



D.C. School Choice Opportunity Scholarships Expand Options for Families

June 2008

"The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is a lifeline of hope and opportunity for these low-income students who are striving for a better future for themselves and their families. The academic gains indicated in the report show that students have chosen to work hard, and their families have chosen to make the commitment to support them in their new schools. While it reflects the reality that this program is still in its early stages, this report also tells me that no one in a position of responsibility can sever this lifeline right now and leave these kids adrift in schools that are not measuring up—not when they have chosen to create a better future for themselves."

--Secretary Margaret Spellings

The Federal Government is committed to strengthening the education opportunities for all children in our Nation's capital.

- The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is part of a unique, locally-developed three-sector initiative to reform D.C.'s public schools, replicate high-performing charter schools, and provide scholarships to some of Washington's poorest children.
- Children enrolled in the program can receive \$7,500 in scholarship funding to attend the private school of their choice.
- Created in 2004, the program provides high-quality education options to more than 1,900 low-income children every year.

D.C. Opportunity Scholarships are designed to help the children who need it most.

- The average household income of participating families is \$22,736 for a family of four, all participating students come from families below 185 percent of the poverty line, and nearly 100 percent are minorities.
- 86 percent of scholarship students would otherwise attend public schools that did not meet "adequate yearly progress" standards in 2006-07.

The Institute of Education Sciences report, "Evaluation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Two Years" reaffirms academic gains among participants and parental satisfaction with their children's education and safety:

- Reading test scores of three subgroups of students, representing 88 percent of participating students¹, were higher by the equivalent of two to four months of additional schooling.
- Last year's study found that math scores were higher for subgroups representing 83 percent of participating students.
- The positive effects found in this year's report are larger than those in last year's report, and whenever statistically significant effects were found, they always favored students who were offered scholarships. While this evaluation found no statistically significant difference in test scores overall between students who were offered a scholarship and students who were not offered a scholarship, achievement trends are moving in the right direction.
- Parents of scholarship students expressed greater satisfaction with their children's education and more confidence that their children would be safe at school.
- Demand for the program remains high. Over 7,000 students have applied for scholarships and eligible applicants represent 12 percent of the low-income student population in D.C.

¹ Three subgroups showing gains: students who applied in the first year of program implementation; students who had previously attended DC public schools that were not identified for improvement; and students who scored in the top 2/3rd of the evaluation's baseline testing. The performance of this group of relatively higher performing students is equivalent to about the 30th percentile nationally, and thus substantially below the national norm at the 50th percentile.

Next year's evaluation will examine impacts on student achievement three years after application to the program.

Georgetown University studies also show the Program is making a difference for students and families:

- As a result of participating in the Program, parents' involvement in their children's education increased.
- Participating students are demonstrating enthusiasm for school and an improved attitude toward learning.

Given the positive trends in achievement, in combination with high parental satisfaction and strong demand, Congress must act to continue providing these important options for parents and their children.

- The "three-sector" approach adopted by Congress for improving educational opportunities for DC schoolchildren must continue in order to provide all students in the nation's capital, especially those most disadvantaged, with the opportunity to succeed.
- President Bush's 2009 budget contained record funding for education reform in the District of Columbia, including \$18 million for D.C. Opportunity Scholarships, and an additional \$56 million for the D.C. public school system and the city's growing charter school sector. Crafted in collaboration with the District's Mayor and Chancellor of schools, this package supports the ongoing efforts to make sure all children have access to high-quality schools, whether traditional public, charter, private, or parochial.
- According to a study by the Greater Washington Urban League, D.C. residents are overwhelmingly in favor of this overall package, with more than two-thirds (69 percent) of residents in favor of the plan.

For more information, please visit the U.S. Department of Education's web site at:

<http://www.ed.gov/programs/dcchoice/index.html>.