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- From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

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Feature

Expanding Opportunities for Parental Choice

Tiffany Dunston grew up in a dangerous, struggling neighborhood where many people do not have the luxury or means to excel or succeed. Fortunately, Dunston was awarded a [DC Opportunity Scholarship](#) (DC OSP) and used this scholarship to attend Archbishop Carroll High School, a private Catholic school in Washington, D.C. Dunston ultimately became the 2008 valedictorian of her senior class at Archbishop Carroll, and she will attend Syracuse University in the fall. Profiled on the [D.C. Children First Web site](#), Dunston asserts, "I am determined to build a better life and want others in my community to have that chance as well."

Parental choice programs allow low-income and minority families whose children may be attending poor-performing public schools often their first opportunity to choose better schools for their children. A goal of many of them is to spur public schools to improve their performance so that all children, regardless of where they live, have the opportunity of a high quality education. The advent of school choice programs is both an innovation in the traditional delivery of education and in making inventive, successful schools and programs available to children - especially economically disadvantaged and minority children - that would not otherwise be available.

During the 2007-2008 school year, over 1,900 students benefited from DC OSP, which provides scholarships of up to \$7,500 for low-income Washington, D.C. families, and is the only federally funded "voucher" program. Additionally, as of August 2008, there are 23 [programs](#) in 14 states that also provide financial assistance in the form of voucher or voucher-like tuition assistance, tax credits, and tax deductions, compared with just seven programs in seven states a decade ago.

The vouchers (or scholarships) are payments made to a parent or to an educational institution for a student's education expenses, and are often available only to students who meet certain eligibility criteria. These criteria could include residing in a particular area, having low family income, attending a public school in need of improvement, or having a disability.

Florida's [John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program](#), for example, provided vouchers to over 19,800 students with special needs to attend 850 private schools across the state during the 2007-2008 school year. According to a recent [study](#), vouchers also benefit public school students with disabilities who remain in their public schools. Building on the success of the Florida program, Georgia, Arizona, Ohio, and Utah have enacted similar programs for students with disabilities.

Tax credit and tax deduction programs reimburse individuals or corporations for education-related expenses via tax relief. [Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit](#) (EITC), for example, provides tax credits to businesses contributing to scholarship organizations, education improvement organizations, and pre-K scholarship organizations. EITC serves close to 40,000 students and was cited as a national model by President George W. Bush earlier this year. Similar tax credit programs exist in Florida, Arizona, Iowa, Rhode Island, and Georgia.

The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program and state school choice programs strive to provide high-quality education options for families. Their growth has continued this year with passage of new programs in [Georgia](#), [Louisiana](#), and the positive impact is indisputable. According to recent [Georgetown University studies](#), the DC OSP is making a difference for students and families. For example, parents' involvement in their children's education increased and participating students demonstrated enthusiasm for school and an improved attitude toward learning. Empirical [studies of other choice programs](#) also have found improvements in student achievement and consistently high levels of [parent satisfaction](#).

Additional Resources

- *Save DC's Vouchers* by Margaret Spellings [More—[Washington Post](#)] (July 8, 2008) (*subscription required*)
- *Expanding Educational Options - The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program* [[The Education Innovator](#)] (May 2006)
- Alliance for School Choice's "[School Choice in Your State](#)" Navigation Tool

What's New ?

From the U.S. Department of Education

- [Spellings Announces 25 Teachers Selected for Teaching Ambassador Fellowships](#)
- [Spellings Speaks at Education Leaders Forum in Paris](#)
- [Six States Approved to Use Differentiated Accountability](#)

From the Office of Innovation and Improvement

- *New Grant Competition: [High-Quality Supplemental Educational Services and After-School Partnerships Demonstration](#)*. OII has announced a new grant competition to encourage the establishment or expansion of partnerships between 21st Century Community Learning Centers and programs offering supplemental educational services. The goal is to increase the reading and mathematics achievement of low-income students in Title I schools identified for improvement. There will be a technical assistance call for interested applicants in the near future. Information will be available on the program's Web site. Questions can be directed to HQSEsafterschool@ed.gov.
- [Grants to States to Help Create Charter Schools](#) Announced

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