

June 2008

#08-24

Summary

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program enjoys broad bipartisan support, yet Congress is about to end this life-saving chance for a better future for 1,900 District children. Educational opportunity for all students, especially for the most disadvantaged, should not be allowed to be a partisan issue.

Word Count 438

“These minority and disadvantaged children and their parents have high praise for the opportunity they have received and desperately want the program to continue.”

4850 SW Scholls Ferry Road
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

t: 503.242.0900
f: 503.242.3822
info@cascadepolicy.org
www.cascadepolicy.org

Will Congress Put African-American Students in the Back of the Bus?

By Matt Wingard

Time is running out for 1,900 children, most of them low-income African-Americans, who will be forced to leave the private schools that are changing their lives.

In 2004, the Republican-controlled Congress authorized vouchers for students in the Washington, D.C. area, where children attend public schools in one of the worst performing districts in the country, a district that spends more than \$15,000 per student each year.

According to Dan Lips with the *Heritage Foundation*:

...On the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, half of all D.C. eighth graders scored “below basic” in reading. A recent study found that only 59 percent of D.C. students graduate high school.

Besides being low-performing, D.C. schools are often violent and dangerous. *The Washington Post* reported that, on average, there are nine violent incidents in D.C. schools during a typical day.

Some Democrats in Congress tried to block the voucher program four years ago, but Representative Harold Ford (D-TN) and Senator Diane Feinstein (D-CA) provided crucial votes to put children’s lives and dreams ahead of the local D.C. Teachers Union and the National Education Association. Rep. Ford is no longer in Congress.

Since 2004, about 7,200 students have applied for the scholarships, nearly four times more than the \$18 million program could support. The program saves the district money by educating nearly 2,000 children at a lower cost. These minority and disadvantaged children and their parents have high praise for the opportunity they have received and desperately want the program to continue.

Educational opportunity for all students, especially for the most disadvantaged students in the District, should not be a partisan issue; and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program enjoys broad bipartisan support. D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty has asked Congress to boost funding for the scholarships. Former Mayor (and current City Council member) Marion Barry, who once opposed school choice, also has publicly endorsed the program.

But instead of expanding funding, the current Democrat-controlled Congress is preparing to end the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.



“If you don’t reauthorize it, it will be taking a lot of kids’ dreams away,” says Carlos Battle, an African-American teenager in D.C. who receives an Opportunity Scholarship.

Only elected officials concerned entirely about a special interest could ignore the pleas of 1,900 children who ask only that they be allowed to stay in the private schools that are giving them a real chance to succeed.

Our public education system must put the interests of children and parents ahead of the adults who run our schools. When it comes to their education, the U.S. Congress is about to put thousands of low-income black students in the back of the bus.

Matt Wingard is Director of the School Choice Project at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon’s premier public policy research center. To read other publications of the School Choice Project, visit www.cascadepolicy.org.

“If you don’t reauthorize it, it will be taking a lot of kids’ dreams away,’ says Carlos Battle, an African-American teenager in D.C. who receives an Opportunity Scholarship.”

Attention editors
and producers

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic.

Please contact:

Nancy Wheaton
Cascade Policy Institute
4850 SW Scholls Ferry Rd.
Suite 103
Portland, Oregon 97225

Phone: (503) 242-0900

Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
info@cascadepolicy.org

Cascade Policy Institute is a tax-exempt educational organization as defined under IRS code 501 (c)(3). Nothing appearing in this Cascade Commentary is to be construed as necessarily representing the views of Cascade or its donors, or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before any legislative body. The views expressed herein are the author’s own.