

District of Columbia Education Advocates Response to the Federal Imposition of School Vouchers in the District of Columbia

Congressman Robert Flake (R-AZ) and other conservative lawmakers recently proposed legislation supporting the federal imposition of school vouchers in the District of Columbia. Voucher advocates claim parents competing to send their students to private school will encourage public schools, who want to retain students, to perform better. Not only does research refute this claim, but public support nationally for this ideological driven education reform effort is limited. Indeed, voters in Representative Flake's home state of Arizona rejected vouchers as a means of improving public schools.

District Resident Support Public Accountability and Existing School Choice Options

The position of District voters and public officials are no different than those found nationally. A recent poll by the National School Board Association found:

- 76 percent of District voters do not support vouchers
- 80 percent believe private schools that receive vouchers should be accountable to the public.

District residents prefer to improve their public schools through increased accountability by way of public oversight and public school choice options. They have embraced charter schools and liberal out-of-boundary methods for offering school choice that retain public accountability and oversight. Over 11,000 District residents attend charter schools that have open admission policies (70 percent of them are on free and reduced lunch) and nearly 10,000 residents attend schools outside their school boundaries.

Communities Improving Schools vs. Individuals Competing for Schools

An essential element of a successful school – a community of citizens committed to educating every child – will be fractured by school vouchers. Parents will no longer be encouraged to work together to improve their neighborhood schools. Instead, parents will have to compete with one another for a check that allows them to attend schools that view students as commodities. Public policy that provides parents a voice for improving their schools, rather than an exit route, will put us on the path to ensuring every community has a public school that meets the needs of every student.

The Argument for Vouchers Has Many Flaws

In addition to the problems associated with values and public support, there are serious flaws in the Cato Institute's argument for imposing vouchers on the District. The voucher education system:

- **Does not improve student achievement.** Reports by the General Accounting Office and official evaluations of established voucher programs show no achievement gains associated with vouchers.
- **Does not promote accountability.** Private schools that take vouchers do not have to keep or make public essential information, such as test scores and teacher qualifications, essential for holding schools accountable.
- **Does not guarantee equitability.** Private schools are competitively selective, and as a result, may not directly serve high-need students who have vouchers.

Voucher proponents appear to be content forcing an unproven idea on unwilling District residents, experimenting with the lives of the youth as opposed to joining in their shared responsibility to improve education for all children.