

US: Congress approves school voucher plan for nation's capital

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The US Senate last month gave final passage to a \$14 million-a-year private school voucher program as part of an omnibus spending bill that includes funds for many federal agencies. The legislation cleared the Senate on January 22 by a vote of 65-28. The House of Representatives had already approved the spending measure in early December. President Bush praised the voucher plan, which he signed into law January 23.

The voucher money is part of a \$40 million funding package for the Washington, D.C., school system. The additional \$26 million is to be evenly divided between the city's regular public school system and its 38 charter schools. Adopted as a five-year pilot program, it will allow nearly 2,000 children from low-income families in the District of Columbia to be eligible for tuition aid of up to \$7,500 to attend religious or secular private schools in the city.

The federal approval of the D.C. voucher plan is an aggressive assault on the nation's public schools. It will drain desperately needed funds from the public school system as well as undermine the constitutionally protected separation of church and state.

The nation's capital has joined Milwaukee and Cleveland as cities where students can receive publicly financed tuition vouchers to attend private schools. Florida also offers private school vouchers to children with disabilities and those in low-scoring public schools, while Colorado's planned voucher program has been put on hold as a legal battle over it persists. However, this latest initiative is the first federal program to directly finance private school vouchers.

Underscoring the determination of the Bush administration to establish a federal voucher program, Secretary of Education Rod Paige told a meeting of the right-wing think tank, the Heritage Foundation, "I respectfully warn those in Congress and the District who ponder such continued political warfare that their actions will not stop us."

Warning, "This is just the beginning," Paige told the meeting that President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal 2005 would include \$50 million for a "choice incentive fund." The secretary called on school leaders around the country to contemplate ways to offer students "broader educational options." Such programs are necessary, he said, because of "the urgent need for education reform" in many districts, not just in

the District of Columbia.

Rather than provide the funds to lower class size, increase the number of teachers, repair the thousands of dilapidated school building around the country and provide quality public education to all children, the Bush administration is pushing vouchers as another step in the destruction of public education.

"Vouchers have been shown time and again to drain dollars from public schools and fail to improve student achievement," said Anne L. Bryant, executive director of the National School Boards Association. "Today, the Senate let down America's schoolchildren and taxpayers."

Vouchers have been consistently voted down in statewide decisions from 1972 to 2000. In 1972, in Maryland, voters defeated a voucher program 55 to 45 percent; in Michigan in 1978, the vote was 78 to 26 percent; in 1992 in Colorado, 67 to 33 percent; in California in 1993, 70 to 30 percent; in Washington State in 1996, 64 to 36 percent. Again in Michigan in 2000, vouchers were rejected 69 to 31 percent; and finally again in California in 2000, a voucher program was defeated 71 to 29 percent.

Under the D.C. School Choice Incentive Law, the US Department of Education and the office of Washington, D.C. mayor Anthony A. Williams will enter into a memorandum of understanding to implement the voucher program. Applications to run the program are being solicited from outside groups.

Priority would be given to students in schools defined as underachieving under the No Child Left Behind Law, and once a year participants would have to take the same standardized tests given to pupils in the city's regular public schools. Nevertheless, critics have stressed the relatively small number of pupils that will be served annually—about 2,000—and have argued that the money would be better spent on the 66,000 students in the city's regular public schools.

D.C. schools are in desperate need of funding. In December, the school board announced the layoff of 700 school employees. This was reduced to 80 administrative jobs after the city gave the school district a grant, but it will still mean fewer support services for teachers and students, while those that remain face pressure to do more with reduced resources.

Washington mayor Williams, a Democrat, strongly supports the voucher plan as does the city's school board president and

the head of the District of Columbia Council's education committee. But other members of the school board and council oppose it, and Washington's nonvoting representative in the House, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat, has been an outspoken opponent of the plan.

Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts announced shortly after the vote that he would be pushing for legislation to repeal the program. Kennedy, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, also attacked the legislative tactics employed by Republican leaders of the Senate to get the measure passed.

"The administration couldn't pass a voucher provision honestly, so they've attached it to an omnibus appropriations bill to avoid a vote to eliminate it," the senator said through a spokesman. "The vast majority of the leaders in the District don't want vouchers, and we intend to do all we can to stop vouchers from being imposed on the District."

Despite Kennedy's criticism of the measure, however, Democrats in both the House and the Senate provided Republicans with enough votes to ensure the passage of the bill by a comfortable margin. Through what has become a familiar method for pushing through reactionary legislation, the Republicans attached the voucher measure to an appropriations bill for the Departments of Agriculture, Transportation and Education. Kennedy criticized it, pledged to work to repeal it and even voted against the bill; while enough Democrats voted for the overall package, claiming that it would be irresponsible to deny money to the other programs.

The federally funded vouchers in the nation's capital would be worth much more than the \$2,700 per year in tuition aid available through Ohio's nine-year-old state-run voucher program in Cleveland, whose constitutionality the US Supreme Court upheld in 2002. The Washington vouchers would also be higher than the roughly \$5,800 in tuition aid that can go to participants in the city of Milwaukee's program, the first private school voucher program in the US, enacted in 1990.

Moreover, voucher programs such as Milwaukee's exclude learning disabled and emotionally disabled children by allowing the schools to simply claim that they do not have the services to meet their needs. This leaves those children who are two to three years below grade level in already underfunded public schools, with vouchers siphoning out millions more. These children usually need twice the dollar amount to provide teachers' aides, smaller class sizes, afterschool tutoring, occupational and physical therapy, a speech and language pathologist, and teaching materials appropriate for each child's math and reading level as well as learning style.

Jim Ward, president of ADA Watch and the National Coalition for Disability Rights in Washington, D.C., warns that voucher programs threaten the rights of students with special needs. He cites a 1998 survey by the US Department of Education that between 70 and 85 percent of private schools in large inner cities would "definitely or probably" not participate

in a voucher program if required to accept "students with special needs such as learning disabilities, limited English proficiency, or low achievement."

Much of the money will go directly to the funding of religious schools. The Catholic archdiocese will benefit from the influx of cold hard cash. It directly runs 24 elementary or K-8 schools in the city, as well as one high school. Patricia Weitzel-O'Neill, the superintendent of schools for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, which serves 33,000 students in Washington and part of Maryland, said that at present those schools have some 1,100 slots available for the 2004-2005 school year. That means \$8,250,000 siphoned from public schools and handed to parochial schools from the federal government. There are over 100 private schools in D.C.

President Bush has continually made clear his support for federal funds being used for religious schools. Just this past Friday, February 13, he spoke at the Archbishop Carroll High School in praise of the measure, and last month he spoke before 250 members of the National Catholic Education Association in the White House pushing for the measure.

The Republican right has long championed school vouchers and funding for religious schools. These forces view public education both as a threat to their ideological views and as an unnecessary expense. Many of the current voucher programs are being written with clauses for low-income students, to win over the support of politicians and religious leaders in minority communities who will benefit from these measures.



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