

White House strikes deal to expand school vouchers in nation's capital

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The Obama administration arrived at an agreement last week with proponents of private school vouchers in Washington DC. The deal will increase the number of students enrolled and receiving vouchers in private and religious schools in the nation's capital from 1,615 to over 1,700 in the year 2013.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), part of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act (SOAR) co-authored last year with bipartisan support by Republican House Speaker John Boehner and Senator Joseph Lieberman (Independent, Connecticut), allows for \$60 million in federal money to be split three ways between low-income students enrolled in religion-based private schools, traditional public schools, and public charters. The bill allows for as much as \$8,000 each to be given to students at the elementary level, and \$12,000 for high school students.

After having been phased out by District Democrats after the bill's original enactment in 2004, the SOAR Act, signed by the Obama administration in 2011, reinvigorated the program as a part of the deal struck between the administration and Congressional Republicans on the controversial budget ceiling issue.

The budget deal itself opened the way to some of the most regressive spending cuts the nation has ever seen (see "Obama hails deal to impose record cuts in social spending"). A specific measure in the budget deal also prohibited Washington DC officials from spending the District's own funds to provide abortion services for low-income women.

The SOAR Act has been highly controversial inside the District, with a number of local Democrats, including DC Mayor Vincent Gray, opposing the legislation. Eleanor Holmes Norton, DC delegate to the US Congress, has publicly opposed the act.

study undertaken in 2007 by the Government Accountability Office was also critical of the program, stating that it lacked "an accountability infrastructure that could assure Congress ... and the public that its funds were used effectively and in compliance with laws and regulations." Similar studies by the US Department of Education have also found "no conclusive evidence" that these schools increased performance in areas of test scores.

However, this did not stop the Obama administration from supporting expansion of the program. Speaking on the deal in a written statement last Monday, Education Secretary Arne Duncan stated "The President and I are committed to ensuring that the education of the children currently in the DC Opportunity Scholarship program is not disrupted."

There were minor disagreements between the bill's proponents and the administration about allotment of funds for the program. The Obama administration had not allocated new funds for the program for the current fiscal year, citing the program's own continued pool of funds not being fully exhausted.

Claiming they were "very disappointed" in the move not to re-inject funds, the bill's authors wrote a co-signed statement to the Obama administration, attempting to appeal the decision. Boehner and Lieberman claimed that the SOAR Act "reauthorizes a robust five-year program and does not cap the number of students who are able to receive scholarships."

In a written statement last Monday, Duncan said that the administration had agreed to increase "the current enrollment of about 1,615 to approximately 1,700 students for the coming year to allow for a statistically valid evaluation of the program," as Congress had mandated the Department to Education to conduct such a study.

In an additional statement on Tuesday, the department claimed that the Obama administration had not changed its position on school vouchers: “Despite the agreement to allow a modest increase in the number of students admitted to the DC voucher program next year to comply with a Congressionally-mandated student, there has been absolutely no change in policy.”

In fact, the White House agreement to expand the DC voucher program is in keeping with the administration’s education policy and Race to the Top program, which is aimed at starving public schools for cash and victimizing public school teachers and students at so-called “failing” and “underperforming” schools.

For their part, the District’s teachers unions were ambivalent on the voucher deal. Nathan Saunders, president of the Washington Teachers Union (WTU), said, “I would love to see him [Obama] throw all of his energy into the concept that a rising tide lifts all boats. Throw the money at the bottom ... increasing the quality of education for all children,” implying that the move was well intentioned, but not sufficiently committed.

For District officials and teachers union leaders, the defense of public education against the threat by charters and vouchers is a matter of tactical concern rather than a principle. In a statement to the press, Delegate Norton criticized the bill from the standpoint that “our own public charter schools are where both the need and the demand are.”

In May, DC schools chancellor Kaya Henderson announced a plan to “improve” public school performance in the District that threatens the closure or replacement by charter of as many as three-dozen public schools, the elimination of school libraries and the “excessing” of school personnel. Washington DC is the second most charter-heavy school system in the country, after New Orleans.



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