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Institute for Justice Hails House Committee Vote That Puts D.C. Parents One Step Closer to Choice

Washington, D.C.—Institute for Justice President Chip Mellor had the following to say about today's passage (by a 22-21 vote) of the D.C. school choice bill by the U.S. House Government Reform and Oversight Committee:

“Passing this bill moves D.C. parents one big step closer to securing the means needed to get their children a quality education. D.C. school choice will help the most vulnerable children in the District get a quality education as soon as the vouchers become available. D.C. choice means economically disadvantaged parents can finally vote with their feet. That personal empowerment can only spark reform within the public schools.”

The bill is now ready for a vote by the full House.

The Institute for Justice, the Washington, D.C.-based public interest law firm that has defended the constitutionality of school choice programs across the nation, commended Rep. Thomas M. Davis III and Rep. John Boehner for introducing legislation to expand educational opportunities for low-income families in the District of Columbia who urgently need them.

The Institute for Justice helped successfully defend Cleveland's school choice program before the U.S. Supreme Court on behalf of parents. The Institute also successfully defended vouchers in Milwaukee and tax credits in Illinois and Arizona. IJ is currently defending Florida's groundbreaking Opportunity Scholarships program and Colorado's Opportunity Contract program—the nation's first new choice program since the Supreme Court victory—and is fighting state-level barriers to choice in Maine and Vermont.

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[NOTE] To arrange interviews on this subject, journalists may call John Kramer, IJ's vice president for communications, at (202) 955-1300 or in the evening/weekend at (703) 527-8730.]

washingtonpost.com

House Panel Approves Plan For Vouchers at District Schools

Norton, Who Opposed Bill, Says Member's Absence Affected Result in Narrow Vote

By Sylvia Moreno
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, July 11, 2003; Page B05

The House Government Reform Committee narrowly passed a bill yesterday to create a private school voucher program for Washington's public school students after a spirited debate over how to best reform the struggling school system in the nation's capital.

The committee approved the measure 22 to 21, splitting almost entirely along partisan lines with the exception of two Republicans who voted against the bill, which was sponsored by the committee chairman, Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.). A Democrat, Major R. Owens of New York, was out of town because of medical appointments. His vote, said Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), a chief opponent of the voucher bill, would have created a tie and stalled the bill in committee.

"That's bad luck for us. But it does show you we have several shots," Norton said. "There's a lot of hypocrisy to put vouchers in the District when these members have school districts just like the District of Columbia in their states. . . . They ought to be voting for vouchers so that their low-performing school districts can be getting federal money, but they're not. Vouchers can't win nationally, so they shouldn't win locally."

Davis's bill would authorize the appropriation of \$15 million annually for five years to fund vouchers of up to \$7,500 for about 2,000 low-income children to attend private schools. D.C. public schools enroll about 67,500 students and the public charter schools about 11,600. An additional 14,000 students attend private schools at tuitions that range from \$3,500 for parochial elementary schools to \$20,000 for elite secondary schools.

About two dozen parents who attended the three-hour debate applauded the vote.

"I think it's wonderful, and I think it showed that those who voted for it care for children," said Virginia Walden-Ford, executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice. "I'm very disappointed in the other side. I wish they'd listen to the parents we hear every day."

Several dozen opponents, members of the Coalition for Accountable Public Schools, also attended the meeting, wearing white lapel stickers with the slogan "Stop D.C. Vouchers."

"D.C. vouchers are not going to benefit the majority of D.C. public school students," said coalition member Tanya Clay, who is also deputy director of People for the American Way.

The voucher bill is supported by President Bush and U.S. Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige, who back using the District to implement the administration's \$75 million school choice plan, which could be extended to other cities eventually.

The two Republicans on the committee who voted against the bill were John M. McHugh of New York and Todd R. Platts of Pennsylvania. Neither participated in the debate.

Davis said he would confer with the Republican leadership in Congress before deciding whether to submit the voucher bill to a House vote or whether to attach it to the appropriations bill that Congress will take up in September.

Either way, Davis said after the committee vote, "with the president pushing it, I suspect it will probably go through. But you know, you take it a step at a time. I think that the game plan is a good game plan to move it through."

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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Freeing D.C. Kids

Five long years after Bill Clinton vetoed education vouchers for the poorest pupils in the District of Columbia, the political stars are realigning. The question now is whether Republicans are going to miss this opportunity to match policy with their we-care-for-poor-kids rhetoric.

A voucher bill narrowly passed a House committee yesterday, 22-21, allocating \$7,500 a year to low-income children shackled to schools where kids aren't learning. President Bush, who earmarked \$75 million of his 2004 budget for school choice pilot programs, has promised to sign the legislation. This represents the best chance yet to demonstrate that vouchers can improve the lives of kids trapped in our nation's worst school systems.

The District already spends well over \$15,000 per student (the national average is \$8,500), three times more than in 1980. Yet in the latest National Assessment of Education Progress report, D.C. public school students scored lower than all 50 states. Seventy-two percent of black D.C. students read at the "below basic" level, which means they have "little or no mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills." Who can possibly defend such results?

This scandal has finally shaken Washington, D.C., officials, who have abandoned their former hostility to vouchers. D.C. school board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, Kevin Chavous, a D.C. council member who heads the education committee, and Mayor Anthony Williams are all now choice advocates.

On the District's Web site, Mayor Williams calls it a "human tragedy" that "approximately 40% of adults in our city read only at a third grade level . . . [and] can't complete a job application or advance beyond an entry-level position." By way of explaining his change of heart on vouchers, the Mayor recently told Congress that parents tell him "there are no practical and easy alternatives for their children within the current system of public schools." He says he "cannot tell parents they must continue to wait while there are other outlets in our midst."

With all of this new support, it's fascinating to see how the unions are scrambling to scuttle

this offer of hope at the last minute. This week People for the American Way, an outfit in bed with the unions, released a report claiming that the voucher pilot is all about "ultra-conservative elements" who want to destroy public education. Apparently Anthony Williams and all those poor D.C. parents have now joined the vast right-wing conspiracy. It says something about the reactionary condition of modern liberalism that one of its great causes is defending failed inner-city schools.

The other last-ditch strategy is to work through individual Republicans who are trying to sabotage the bill as it moves through Congress. Todd Platts, a GOP Congressman from exurban Pennsylvania, tried to block the bill from getting to the floor and voted against it in committee. And earlier this week House Appropriator Rodney Frelinghuysen of New Jersey inserted his own poison pill into a spending bill.

We wonder if either of these worthies has ever met a D.C. parent or child. Here's how the 2002 Almanac of American Politics describes Mr. Frelinghuysen's horse-country district: "Only in the late 20th Century has it come into its own as one of the wealthiest areas in the United States. And it is not just a collection of country estates, with huddled small towns for the servants to live in, but a well-rounded community with all the appurtenances of urbanity except high crime and poverty rates." Maybe Mr. Frelinghuysen can offer D.C. dropouts a job cleaning the stables.

It's hard to believe that if the now-retired Dick Armey were still in the GOP House leadership, a backbench Pennsylvanian and a New Jersey Brahmin would be able to keep poor black kids in D.C. stuck in schools that they'd never allow their own children anywhere near. These days it falls to Speaker Dennis Hastert and Majority Leader Tom DeLay to prevent Republicans from living up to the liberal stereotype that they are the indifferent rich.

Polls show that black parents are the nation's strongest, most consistent supporters of educational choice. For decades they have waited for some acknowledgment of this from the black political establishment. Thanks to Mayor Williams and a few other brave local leaders, it's finally come. What an outrage it will be if a GOP White House and Congress can't get their act together to capitalize on this golden educational opportunity.

Some odd allies are trying to scuttle vouchers in Washington.



Todd Platts

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

D.C. Council pushed on vouchers, Fenty says

By Patrick Badgley
Published July 9, 2003

DC School Choice Effort

D.C. Council members are being pressured by President Bush and conservative members of Congress to support a federal voucher program for District students to attend private schools, council member Adrian M. Fenty said yesterday.

"They've really used their leverage over our budget over us," said Mr. Fenty, Ward 4 Democrat.

He said more council members would oppose the proposal if they were not feeling that pressure.

Mr. Fenty planned to introduce a resolution yesterday stating that the D.C. Council opposes vouchers, but it was pulled from the agenda after an informal vote showed a lack of support. He said no such resolution will pass this year.

The only others on the 13-member council who support the resolution are council member Phil Mendelson and council Chairman Linda W. Cropp, both at-large Democrats,

However, council member Kevin P. Chavous, Ward 7 Democrat, has said he will withdraw his support of the program until Mr. Bush provides more money for D.C. public and charter schools.

In a letter to Mr. Bush, Mr. Chavous stated that he was displeased that the president touted his voucher-scholarship program last week while visiting a Southeast charter school but did not promise an additional \$30 million in federal money to keep D.C. public schools operating properly.

The voucher program for the District was introduced in Congress last month by Reps. Thomas M. Davis III, Virginia Republican and chairman of the Government Reform Committee and John A. Boehner — Ohio Republican, and chairman of the Education and the Workforce Committee.

Their Parental Choice and Incentive Act of 2003 would give children of low-income families scholarships of as much as \$7,500 to attend private institutions in the District.

The \$75 million nationwide school-choice program includes \$15 million for the District. The president said about 2,000 of the city's 67,000 public school students would benefit from the bill and that he is asking Congress for \$320 million more for charter schools, which are publicly funded but independently operated.

Mr. Fenty's action came yesterday as Mayor Anthony A. Williams was accepting an award from the Manhattan Institute's Center for Civic Innovation for his support of school choice.

During the event, Mr. Williams said he thought about vouchers for years and has decided that the city should try the program because the students need help immediately.

"One of the things I've found is there is so much information, so much literature on school choice," Mr. Williams said. "At the very least, we should experiment with choice in the city. If people are afraid to at least experiment, that tells me there is some self-interest in this motive."

He also said vouchers could strengthen the community because they would form a stronger middle class in a city that has gaping disparities between the affluent and the poor.

Mr. Fenty said Mr. Williams is not appropriately representing District residents by supporting vouchers.

"He should get the point," Mr. Fenty said. "He's on the wrong side. He's in bed with the president, who received about 5 percent of the vote in the District."

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washingtonpost.com

Williams Defends Progress in Services

D.C. Mayor Concedes Problems but Admits to 'Puzzlement' Over Criticism

By Craig Timberg
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, July 8, 2003; Page B05

*DC School
Choice effort*

Mayor Anthony A. Williams yesterday dismissed criticism that his second term in office so far has been lackluster, saying that such comments filled him with "half a sense of anger and half a sense of puzzlement."

"There's a number of things . . . that we've done that haven't been acknowledged as they should be," Williams (D) said in a luncheon interview with Washington Post reporters and editors.

Six months into the mayor's second term in office, his schedule is busy and he remains focused on improving services throughout city government, he said. He even left open the possibility of running for a third term in 2006, though few in the District's political community expect him to.

"The government is more responsive," Williams said. "People answer the phones more than they used to. There's more customer service than there used to be. I would argue to you that that's because we've put in tools like tracking numbers, call centers, holding people accountable under performance measures."

The mayor was criticized in the spring and early summer by longtime opponents and former supporters who contended that his reforms of the D.C. government failed to address systemic problems. Scandals involving allegations of criminal misdeeds by former officials in the Office of Property Management and among his longtime political allies in the Washington Teachers' Union have distracted the administration.

But Williams said there has been insufficient focus on the medical care available to the working poor through Healthcare Alliance, which despite financial troubles provides services to those not covered by federal aid programs or private insurance through work.

And the voucher program being pushed by Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.) would allow thousands of underprivileged children to attend better schools, he said, and additional federal money would be forthcoming for the public schools. *

"We have to do everything possible to create a marketplace, a sense of competition" among public, private and charter schools, Williams said.

The mayor defended his administration's struggle to improve social services and said they are improving now that the agencies involved have emerged from federal control.

"As this new agency leadership takes hold and takes root and works its way down through the agency, increasingly in coming months and years you aren't going to see this problem," he said.

He also acknowledged trouble in the Office of Property Management, which is under investigation by city and federal officials because of allegations that former deputy director Michael Lorusso conspired with private businesses to spend more of the city's money than was warranted for services and properties.

Williams noted that Lorusso was not reappointed to his administration and left in January. The mayor said his office reported problems to the inspector general last year.

Overall, he said, "I think I've done a great job of bringing a great caliber of people to District government."

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Bush Pushes Vouchers, D.C. Charters

Educational Options Touted as Ways to Make City a 'Model of Excellence'

By Jay Mathews

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, July 2, 2003; Page A01

President Bush yesterday touted a plan to give \$15 million in taxpayer-funded tuition grants to D.C. families who want to send their children to private schools and said schools that accept such students will be held accountable for their progress.

Visiting a D.C. public charter school, Bush noted the concentration of independently run charters in the city and said the combination of charters and private-school vouchers would make the District a model of parental choice in education.

"What we are trying to do is give parents more options," he said, as several parents in the audience at the KIPP DC: KEY Academy on M Street SE clapped and shouted approval.

Bush, who was accompanied by D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), school board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz and several other local officials, said he wanted the District "to become a model of excellence so that when people . . . see the educational entrepreneurial spirit alive and well in D.C., they realize they can do the same in their own communities."

His remarks were among the most extensive comments he has made about the District. They also signaled a renewed emphasis on an issue that Bush has rarely discussed since Congress rejected his administration's private-school voucher proposal two years ago.

The plan Bush is now pushing would establish a \$75 million national "choice incentive fund" from which \$15 million would be used in the District to fund private school vouchers of up to \$7,500 per student. The proposal, sponsored by Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), is scheduled for a committee vote July 8.

Bush said that private schools would report the test scores of their voucher-funded students and that Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige "will submit reports to the Congress on an annual basis."

The president several times called the District school system's test scores "unacceptable," noting that its fourth- and eighth-graders scored lower in reading than their counterparts in each of the 50 states, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress exam results released last month. Many educators consider such a comparison invalid because the District is an urban school system and states' scores are boosted by traditionally high-performing suburban schools.

Critics of vouchers say they drain money from public schools. Williams dropped his opposition to the grants earlier this year but said his support for them was contingent on increased federal funding for the District public school system.

Bush did not mention increased funding for the city's regular public schools in his remarks yesterday, but he said he is asking Congress for \$320 million in federal support for public charter schools nationwide in his 2004 budget, which is about \$100 million more than they received this year, according to charter advocates.

D.C. Council member Kevin P. Chavous (D-Ward 7), who chairs the council's education committee and attended the Bush visit, said afterward that he thought the chances were good that Congress would provide an additional \$35 million to \$40 million to the District school system as part of the city's annual appropriation. Davis, who chairs the House Committee on Government Reform, said as he left the KIPP school that he agreed with Chavous.

washingtonpost.com

Bush Endorses D.C. School Vouchers

By Jay Mathews
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, July 1, 2003; 1:39 PM

President Bush today personally endorsed a plan to give \$15 million in federal vouchers to D.C. children who want to attend private schools and promised to make sure they are progressing outside the public school system.

Visiting a D.C. public charter school, the KIPP DC: KEY Academy, to show his support for independently run charters, Bush said there were not enough charters to meet parental demands for better schooling. Bush said he was asking Congress for a \$75 million "choice incentive fund," from which \$15 million would be used in the District to fund private school vouchers of as much as \$7,500 per student.

"What we are trying to do is give parents more options," he said, as several D.C. parents in the audience at the KIPP school in Southeast Washington clapped and shouted approval.

"It is time for our society to challenge failure" in schools, he said. He said private school operators would also have to report the test scores of their voucher students and Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige "will submit reports to the Congress on an annual basis."

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, who as archbishop of Washington oversees many of the Catholic schools expected to receive voucher students, was in the audience and said afterward he supports the president's plan. He said the archdiocese schools will be happy to provide the test scores to federal officials.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform, said private schools in other cities with vouchers had cooperated with similar efforts to measure their success. "I think the important thing is the cardinal is saying he will produce those scores clearly," Allen said.

D.C. Council member Adrian M. Fenty (Ward 4) said he opposed the voucher plan. "Public dollars are supposed to support all our children and even the president is admitting his plan is helping just a couple of thousand people," he said.

Bush said he was also asking for \$320 million to support charter schools.

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Friends of choice

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Published July 2, 2003

*Editorial
re: 3 sector approach*

Monday marked the opening of the District's summer school program and, as in recent years, thousands of children are expected to attend. In fact, the targeted summer-school population is 10,000, or one in six students — numbers that speak volumes about D.C. Public Schools trying to accomplish in six weeks over the long, hot summer what it fails to do in nine months. If the White House and Congress do what they ought to do, though, fewer students will be suffering next summer.

The Bush administration proposes spending \$756 million on school choice programs, including \$75 million for a choice-incentive fund. The District would receive a large portion of that \$75 million — \$15 million — for scholarships so that poor children would be allowed to attend private schools. The administration also wants to boost funding for charter schools. That would certainly help the District, which is expected to have three dozen charter schools by the start of the next school year. The charter schools would get \$320 million.

Why the funding for choice? The costly inadequacies of traditional D.C. schooling are secret to no one — including President Bush. "Let me put it bluntly," the president said yesterday during a visit to a D.C. charter school. "[T]he District scored below every single state in the union in terms of basic skills" on recent standardized exams, and that is "unacceptable."

To be sure, those "unacceptable" consequences of the status quo will continue if school-choice legislation doesn't pass bipartisan muster on Capitol Hill. Federal lawmakers don't have to look hard at all to find broad and deep support. Mayor Williams, Education Committee Chairman Kevin Chavous and School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz all support the federal choice initiative. D.C. parents, who have shown their enthusiasm for choice by supporting the charter school boon and signing their children up for privately financed vouchers, renewed their support yesterday. Mitzy Franklin, a single mother of six who has a son at KIPP Academy, where the president spoke yesterday, told Bloomberg.com that vouchers are good for schools and children. "This [KIPP] program is pretty good for Montae, but we need more options for education, more ways to enable kids to get to college."

As things now stand, D.C. Public Schools is having considerable trouble getting kids to read on grade level and do simple arithmetic. Scores from the 2002 NAEP reading exams show that 69 percent of D.C. fourth-graders performed below basic level. No wonder students by the thousands are pouring into sweltering classrooms every summer.

Naysayers of vouchers (teacher unions and the PTA, for example) argue that they drain money from public schools. We have always contended — along with other proponents — that public school dollars should follow the child into the schoolhouse and classroom instead of bureaucracies. There simply is no other practical or easy alternative to bolster educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged children. D.C. parents and top leaders acknowledge as much. Congress should, too.

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Bush Proposes \$75-Million Voucher Plan

Renewing an old campaign issue, he seeks federal funds for private education. The program would be the first of its kind.

By Elizabeth Shogren
Times Staff Writer

July 2, 2003

WASHINGTON — President Bush, reviving a neglected theme from his presidential election campaign, proposed spending federal money on vouchers that parents dissatisfied with public school could apply toward tuition at private schools.

Vouchers are popular with a segment of Bush's conservative core of supporters, and his new attention to the issue comes at a time when he has been revving up conservatives for his reelection bid.

"We cannot have a two-tiered education system in America: one tier for those who can afford a certain type of school, and one tier for those who can't," Bush said at a public charter school in Washington, D.C.

The president will ask Congress to spend \$75 million on vouchers, with \$15 million going to families in the U.S. capital.

Bush spoke frequently about vouchers in the 2000 campaign, but he had rarely talked about them since agreeing with Congress in 2001 on a major education bill that omitted vouchers.

On Tuesday, however, he said his program "is the beginning of an experiment that will show whether or not private school choice makes a difference in quality education in public schools. I happen to believe it will."

Teachers' unions, congressional Democrats and many education experts do not. They note, for example, that the \$15 million that the president wants to spend in Washington would provide vouchers for only about 2,000 of the city's 67,000 public schoolchildren.

"It makes sense to us to put our energy and resources into the kind of changes that would make it better for all 67,000," said Michael Pons, a spokesman for the National Education Assn., the largest teachers' union.

The critics also said studies of existing voucher programs showed that they do not improve educational quality and that the vouchers generally are used by students who would go to private school anyway.

Democrats Object

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THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

D.C. voucher plan would aid 2,000

By Amber Mobley, Globe Correspondent, 6/27/2003

WASHINGTON -- As many as 2,000 students who attend public schools in the nation's capital would receive federal vouchers to pay tuition at private or religious schools under legislation being drafted in Congress.

The five-year pilot project, which could begin as early as this fall and would be administered by the US Department of Education, would be the second such program established since the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of taxpayer-funded vouchers at religious schools one year ago today. Earlier this year, Colorado authorized a similar program, set to begin in 2004.

In the District of Columbia, poor families would receive vouchers worth up to \$7,500 per year for students who attend underperforming public schools, under legislation likely to be approved next week by the House Government Reform Committee. Congress would provide as much as \$15 million a year for the program, which would be directly managed by an entity to be chosen by the US Education Department.

Senator Judd Gregg -- a Republican from New Hampshire and chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee -- has introduced a similar bill in the Senate. President Bush advocated vouchers heavily during his 2000 presidential campaign, as a part of his No Child Left Behind effort.

About 89,000 children attend school in Washington. Nearly 19 percent, or 16,690, are already enrolled in private schools. Catholic elementary and secondary schools served nearly half of those students last year, and a majority of them were not Catholic.

Although the city currently spends more money per student than most US cities, around \$10,000, its standardized test scores are among the lowest in the nation. The average SAT score in Washington is 799; the national average is 1,020.

The bill was the subject of an emotional hearing Tuesday before the House Government Reform Committee, as parents and their school-aged children packed the audience. Representative Tom Davis, a Republican from Virginia and author of the bill, said the legislation has the support of Washington's mayor, Anthony Williams.

"We have two Republican full committee chairmen in agreement with the Democratic mayor of the District of Columbia over the best course of action for D.C.," Davis said, referring to himself and Representative John A. Boehner of Ohio, chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.