

May 13, 2015

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: Organizations that Represent DC Oppose the DC Private School Voucher

Dear Chairman Chaffetz and Ranking Member Cummings:

As organizations that represent residents of the District of Columbia, we write to express our opposition to the DC private school voucher program, which was implemented by Congress as part of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act.

Our organizations represent a diverse cross section of the residents of Washington, DC, with a wide variety of interests and concerns. We are united, however, in opposing this voucher program, which was imposed upon us by a Congress in which we have no voting representation. Some of the undersigned groups oppose the DC voucher because the program is ineffective and lacks accountability; others because the program 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.

The residents of the District do not support this program. When the issue of school vouchers was put before our voters directly, it was rejected overwhelmingly. Vouchers also conflict with the education policies adopted by our own elected officials: our Council has chosen to implement public school choice in the form of public charter schools, but have never adopted a private school voucher program. Indeed, numerous members of the DC Council, and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, have strongly, vocally, and repeatedly opposed the voucher program. As many members of this Committee are strong supporters of local control, we would hope they would understand that many of the undersigned organizations oppose Congress imposing a program upon us that our residents and elected officials do not support.

Many of us are also extremely concerned that Congress would increase funding for the DC voucher program even though multiple studies have shown it does not work. The U.S. Department of Education has conducted a rigorous evaluation of the program,¹ and concluded that the program had no statistically significant impact on overall student achievement in math or reading. Even worse, the program failed to serve those students that Congress designated as the highest priority for the program: those who applied from

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>.

schools in need of improvement. The study also found no significant increase in students' reports of school safety or satisfaction with their school.

An overwhelming majority of participating students – more than three quarters – have used the voucher to attend religious schools. This is not just problematic because the program funnels taxpayer money to fund the religious education of children, which violates the principle of church state separation, but also because these schools function outside many of the antidiscrimination provisions of the DC Human Rights Act. Without protection under the 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. Such discrimination should not be funded with taxpayer money.

Finally, some signers oppose the voucher because it fails to adequately protect the federal civil rights of students, especially those students 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 have been disappointed that Congress has not respected this decision and instead imposed this program upon us even though it has proven ineffective and stripped many students of civil rights. In the future, we hope that Congress will phase out the program rather than reauthorize it.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

ACLU of the Nation's Capital
Anti-Defamation League, Washington, DC Region
DC Vote
Gay and Lesbian Activists Alliance of Washington, D.C.
Jews United for Justice
National Organization for Women, DC Chapter
Washington Teachers' Union