher program increased, but the number of students actually using a voucher decreased. In 2016-17, one-third of the students already awarded vouchers did not use them and more than one-half of the new students receiving vouchers did not attend private school.²¹

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.²² The 2019 Department of Education study found that students who received a voucher on average were provided 1.7 hours less of instruction time a week in both reading and math than students who did not receive vouchers.²³ It also found that students who received a voucher had less access to programming for students with learning disabilities and for students who are English Language Learners.²⁴

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.”²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.”²⁸

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

²⁰ 2019 Dep’t of Educ. Report at A-9.

²¹ Phyllis W. Jordan & Kendall Long, Georgetown Univ., Vouchers in D.C.: [Why D.C. Families Aren’t Choosing Vouchers](#), 1 (2017).

²² U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program Final Report](#), 20 (2010) (2010 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report); 2009 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xxii & 17; 2008 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xviii & 16. The 2010 Report found a decrease in access to tutors, but no “significant” reduction in tutors.

²³ 2019 Dep’t of Educ. Report at A-11.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ 2010 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at, xxvii, 19-20; 55-57, 60; 2009 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xxii, 17-18; 2008 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xviii, 16; U.S. Dep’t of Educ., [Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year](#), 20-21 (2007) (2007 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report).

²⁶ 2010 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at 24-26.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 60; 2009 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xxxii.

miles down the road.²⁹ 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.³⁰ Furthermore, because the program's administrator has not properly enforced the SOAR Act's requirement to record schools' certificates of occupancy,³¹ 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."³² In addition, students in the DC voucher program "rated their teacher's attitude" no better than students who did not participate in the program.³³

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."³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 will 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 child's learning or physical disability or other special needs."³⁶ 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."³⁷

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."³⁸

²⁹ Lyndsey Layton, [D.C. School Voucher Program Lacks Oversight](#), *GAO Says*, WASH. POST (Nov. 15, 2013) (revealing details about Academia de la Recta Porta).

³⁰ *Id.* (discussing Muhammad University of Islam, which enrolled one-third voucher students).

³¹ 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).

³² 2007 GAO Report at 34.

³³ 2009 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at xxxii.

³⁴ Layton, *supra* note 28 (discussing the Academy for Ideal Education).

³⁵ P.L. 108-199 Stat. 3 (2004).

³⁶ 2008 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 22.

³⁷ 2010 U.S. Dep't of Ed. Report at 24.

³⁸ 2007 GAO Report at 31.

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.”³⁹

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.”⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ The 2010 report found that was true for 2.3% of students who never used the voucher offered to them.⁴²

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.”⁴³ And, “[s]ome information [the administration organization] did provide to parents may have been misleading.”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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 controls⁴⁷ and even failed to maintain adequate records on its own financial accounting.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ It is simply bad policy 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 DC public schools (DCPS) “continues to be the nation’s fastest improving urban school district.”⁵⁰

³⁹ 2014 U.S. Dep’t of Ed. Report at 10, 29.

⁴⁰ 2008 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at 23.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² 2010 U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Report at xxv.

⁴³ 2007 GAO Report at 36.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 36-37

⁴⁶ 2013 GAO Report at 13-14.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 19.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 28.

⁴⁹ Layton, *supra* note 28.

⁵⁰ [DC Public Schools Continues to Be the Fastest Improving Urban School District](#), D.C. Pub. Sch. (Oct. 30, 2019).