

For Immediate Release
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District Education Advocacy Community Rejects Vouchers as Option for Improving Public Schools

****If you support the community's civic responsibility to provide quality schools for every child in the District through public control and oversight of the school system as outlined in this response and would like to sign your name or that of an organization you are affiliated with, please contact Jeff Edmondson at the phone number or e-mail mentioned below.****
(2/13/03)

Washington, DC – A coalition of District of Columbia public education advocacy organizations has drafted a response rejecting federally imposed vouchers as an option for improving the nation capital's public schools. Any questions or comments concerning the response should be directed to the 21st Century School Fund at 202-745-3745 or jedmondson@21csf.org, and information contact information will be provided for the response's co-signers.

The education advocacy coalition believes federal assistance is an invaluable part of making much-needed reforms that will help ensure every child receives a high quality education in the nation capital's public schools. District residents and elected officials are committed to improving schools through raising standards, increasing public accountability, and providing choice options within the public school system as a means of attaining this goal.

A recent proposal to impose an education voucher system in the District without the residents' consent, led by President Bush and supported by conservative legislators and think tanks, has raised concerns in the community. As Mayor Anthony Williams and the City Council have expressed, District of Columbia residents strongly oppose a federally imposed voucher education system that would undermine current efforts to improve the public schools.

The District of Columbia education advocacy organizations mentioned below have collaborated to develop the attached response clarifying our position and that of our constituency. While we encourage Congressional support of initiatives to improve the District's public schools, we hope support can help to further reform efforts the residents embrace and that ensure *every* child in *all* our schools receives the best possible education.

21st Century School Fund
District of Columbia Parent, Teacher Association (DCPTA)
District Community Voices Organized and Informed for Change in Education (DC VOICE)
Parents United
Senior High Alliance of Principals, Parents, and Educators (SHAPPE)

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Response to Federally Imposing Vouchers in the District of Columbia

If public education in the District of Columbia is to become effective and accountable for *all* students, sending some students to selective, non-accountable private schools with public tax dollars is more likely to defeat than to accomplish the goal. Yet a new proposal to impose an education voucher system in the District, led by President Bush and conservative legislators, intends to do just that. The District's education advocacy community, made up of non-profit, parent, and other organizations, recognizes that the District public schools are in need of improvement. However, we believe District students should not be subjected to further experimentation, and certainly not without the consent of District citizens and their elected representatives. Our preferred method for improving public schools, and that of the federal government, as embodied in No Child Left Behind, is to

- 1) Increase and improve accountability through public oversight
- 2) Provide choices within the public school system.

Our response will highlight the risks a voucher program poses to a public education system that has been an integral part of our democracy and communities for 200 years. We will also cite the widespread

opposition to vouchers in the District and around the country, as well as the lack of research supporting voucher education systems and general flaws in implementing them.

The Voucher Argument

The voucher approach to improving public education relies on consumer competition through the market system as the vehicle for accountability, abandoning the recent and promising policy trend adopted by Congress and all fifty states, of improving oversight by and increasing accountability to all citizens. Vouchers proponents argue, without the support of research, that student achievement will improve through increasing parental choice, inducing competition with private schools that will drive public schools to perform better. We believe that the competition voucher advocates desire is already in force within the District's public schools and charter school system and that increased public accountability is the best way to ensure equitable and universal improvement and opportunity for all students.

Citizens vs. Consumers

Vouchers have negative implications on our democracy at the national level and on communities at the local level. Schools are

an essential part of ensuring every citizen in a democracy access to a good education, enabling them to access information and engage in dialogue that will help shape public opinion. At the community level, schools act as the anchors of communities where all residents share the responsibility for educating those who will shape their future.

A voucher education system offers District residents the prospect that the education of children will be relegated to a competition among anxious parents and schools that view students as commodities. Vouchers change the democratic ideal of providing a good education to *all citizens* through an effective public school system, to a market system where some students and parents who act as *consumers* will have to out-compete their peers to gain access to good schools, while those who don't will be left behind. We want our children to have the right to a good education, not just the right to a check that leaves their education vulnerable to the vagaries of an imperfect market. The difficult work of improving *all* schools and participating in the shared responsibility for making the District of Columbia Public Schools the best they can be should not be abandoned for this simplistic consumer model.

District Residents Do Not Want Vouchers; They Want Public Accountability

The federal government could not impose vouchers anywhere else in the country. District residents, like voters and public officials across the country, oppose vouchers.¹ Yet taking advantage of Congress' unique authority over the District, elected officials from other states and officials in the Department of Education are poised to impose such a system on District parents. A recent poll by the National School Board Association found that 76 percent of District voters do not support the establishment of vouchers in the District. In addition, over 80 percent of voters declared that private schools that accept taxpayer vouchers should be held accountable.² This survey makes two points clear:

- 1) District residents overwhelmingly oppose vouchers.
- 2) District residents want public accountability to improve public schools.

¹ Laitsch, D. (2002, December 4). K-12 voucher programs and education policy: An exploratory study of policy maker attitudes and opinions, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 10(48). Available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n48/>. Also, The Voters Speak in 2002: Fully Fund and Strengthen Public Education, People for the American Way, November 2002. Available at http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/dfiles/file_143.pdf

² New Poll Finds District of Columbia Voters Strongly Oppose Vouchers, National School Board Association, December 2002. Available at <http://www.nsba.org/pressroom/pr121002.htm>.

District parents are pressing for information, oversight and consequences for failure, but few are arguing for vouchers. Both the lack of public support for vouchers and DC voters' desire to retain public oversight argue for keeping all publicly funded education under public control.

In recent years, the federal and state governments have adopted policies that increase public accountability for meeting high standards. This is embodied in the spirit of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Under this new federal law, schools that cannot demonstrate that they are making progress towards meeting high standards may get extra assistance, be subject to sanctions, transformed or even closed by the school system. States and localities are in the process of implementing testing and developing other more comprehensive methods to improve education by improving accountability. In fact, both DCPS and the recently created State Education Office are working on developing a new accountability system for District schools. Such efforts should not be undermined by a voucher system that looks to destabilize a system the DC residents and their elected officials are acting to improve.

District Residents Support Available School Choice Options that Retain Public Control

School choice options are already available to all parents within the publicly controlled District schools. Open admissions at 40 charter schools; liberal out-of-boundary policies among DCPS schools; and the transfer requirements of No Child Left Behind have resulted in a wide array of choices for parents of all socio-economic backgrounds. A recent Cato Institute report³ supporting vouchers fails to acknowledge these other options for providing school choice despite the fact that more than 11,000 District students are in charter schools, over 70% from low-income households, and nearly 10,000 more students attend out-of-boundary schools. Considering the growing support and viability of charter schools in the District and the broad use of the liberal out-of-boundary policies, these options certainly deserve some consideration by voucher proponents who believe parental choice and competition will improve all schools. It should be noted that while District residents support these choice models, the choice and competition these options have introduced – mirroring what a voucher education system would induce – has so far had little measurable

³ Casey J. Lartigue, Jr. The Need for Educational Freedom in the Nation's Capital, Policy Analysis 461, Cato Institute, Washington, D.C., December 10, 2002.

effect on student achievement or school management in traditional public schools.

Recent Research on Voucher Programs Shows No Effect on Improving Student Achievement

Not only are there problems with the lack of democratic values associated with a voucher education system, but existing research does not support voucher systems. The official evaluators of the Cleveland and Milwaukee voucher programs and reports by the General Accounting Office find that differences in the achievement of voucher students and public school students are negligible.⁴ Accountability through market competition to improve students' educational achievement is unproven. The pressure to adopt vouchers in the District urges an experiment in support of a purist free market ideology, rather than a verifiable and comprehensive method to improve students' educational experience.

⁴ School Vouchers: Characteristics of Privately Funded Programs. General Accounting Office, September 2002. Available at <http://www.gao.gov/>. School Vouchers: Publicly Funded Programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee, General Accounting Office, August 2001, available at www.gao.gov/. Witte, John. Fifth Year Report: The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Madison, WI: Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin—Madison, 1995. Metcalf, Kim K. Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program 1996-1999, Bloomington, IN: The Indiana Center for Evaluation, Indiana University, 1999.

The Voucher Education System Is Plagued with Problems

The assertion that education providers competing in a private market would automatically improve education ignores the realities of competition that could be detrimental to student learning. In addition, vouchers would provide public tax dollars to private schools that are not accountable or equitable.

Vouchers:

Destabilize Schools and Communities

For generations, stable public schools have been assets central to American communities. A voucher education system risks having communities depend on private schools that can close rapidly and regularly because they cannot cover their costs, experience management crisis, or lose enrollment.

Do Not Hold Private Schools Accountable

The actual effect of private school instruction on student achievement is unclear because they are not required to keep and report data like their public counterparts. Private schools are not required to use standardized tests, reveal demographic information, teacher qualifications or any other performance or accountability information that is standard in the public sector. Holding schools accountable is dependent upon such data being collected.

Are Not Equitable

Private schools can select and reject students, meaning any achievement reported by private schools may result from the exclusion of lower achieving students. Selective admissions also mean that vouchers may not benefit the high-need students they purport to target. In contrast, public charter schools are required by law to maintain open enrollment policies regardless of students' achievement, special needs, or socioeconomic status. In addition, the voucher education system relies on parents having equal access to information and transportation to utilize their options. Social conditions in urban areas like the District, such as parents having no access to computers or ability to read, make equitable access to vouchers unrealistic.

Conclusion

The education advocacy community recognizes that the District schools are in need of improvement, but differs with voucher proponents on how they should be improved. We believe a public school system is an invaluable asset to our democracy and to our communities. We agree with the public that is intent on increasing accountability in order to improve schools. The evaluations of voucher programs do not support the idea that accountability through market competition will improve student performance. Support for a federally imposed voucher system in the District is

based solely on market ideology that is neither supported by research nor has public support. This is especially clear considering there are other options, such as charter schools, that can attain the goals they wish to achieve concerning school choice. These options, unlike vouchers, have public support and maintain public accountability.

It appears that voucher proponents are intent upon forcing an unproven idea on unwilling District residents, experimenting with the lives of the youth as opposed to improving them. We welcome the assistance of entities that want to provide equitable solutions to improve every child's education, while respecting the desires of DC's residents.

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