



Mr. Jason Chaffetz

Chairman
House Oversight & Government Reform
Committee
2236 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Mr. Elijah Cummings
Ranking Member
House Oversight & Government Reform
Committee
2230 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: The Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV), a member organization of NCPE Opposes Reauthorization of the D.C. School Voucher Program

Dear Chairman Chaffetz and Ranking Member Cummings:

The Institute for Science and Human Values (ISHV) writes to voice opposition to the reauthorization of the District of Columbia private school voucher program. We oppose this and all private school voucher programs because public funds should be spent on public schools, not private schools. It is the view of ISHV that two major goals drive voucher programs. One, is to simply destroy the public school system in the United States, replacing it with corporate owned and religious schools, displacing tax dollars and forcing taxpayers to support the profits of big business and the income of religious schools thereby favoring those religions, a clear violation of democratic principle. The public school system is an important component of the U.S. democracy.

The other is a long term tactic to re-segregation the school population.

The D.C. program, in particular, has proven ineffective and unaccountable to taxpayers. Not only have multiple Department of Education (USED) studies concluded that the program has failed to improve educational outcomes for participating students, but two U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reports have also identified its repeated management and accountability failures.

We acknowledge that the Committee may be able to point to some students who have gone to exemplary schools and seen improvement from the program. But according to government studies and investigative reports, these students are, unfortunately, the exception rather than the rule. Congress should not reauthorize this unsuccessful and poorly managed program.

Our Public Schools Have Great Value, but They Are Undermined by Private School Vouchers

Open and nondiscriminatory in their acceptance of all students, American public schools are a unifying factor among the diverse range of ethnic and religious communities in our society. Public schools are the only schools that must meet the needs of all students. They do not turn children or families away. They serve children with physical, emotional and mental disabilities, those who are extremely gifted, and those who are learning challenged, right along with children without special needs.

Vouchers undermine this vital function, however, by placing some of the most motivated students into private schools, leaving the students who are most difficult to educate behind in the public schools. Voucher programs also divert desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of a few voucher students. The government would better serve our children by using these funds to make the public schools stronger.

The D.C. Voucher Program Does Not Improve Academic Achievement

All four of the congressionally mandated USED studies that have analyzed the D.C. voucher program have concluded that it did not significantly im-

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prove reading or math achievement. The USED studies further found that the voucher program had no effect on student satisfaction, motivation or engagement, or student views on school safety. The studies also indicated that many of the students in the voucher program were less likely to have access to key services such as ESL programs, learning supports, special education supports and services, and counselors than students who were not part of the program. A program that has failed to improve the academic achievement or school experience of the students in the District of Columbia does not warrant reauthorization.

The D.C. Voucher Program Lacks Sufficient Oversight

GAO reports from both 2007 and 2013 document that the D.C. voucher program has repeatedly failed to meet basic and even statutorily required accountability standards. The 2013 report concluded that the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation (Trust), has continually failed to ensure the program operated with basic accountability measures and quality controls and even failed to maintain adequate records on its own financial accounting. The interim executive director of the Trust at that time even admitted that “quality oversight of the program as sort of a dead zone, a blind spot.”

Congress has attempted to address the oversight problems, yet they continue. For example, in its 2007 report, the GAO criticized the D.C. voucher program’s annual directory, saying that the program administrator “did not collect or omitted or incorrectly reported some information that would have helped parents evaluate the quality of participating schools.” The most recent GAO report found that six years later, the program still suffered the same flaw. In a similar vein, the 2007 GAO report found that several schools receiving vouchers lacked valid certificates of occupancy. In response, Congress included a provision in the SOAR Act specifying that private schools accepting vouchers must obtain and maintain one. Nonetheless, in 2013 the GAO reported that nine of the ten schools they investigated still did not meet the certificates of occupancy requirement.

A program with such repeated and serious oversight problems should not be reauthorized.

Many Participating Schools Are of Poor Quality

A special investigation conducted by the Washington Post found that many of the private schools in the program are not quality schools. It described one school that consisted entirely of voucher students as existing in just two classrooms in “a soot-stained storefront” where students used a gymnasium two miles down the road. Another voucher school was operated out of a private converted home with facilities so unkempt that students had to use restrooms in an unaffiliated daycare center downstairs. And yet another school, where 93% of the students had vouchers, used a “learning model known as “Suggestopedia,” an obscure Bulgarian philosophy of learning that stresses learning through music, stretching and meditation.” Congress cannot justify reauthorizing a program that uses federal funds to place D.C. students in such schools.

The D.C. Voucher Program Threatens Civil Rights and Undermines Constitutional Protections

The voucher program strips students of civil rights protections. Despite receiving public funds, the private schools participating in the D.C. Voucher program are not subject to all federal civil rights laws and public accountability standards that all public schools must meet, including those in Title VI, Title IX, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Students who attend private schools with vouchers are also stripped of their First Amendment, due process, and other constitutional and statutory rights provided to them in public schools. Schools that do not provide students with these basic civil rights protections should not be funded with taxpayer dollars.

The D.C. Voucher Program Does Not Provide Parents Real Choice

Vouchers do not offer a meaningful choice to parents or students. Voucher schools can reject students based on prior academic achievement, economic background, English language ability, or disciplinary history. Also, the D.C. voucher allows religious schools to discriminate against students on the basis of gender. In contrast, public schools serve all students who live in D.C.

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Certain groups of D.C. students have less access to voucher schools than others. For example, students with special needs often cannot find a private school that can, or wants to, serve them: The Department of Education reports show that a significant number of students with special needs had to reject their voucher or leave their voucher school because the schools failed to offer them needed services” that would have been available to them had they remained in a public school.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.



Toni Van Pelt

President

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