

# WebMemo



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## D.C. Opportunity Scholarships Boost Reading Scores, Family Satisfaction

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In a recent speech, President Obama explained how his Administration would prioritize federal funding for education programs: “[Education] Secretary [Arne] Duncan will use only one test when deciding what ideas to support with your precious tax dollars: It’s not whether an idea is liberal or conservative, but whether it works.”<sup>1</sup>

On this basis, the Administration should now support continuing and expanding the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program (DCOSP).

**The Results Are In.** Created in 2004 by Congress, the DCOSP provides disadvantaged students living in the nation’s capital tuition scholarships to attend private school. The federal legislation creating the program required a rigorous evaluation to determine the program’s impact on participating children’s education. This included a randomized-experiment trial comparing the outcomes of a treatment group (students who were offered scholarships through a lottery) and a control group (students who applied but were not offered vouchers through the lottery).

On April 3, the Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences released the results of the third-year evaluation of the program.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the evaluation found a statistically significant positive effect for the treatment group in reading. Specifically, students who had been offered vouchers were performing at statistically higher levels in reading, approximately three months of additional learning. The report also found that families who had been offered a voucher were more satisfied with their

children’s school and safety. The following is an overview of the report’s main findings.

- **Impact on Academic Achievement Overall.** Students offered scholarships were performing approximately 3.1 months ahead in reading of students not offered vouchers. The authors note that this gain represents a statistically significant positive effect. The authors also measured the effect of the use of a scholarship, since 14 percent of the students who were offered vouchers (and, therefore, were counted in the treatment group for the evaluation) never used them.

The use of a scholarship led to the equivalent of 3.7 months in additional learning. While the treatment group’s math test scores were slightly higher than the control group, neither students who were offered vouchers nor those who used vouchers made statistically significant progress.

- **Impact on Family Satisfaction Overall.** The evaluation found that the parents of students who were offered scholarships were more satisfied with their children’s school. For example, parents of students who were offered scholarships were more likely to grade their schools with an “A” or “B” than were those in the control group

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[www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2391.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2391.cfm)

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and were also more likely to report that their children's schools were safe and orderly.

The evaluation found that the offer or use of a scholarship did not have a significant effect on students' views of their schools. The positive impact on scholarship parents' views about their children's educational experience is supported by previous qualitative reports published by the Department of Education.<sup>3</sup>

- **Impact on Student Subgroups.** The evaluation also found that being offered or using a scholarship led to higher reading test scores for five out of 10 subgroups, including girls, students who entered the program at higher achievement levels, and students who began in grades K–8. The offer or use of a scholarship did not lead to a positive effect for students who had left public schools classified as “in need of improvement” under federal law.

One subgroup that made notable improvement was the first group of applicants to the program, or 21 percent of the treatment group. Students in this subgroup who were offered or used scholarships made gains in reading achievement that were the equivalent of 14.1 and 18.9 months, respectively, of additional learning—a gain that is approximately 1.5 to two school years of learning. These are the students who have been in the program the longest and have had the greatest opportunity to benefit from their parents' choice.

The authors of the study caution that the “statistical significance of this finding was not robust to adjustments for multiple comparisons.”<sup>4</sup> Granting the department's reasons for cautions, policy-makers considering the program's likely impact in future years should note that the greatest aca-

ademic progress has been made by students who have been in the program the longest.

**Evidence Supports Continuation and Expansion of Program.** Since the DCOSP was created, supporters and opponents alike have pointed to this evaluation as a critical factor in determining whether the program should be continued. It has long been clear that, if success is judged by the level of satisfaction of parents of participating children, the program has been successful. Now that the third-year evaluation has found that the offer and use of a scholarship has had a statistically significant effect on students' reading achievement, questions about this program's effectiveness are resolved.

It is worth noting that the scholarship program's positive impact is being achieved at a significantly lower cost to government than what otherwise would have been spent on these students' educations in the D.C. public school system. Opportunity Scholarships offered through the program are worth \$7,500. Since the participating private schools cannot charge scholarship students more than the amount of their scholarships, it is likely that scholarships awarded to many students were less than \$7,500. The third-year evaluation reports that the weighted mean tuition of participating private schools was \$6,620. But even if private schools charged the full \$7,500, that amount is still less than half of the \$15,315 that D.C. taxpayers spent per pupil in the 2004–2005 school year.<sup>5</sup>

**Despite Positive Evidence, Program's Future Uncertain.** Despite the growing evidence of the DCOSP's success, its future beyond 2009–2010 remains uncertain. This spring, Congress included legislative language in the Omnibus Appropriations Act requiring that the DCOSP be reauthorized by

1. “President Obama's Remarks to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2009, at [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/us/politics/10text-obama.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/us/politics/10text-obama.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print) (April 7, 2009).
2. Patrick Wolf *et al.*, “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years,” U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, March 2009, at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/pdf/20094050.pdf> (April 9, 2009).
3. Lindsey Burke, “D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Study Supports Expansion,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2297, February 18, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2297.cfm>.
4. Wolf *et al.*, “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program,” p. xxix.
5. National Center for Education Statistics, “Digest of Education Statistics: 2007,” U.S. Department of Education, Table 172, at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07\\_172.asp?referrer=list](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d07/tables/dt07_172.asp?referrer=list) (April 10, 2009).

Congress and authorized by the D.C. City Council before receiving new federal appropriations. The Senate rejected an amendment offered by Senator John Ensign (R–NV) that would have removed the language that effectively sunsets the voucher program. Members of Congress are now expected to introduce legislation to reauthorize the DCOSP.

Growing evidence that the DCOSP is improving participating students' academic achievement and increasing parental satisfaction should give Congress, the Administration, and the D.C. City Council

reason to support continuing this program. Moreover, the emerging positive evidence suggests that instead of debating whether to end this successful program, federal policymakers and D.C. city leaders should be exploring ways to allow more District children to have an opportunity to attend a school of their parents' choice.

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