

March 22, 2011

Re: Oppose Expansion of the Failed DC Voucher Program

Dear Representative:

As organizations that represent residents of the District of Columbia, we write to oppose the Scholarships for Opportunity Results (SOAR) Act, H.R.471, which would re-establish and expand the DC school voucher program.

Our organizations represent a diverse cross section of the residents of Washington, DC, with a wide variety of interests and concerns. Nonetheless, we have come together to oppose efforts to impose an unwanted voucher program upon our city by a Congress in which we have no voting representation. Some of the undersigned groups oppose H.R. 471 because the DC voucher is ineffective and lacks accountability; others because the bill offends the notion of home rule; and still others because the program allows private schools to receive federal funds and educate our students while they maintain exemptions from federal and District of Columbia civil rights protections.

In 2003, Congress imposed a five-year pilot private school voucher program on the District of Columbia. After the expiration of the program, Congress decided to phase out the program due to its ineffectiveness and appropriated funds only so that students currently in the program could continue in their schools until their graduation. The SOAR Act would reauthorize, expand and open the program to new students.

The residents of the District do not support this program. Our elected representatives, including Mayor Vincent Gray, numerous members of the DC Council, and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, have all strongly, vocally, and repeatedly opposed resurrecting the voucher program. The District has never adopted a private school voucher program locally. In fact, when the issue was put before our voters directly, it was rejected overwhelmingly. Therefore, many of the undersigned groups strongly oppose Congress imposing this unwanted program upon us.

Many of us are also extremely concerned that, while Congress is cutting funds to desperately needed services in DC and elsewhere, it would increase funding for the DC voucher program, which research has proven does not work. The U.S. Department of Education has conducted a rigorous evaluation of the program every year since 2007. The final report,¹ issued in June 2010, concluded that use of a voucher had no statistically significant impact on overall student achievement in math or reading. Even worse, the program failed to serve even those students that Congress designated as the highest priority for the program: those who applied from schools in need of improvement. The study also found no significant increase in students' reports of school safety or satisfaction with their school. Nevertheless, rather than eliminating or phasing out the failed government program, the SOAR Act would expand it and increase its funding.

¹ "Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report," Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2010, <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104018/pdf/20104018.pdf>.

A number of us are also concerned that the program threatens the separation of church and state. An overwhelming majority of participating students – more than three quarters – have used the voucher to attend religious schools. In other words, the program funnels taxpayer money into the religious education of children. Using taxpayer funds to support religious education and to empower churches to expand their religious outreach is contrary to basic American values.

Moreover, these religious schools function outside many of the antidiscrimination provisions of the DC Human Rights Act. Potential employees and students have no recourse when such schools discriminate against them, a problem that is particularly acute for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals and families. While these religious schools may have a First Amendment right to discriminate, such discrimination should not be funded with taxpayer funds.

Finally, some signers oppose the voucher because it fails to adequately protect the federal civil rights of students, especially those most likely to need protection from discrimination or neglect. Congress has adopted a number of laws to protect children in public schools, including Title IX and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Private schools are not subject to the same requirements under these laws as public schools. As a result, the DC voucher program deprives students of many important legal protections.

The above factors have all played a role in the decision of the people of Washington not to adopt a school voucher program of our own. We ask you to respect our decision and not to impose this program upon us. We hope that your resolve to respect the clearly expressed wishes of the people is reinforced by the fact that the money would be going to a program that simply does not work.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

American Association of University Women (AAUW), Washington, DC Branch
Sharron Turner, Interim President

American Civil Liberties Union of the Nation's Capital
Johnny Barnes, Executive Director

Americans for Democratic Action, Greater Washington Chapter

Anti-Defamation League, Washington, DC Region
David C. Friedman, Director

Michael D. Brown
District of Columbia, United States Senator

DC For Democracy
Jerry Clark, Chair

DC Vote
Ilir Zherka, Executive Director

Gay & Lesbian Activists Alliance of Washington
Mitch Wood, President

Jews United for Justice
Jacob Feinspan, Executive Director

Metropolitan Washington Council, AFL-CIO
Joslyn Williams, President

NAACP Washington DC Branch
Hilary O. Shelton, Director

National Alliance of Black School Educators, DC Affiliate
Quentin Lawson, Executive Director

National Organization for Women, DC Chapter
Erin Radford, President

Washington Teachers' Union
Nathan Saunders, President