

May 23, 2022

The Honorable Mike Quigley  
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 Steve Womack  
Ranking Member, House Appropriations  
Financial Services and General Government  
Subcommittee  
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith  
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 Womack, Chairman Van Hollen, and Ranking Member Hyde-Smith:

The 41 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 2023 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, 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 *worse* academically than their peers who are not in the voucher program.<sup>2</sup>

The most recent study also found that the voucher program has no effect on parental satisfaction, perceptions of safety, or 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, services and supports for students with disabilities, 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 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>6</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>7</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>8</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>9</sup>

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

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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 Educ., [Evaluation of the D.C. Scholarship Program: Final Report](#) (June 2010) (2010 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report); U.S. Dep't of Educ., [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 Educ., [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 Educ., [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> 2019 U.S. Dep't of Educ. Report at 6-9.

<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 & 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 & Program Operations](#), Pub. No. 08-9 at 26 (Nov. 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Lyndsey Layton, [Quality Controls Lacking for D.C. Schools Accepting Federal Vouchers](#), *The Wash. Post*, (Nov. 17, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* (Discussing Academy for Ideal Education).

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

## 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 do not abide by all federal civil rights laws and public accountability standards, including those in Title VI, Title IX, 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. 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>10</sup> Schools that do not provide students with basic 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 2023 FSGG Appropriations bill.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

AASA, The School Superintendents Association  
African American Ministers In Action  
American Atheists  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)  
American Federation of Teachers  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
ADL (Anti-Defamation League)  
Association of Educational Service Agencies  
Association of School Business Officials International (ASBO)  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)  
Center for Inquiry (CFI)  
Central Conference of American Rabbis  
Clearinghouse on Women's Issues  
Council for Exceptional Children

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<sup>10</sup> Mary Levy, [Washington, D.C. Voucher Program: Civil Rights Implications](#), Working Paper for the UCLA Civil Rights Program (Mar. 5, 2018), 23.

Council of Administrators of Special Education  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Disciples Center for Public Witness  
Disciples Justice Action Network  
Equal Partners in Faith  
Feminist Majority Foundation  
Freedom From Religion Foundation  
GLSEN  
Interfaith Alliance  
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 (NDRN)  
National Education Association  
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  
Secular Coalition for America  
SPLC Action Fund  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Women of Reform Judaism