

# The National Coalition *for* Public Education

May 9, 2003

Committee on Government Reform

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

Today, your committee will conduct a hearing on academic options available to Students and Parents in the District of Columbia. The undersigned members of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) wish to bring to your attention certain facts about private school vouchers, and urge this Committee not to consider them as a viable option for students in the District of Columbia.

**Vouchers undermine accountability.** Accountability is the cornerstone of education reforms authorized under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, PL 107-110). To send public funds to schools over which the public may exercise no oversight is inconsistent, and which are not required to comply with the accountability standards of NCLB violates the principles of that law, and undermines the reforms it was enacted to implement.

**Vouchers do not expand parents' educational "options."** Private schools may not be required to participate in a voucher program, and participating schools may not be required to accept all applicants. There is thus no guarantee that any student awarded a voucher would be admitted to the private school of his or her "choice." Those most at risk of being left behind by a voucher program are ironically those most in need of educational support – students with learning, behavioral, or physical disabilities, English language learners, and children from unstable homes.

**Vouchers are neither needed nor wanted in the District of Columbia.**

Programs to improve student achievement in the District have been implemented, are working, and should be expanded. Meanwhile, the academic achievement of African American students who used privately funded vouchers to attend private schools in the District was no different than that of students who remained in public school.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, public school choice is available to every child in the District, and the District offers more charter schools per capita than any other school district in the nation.

The citizens of the District and the elected leaders who represent them have also expressed their opposition to publicly funded voucher programs. Just this week, more than a hundred parents, joined by members of the city council and the school board, rallied to express their opposition to vouchers. A survey conducted less than six months ago by Zogby International revealed that 76 percent of District voters oppose private school vouchers. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, the only member of Congress who speaks for the citizens of the District of Columbia, has repeatedly, vigorously, and eloquently voiced the District's opposition to any efforts to bring publicly funded private school vouchers to DC.

**Vouchers threaten civil rights.** Voucher initiatives that require participating private schools to comply with all "applicable" civil rights laws are virtually meaningless, since laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of religion, gender, and disability do not necessarily apply to private schools. Private schools, for example, are not bound by the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and may therefore reject students based on their disability, and may decline to provide needed services to students with disabilities that they do admit. Vouchers could therefore result in federally funded discrimination. Furthermore, where voucher funds may be used for sectarian educational purposes, as would be permitted under the District of Columbia Student Opportunity Scholarship Act of 2003 (H.R. 684), taxpayers would be forced to support instruction in religions contrary to their own.

Education reform must focus on improving the public schools where the vast majority of students will continue to be educated. We urge this Committee to dismiss initiatives to divert public funds to private schools through vouchers.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Women  
American Civil Liberties Union

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *School Vouchers Characteristics of Privately Funded Programs*, GAO-02-752 (Washington, D.C.: September 10, 2002).

American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Jewish Congress  
Americans for Democratic Action  
Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
Anti-Defamation League  
Baptist Joint Committee  
Central Conference of American Rabbis  
Council of the Great City Schools  
Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America  
Jewish Council for Public Affairs  
Leadership Conference on Civil Rights  
NA'AMAT USA  
National Alliance of Black School Educators  
National Association of Elementary School Principals  
National Association of School Psychologists  
National Association of State Boards of Education  
National Associations of State Directors of Special Education  
National Black Child Development Institute  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Education Association  
National PTA  
National School Boards Association  
National Urban League  
People For the American Way  
Presbyterian Church USA, Washington Office  
School Social Work Association  
Service Employees International Union (SEIU)  
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries  
Union of American Hebrew Congregations  
Women of Reform Judaism