

Web Memo



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A Promising Start for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

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On April 5, 2005, the Georgetown Public Policy Institute^[1] released its first of several reports on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The 100+ page report describes the characteristics of the initial group of participating students and their families and offers important first-year comparative data. Moreover, the report provides important early evidence that the Washington, D.C., program is on-track for the type of positive results seen in other choice programs. Congress and the Bush Administration should continue to support this program and its statistical evaluation, which is critical to gauge success.

The major findings of this first-year evaluation report include:

- In total, 1,027 low-income children received and used scholarships in the first year that they were available, representing a 75 percent scholarship usage rate.^[2] The average family of students who applied to the program had an income of \$18,742 in 2003.^[3]
- Fifty-eight schools participated in this initial year, more than half of all private schools located in the District of Columbia.^[4] Some 70 percent of these schools charged tuition that is at or below the program's \$7,500 maximum scholarship amount,^[5] with most charging \$5,500 or less per year.^[6]
- Most of the private schools participating in the program (51 percent) are affiliated with the Catholic Church.^[7] About 61 percent of the program's students enrolled in a Catholic school.^[8]

Background

On January 22, 2004, Congress passed the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003, which established a \$14 million program to provide grants for low-income children to attend private schools in Washington, D.C. While the program is the first federally funded scholarship program in America, it is based on other successful public and private programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, New York City, and elsewhere.

In order to let students to take advantage of the scholarships in the fall of 2004, the program had to be implemented very rapidly. Within just a few months of the law's passage, the U.S. Department of Education sent out for bids for program administration (Washington Scholarship Fund) and evaluation (Georgetown Public Policy Institute), organized the dozens of participating schools, and communicated information to parents.

Establishing a new program that involves so many institutions and individuals is a considerable challenge—even without the truncated timeline. The program received 6,000 inquiries about scholarships, about 2,700 students applied, and 1,848 students were deemed eligible.^[9] The fact that so many families participated in the process is a remarkable achievement in itself.

Still, critics argue that parents lack interest in the program because there were unfilled seats during this first year. For example, last summer D.C. Council member Adrian M. Fenty (D-Ward 4) said, "There is not a lot of support for vouchers....Where is the onslaught of people who were supposed to come out and take part in the process?"^[10]

But this argument overlooks the significant interest that parents have expressed in the D.C. program and the typical pattern of growth in similar programs. As Rep. Tom Davis (R-VA) has noted, it takes time to achieve full capacity, even three or four years.

Consider the example of Milwaukee,^[11] a city that is roughly the same size as Washington, D.C., and uses similar criteria to determine eligibility.^[12] In the first year of the Milwaukee school choice program (1990-91), only about 300 students participated—but that figure doubled within three years. Program enrollment jumped again in the 1998-99 academic year when religious schools were allowed to participate.^[13] The Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau estimates that, in this academic year, 117 schools in Milwaukee will educate some 14,700 students in the program,^[14] or nearly 15 percent of the total student population.

The D.C. program is off to a stronger start than its Milwaukee counterpart was 15 years ago. Not only are there more students participating in the first year (more than 1,000, compared to about 300 in Milwaukee), but there are also more schools participating in the D.C. program—partly because religious schools were allowed from the outset.

Additionally, the D.C. program's evaluators believe that the program's second year will be oversubscribed and that some students will have to be turned away.^[15] Also, the current year was not undersubscribed across the board, and it was actually oversubscribed for several grade levels in middle and high school. In short, it is unlikely that the program will be undersubscribed again.

Parental Satisfaction with the D.C. Program

Since this first evaluation is a "baseline" study, it includes little information about academic achievement; that will be forthcoming in later years. What is available now is preliminary information on what the parents of participating students who attend private schools think of their children's schools, compared with the perceptions of parents whose children attend other kinds of schools in Washington. Consistent with previous studies of similar programs,^[16] parents are extremely happy with private schools in the District:

- Almost 90 percent of these parents rate their child's private school an A or B; ^[17]
- A higher proportion of these parents are "very satisfied" on all 10 factors of parental satisfaction surveyed than public school parents; ^[18]
- These parents report more homework, a safer school environment, and greater satisfaction with their schools than do public school parents; ^[19] and
- These parents are far less likely to report serious problems with their child's school, such as violence or drug and alcohol use. ^[20]

Conclusion

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program is off to a promising start, providing "new options and new hope" for D.C.'s schoolchildren, as House Education and Workforce Committee Chairman John Boehner (R-OH) put it.^[21] Despite a compressed launch timeline, the program started on schedule for the 2004-2005 academic year, and more than 1,000 students now have access to this kind of school choice.

Over the next few years, new information on the academic achievement of participating children will become available. For now, Congress and the Bush Administration should continue to support The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and the efforts of the Georgetown Public Policy Institute to evaluate it. In time, these evaluations will give policymakers much more information on the effectiveness of parental choice programs.

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^[1] Patrick Wolf, Babette Gutmann, Nada Eissa, Michael Puma, and Marsha Silverberg, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: First Year Report on Participation*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).

- [2] Patrick Wolf et al., pg. 30.
- [3] Patrick Wolf et al., Table 4-8, pg. 47.
- [4] Patrick Wolf et al., Table 2-1, pg. 12.
- [5] Patrick Wolf et al., Table 2-4, pg. 15.
- [6] Patrick Wolf et al., pg. 15-16.
- [7] Patrick Wolf et al., pg. 12.
- [8] Patrick Wolf et al., pg. 31.
- [9] Patrick Wolf et al., Table 2-5, pg. 18.
- [10] Justin Blum, "D.C. School Vouchers Outnumber Applicants" *Washington Post*, June 11, 2004, pg. A01.
- [11] Russ Kava, "Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau *Informational Paper 29*, January 2005, at www.legis.state.wi.us/lfb/Informationalpapers/29.pdf (February 28, 2005).
- [12] Both programs have similar family income thresholds. To qualify for the Milwaukee program, the family must have income that is less than 175 percent of the federal poverty line, while for the D.C. program, the threshold is 185 percent of the federal poverty line.
- [13] Wisconsin Joint Legislative Audit Committee, "An Evaluation: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program" Report #00-2, February 2000, pg. 11.
- [14] Russ Kava, "Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau *Informational Paper 29*, January 2005, Table 1, pg. 4, at www.legis.state.wi.us/lfb/Informationalpapers/29.pdf (February 28, 2005).
- [15] Patrick Wolf et al., pg. xiv.
- [16] See, e.g., Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell, "An Evaluation of the Children's Scholarship Fund," Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, May 2001.
- [17] Patrick Wolf et al., Table C-7, pg. C-6.
- [18] Patrick Wolf et al., Table C-7, pg. C-6.
- [19] Patrick Wolf et al., Table C-7, pg. C-6.
- [20] Patrick Wolf et al., Table C-6, pg. C-5.
- [21] House Committee on Education and the Workforce, "Boehner Applauds Early Success of D.C. Scholarship Program, Hails Promising Signs for the Future," Press Release, April 5, 2005, at edworkforce.house.gov/press/press109/first/04apr/wsf040505.htm (April 6, 2005).

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