

The National Coalition *for* Public Education

February 8, 2011

Re: Oppose Restarting and Expanding the DC Voucher Program

Dear Representative:

The undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) strongly urge you to oppose and not co-sponsor H.R. 471, the Scholarships for Opportunity Results (SOAR) Act, which would restart and expand the failed Washington, DC private school voucher pilot program. All five of the federal studies that have analyzed the program concluded that the program is ineffective, leaving no justification for renewing it. Rather than extending the voucher program, federal funding should be spent in more useful ways that would serve all students in Washington, DC. Given the program's ineffectiveness, which is demonstrated conclusively and consistently as described below, and inappropriateness, given the disproportionate funding allocated to relatively few students while the needs of the majority of DC public school students go unmet, it is clear that there is no justification for supporting this bill.

The five-year pilot program was authorized to provide private school vouchers worth up to \$7,500 to approximately 1,700 students, at an annual cost of \$14 million. Although the program was scheduled to expire in 2008, the FY 2009, and FY 2010 appropriations bills and the 2011 continuing resolutions provided additional funding to allow for a smooth transition for students currently participating in the program. These appropriations bills stipulated that no new students could enter the program, but students already in the voucher program could maintain a voucher through high school graduation. The program now receives approximately \$13 million dollars a year to provide vouchers worth up to \$7,500 to approximately 1,300 students.

Despite proponents' claims that the voucher program would improve the academic achievement of DC students, especially students from "schools in need of improvement" (SINI), congressionally mandated Department of Education studies have concluded that the voucher program has had no effect on the academic achievement of students who use vouchers.¹ Indeed, the final Department of Education report, issued in 2010, concluded that the use of a voucher had no statistically significant impact on overall student achievement in math or reading.² Furthermore, according to all four Department of Education studies, students in the program who came from SINI schools also have shown no significant improvement in math or reading.³ **Having failed to improve the academic achievement of the students in the program—including the targeted students from SINI schools—the voucher program clearly does not warrant reauthorization.**

The Department of Education studies further found that the voucher program had no effect on student satisfaction, motivation, or engagement, or student views on school safety.⁴ And, they revealed that many of the students in the voucher program were **less likely** to have access to key services—such as ESL programs,

¹ US Dep't of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report* at xv, xix, 34 (June 2010) (*Final US Dep't of Educ. Report*).

² *Id.*

³ *Final US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 34; US Dep't of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years* at 34 (March 2009) (*2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report*); US Dep't of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years* at 34, 36-38 (June 2008) (*2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report*); and US Dep't of Educ., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After One Year* at xvii, 44, 46 (June 2007) (*2007 US Dep't of Educ. Report*).

⁴ *Final US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 43-47; *2009 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xxvi, xviii, 35, 44-45, 49-50; *2008 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at 42-43, 50, and 57; and *2007 US Dep't of Educ. Report* at xx, 53-55.

learning support and special needs programs, and counselors—than students who were not part of the program.⁵ Perhaps that is why students with physical or learning disabilities are underrepresented in the program compared to the public schools.⁶ **The program’s inability to improve the school experience of students in the voucher program further demonstrates that the program should not be reauthorized.**

In addition to the lack of evidence supporting an improvement in academic achievement or school experience, **a 2007 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.⁷ Also, some of the information provided to parents regarding the private schools, including information that “could have significantly affected parents’ choice of schools,” was “misleading,” “incorrect,” and “incomplete.”⁸

NCPE believes that instead of sending federal money to private schools, these funds should 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 must meet. Finally, we also believe this program continues to raise problems under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

The objective evidence does not support restarting and expanding the federally funded DC school voucher program. Therefore, **we urge you to oppose and not co-sponsor the Scholarships for Opportunity Results Act.**

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

Sincerely,

African American Ministers in Action
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Association of University Women, Washington DC Branch
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)
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 for Exceptional Children
Center for Inquiry
Council of the Great City Schools
Disciples Justice Action Network
Equal Partners in Faith

⁵ *Final US 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.* The 2010 Report found a decrease in access to tutors, but no “significant” reduction in tutors. *Final US Dep’t of Educ. Report at 20.*

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program at 30* (Nov. 2007).

⁷ *Id.* at 22-23, 33-35.

⁸ *Id.* at 36.

Feminist Majority
Interfaith Alliance
International Reading Association
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
NA'AMAT USA
National Alliance of Black School Educators
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Federally Impacted Schools
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Education Association
National Organization for Women
National Parent Teacher Association
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National Rural Education Association
National School Boards Association
People For the American Way
School Social Work Association of America
Secular Coalition for America
Southern Poverty Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism