

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 16, 2008

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Madam Speaker:

We are writing to express our strong support for the funding proposals submitted by the Mayor and City Council for the District of Columbia's education system. As Mayor Adrian Fenty recently stated in a letter to Congress, this education package "will spur improved instruction and services, directly benefiting students in the classroom."

The education funding and reform package proposed by District leaders reflects the urgent educational challenges facing the students, teachers, families, and schools here in the nation's capital. Years of neglect have consigned generations of District residents to inferior educations. In response, the city's leaders have developed an education package for the upcoming fiscal year that seeks to expand education opportunity for students and better prepare teachers and principals for the classroom. The package includes an incentive pay initiative for District of Columbia Public School teachers, increased instructional leadership training for principals, support for a student data reporting system, initiatives to replicate high-performing public charter schools, and the continuation and expansion of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

As you know, the District of Columbia Public School System has some of the largest challenges in the country when it comes to ensuring that all of its students are prepared to excel academically. Out of 229 public elementary and secondary schools in the District, 13 percent (or 30 schools) made academic progress on their district-established standards, compared to 70 percent nationally. Of this total, 173 schools are either in need of improvement or are undergoing some type of restructuring of their school governance, which is the most serious action required under the No Child Left Behind Act. According to recent assessment results released by the District for the 2006-2007 school year, a mere 12 percent of its 4th graders are proficient in reading. The results also show that only 13 percent of its 8th graders are proficient in mathematics.

Unlike most schools in the nation, which have highly qualified teachers in high poverty schools, only 68.8 percent of all high poverty elementary school classes are taught by a highly qualified teacher and only 55.7 percent of all high poverty secondary school classes are taught by a highly qualified teacher. And of serious concern for future generations, the District's graduation rate is a meager 58 percent, with most of its secondary schools classified as "drop out factories."

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, created in 2004, currently provides more than 1,900 students who reside in the District of Columbia with the opportunity to receive a high quality education at the public or private school of their choice. The average household income of those students that receive scholarships is approximately \$22,700, much lower than the applicant eligibility limit of 185 percent of poverty authorized under the law. Since its inception, the program has served over 2,600 students and consistently has a long waiting list of students and their parents wanting to participate in this innovative and ground breaking program. If not for the program, a vast majority of scholarship students would be attending schools that are in need of improvement or restructuring as designated under NCLB.

In a recent report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education and in an independent report conducted by Georgetown University, students that participated in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program showed early indications of gains in math, particularly for those students who had marginal academic ground to make up. The reports also found that parents, who are central to any efforts to increase student achievement, were significantly more satisfied with the scholarship program as compared to their previous public school enrollment across all areas: in the safety of their child, in the overall classroom sizes at the school, in the academic quality of the school's programs, in discipline, and in their relationship with teachers. It also found that parents are more involved in their child's education and are becoming better education consumers.

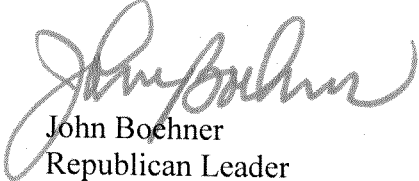
Unfortunately, recent media accounts have raised the specter that this program may be targeted by education reform opponents for elimination. The June 9th edition of the *Washington Post* quoted one of our colleagues as saying that the Opportunity Scholarship Program was "on its last legs," that "the Democratic Congress is not about to extend this program," and that Congress should start telling the almost 2,000 families who praise this program that their scholarships are coming to an end. Surely the Democratic Congress would not allow this to happen on its watch, particularly given the academic and emotional impact it would have on these students, 86 percent of who would be forced to return to low-performing schools. The article also talked about a number of scholarship students like Fransoir William, a sixth-grader at Sacred Heart, a Catholic school in Northwest. His mother, Patricia, credits her son's new school and the scholarship program for changing the direction of his life. "He's been developed in many ways, intellectually, emotionally and in his values," she said. "I couldn't ask for anything better."

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has never been debased by partisan bickering, and we implore you not to allow the program to be sacrificed to special interests now. With the backing of Mayor Fenty, two former Mayors, a number of men and women on the City Council, prominent businessmen and women in the District, and thousands of students and parents who support continuing and expanding the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, we hope that you will join us in continuing to support this valuable program. To this end, we hope that you will support the District's education package and reject calls by a small but vocal minority that are choosing their special interests over the hopes and dreams of thousands of District residents.

All parents in the District of Columbia, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or socio-economic background, should be empowered to make the best decisions when it comes to the

education of their children. We should not, and must not, roll back our commitment to the students and families that would otherwise be trapped in a faltering school system while that system works to turn itself around.

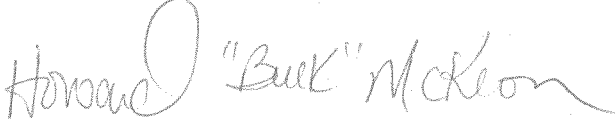
Sincerely,




John Boehner
Republican Leader



Roy Blunt
Republican Whip



Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
Senior Republican Member
House Education and Labor Committee



Tom Davis
Senior Republican Member
House Oversight and Government
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Copy provided to:

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