

# The National Coalition

*for*

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## Public Education

July 9, 2008

Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The undersigned organizations of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) wish to comment on the expiring Washington, D.C., private school voucher program in conjunction with the markup the Committee will hold Thursday, July 10 on the District of Columbia appropriations bill. NCPE strongly opposes the funneling of public money to private and religious schools through vouchers, and wants to comment on the bipartisan bill that was passed out of the subcommittee earlier today.

NCPE consistently has urged that this program end, as was initially intended, at the close of the 2008-2009 school year. Throughout the life of this pilot program numerous evaluations have proven that the program is ineffective and that federal dollars should not be spent for such purposes. It is clear that the funding could have been spent in far more useful ways that would serve **all** students in DC. As we understand it, the funding in this bill would provide one additional year of funding (for the 2009-2010 school year) but also stipulates that no funding beyond that will be provided without a full authorization of the program. We appreciate that the intent of this provision to require that a full look at this program will be undertaken before any future funding is considered. With a thorough examination, Congress will see the program's ineffectiveness and inappropriateness, which should ensure that it is not reauthorized.

We also recognize that the additional clarifying language is an attempt to require that the private schools meet some of the minimal standards that the public schools must meet on a daily basis - both in terms of the safety standards of the actual school buildings and the education background of teachers instructing students in the voucher program. While we appreciate their intent, neither of these provisions goes far enough to justify private schools receiving public funds.

The nearly \$15 million a year program provides vouchers worth up to \$7,500 for approximately 1,900 students. Created as a five-year *pilot*, it is scheduled to expire in 2008. The program's expiration, previously noted by members of both parties, should come as no surprise to voucher proponents. And, despite proponents' claims five years ago that the vouchers would permit students to attend better schools, the Congressionally mandated federal evaluation first released in 2007 **and the new evaluation for the second academic year that was released last month** both found no significant differences overall in academic achievement between voucher students and their peers in Washington, D.C. public schools.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2007. Second Year Report issued June 16, 2008.

In addition to the lack of academic evidence supporting the program, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report also documented several accountability shortcomings in the program. Examples include federal taxpayer dollars funding tuition at private schools that do not even charge tuition, schools that lacked city occupancy permits, and schools employing teachers without bachelor's degrees.<sup>2</sup> It also noted that children with physical or learning disabilities are underrepresented in the program compared to the public schools.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the program's dubious record, President Bush's FY09 budget request actually calls for an increase to \$18 million for vouchers. NCPE believes that money should instead be invested in the public schools. We also note that despite receiving public money, the participating private schools are not subject to all federal civil rights laws, and do not face the same public accountability standards, including those in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, that all public schools face. We also believe this program continues to raise problems under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

NCPE believes the objective evidence does not support the reauthorization or continued funding of the only federally funded school voucher program. We urge you to oppose the program's continued funding in the Committee markup, and as the appropriations bill moves forward.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on this important issue.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Women  
American Association of University Women, Washington D.C. Branch  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees  
American Humanist Association  
American Jewish Committee  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Americans for Religious Liberty  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
Anti-Defamation League  
Association of Educational Service Agencies  
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Interfaith Alliance  
International Reading Association  
National Alliance of Black School Educators  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of Secondary School Principals  
National Association of State Directors of Special Education  
National Council of Jewish Women

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<sup>2</sup> "District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program," U.S. Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

House Committee on Appropriations

June 20, 2008

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National Education Association

National Parent Teacher Association

National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition

National School Boards Association

People For the American Way

Secular Coalition for America

Union for Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Women of Reform Judaism