

Congress Considers Cutting D.C. School Voucher Program

With more families choosing charter schools, the voucher option is losing political favor

By ZACH MINERS

Ingrid Campbell's two daughters — Mercedes, 17, and Madisyn, 9 — both have federal scholarships, or vouchers, that have allowed them to attend private schools in Washington. She hopes her 3-year-old son also will have access to a voucher when it's time for him to enter kindergarten, but Campbell is not optimistic.

Thousands of D.C. families have found themselves in limbo as Congress debates whether to continue the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, the first and only federally funded education voucher plan in the country. Since it was enacted in 2004, the \$14 million-a-year legislation has given vouchers worth up to \$7,500 to more than 3,000 of the city's low-income K–12 students so that they can attend private schools. But the program was signed into law as a five-year pilot initiative when vouchers were the buzzword in school reform. The rise of charter schools, along with recent moves by the Obama administration and congressional Democrats, has thrown the future of the OSP—and the concept of vouchers as a school reform option in general—into question.

The debate over whether vouchers still make sense for the District's disadvantaged students came to a head last spring when Congress voted to discontinue new funding until the program has been fully reauthorized. That move meant that many of the students who were planning to use vouchers to pay for private schools this academic year would have to attend the low-performing schools in their neighborhoods. Public outcry in the city led Congress to extend the funding so students currently getting vouchers would continue to receive them through high school graduation.

But Congress is still deliberating the overall fate of the option—and whether new students can enroll in it. Sens. Joe Lieberman, the independent from Connecticut; Dianne Feinstein, a California Democrat; Susan Collins, a Maine Republican; and others have introduced legislation to save the program for five additional years, but that legislation has not yet been voted on by either the Senate or the House. Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, chairman of the appropriations subcommittee that handles D.C. funding, has been regarded as a vocal opponent of vouchers but has signaled during recent Senate hearings that he might be open to reauthorization if certain conditions are met. (D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee supports the continuation of the federal voucher pro-

gram.)

"To survive, the program needs both houses to reauthorize it and both houses to fund it, and for the president to sign both," says Andy Smarick of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a nonprofit education think tank in Washington. "That is a very heavy lift."

When Congress temporarily revoked the funding, about 90 percent of the displaced students landed in public schools that were in need of improvement, corrective action, or restructuring, according to the Washington Scholarship Fund, the entity that manages the voucher program. Aisha Hillard is a parent of one of those 216 students. After first receiving a letter saying she had a voucher, she was notified in the spring that in fact she didn't have one. "It was awful," she says.

Constitutional issues. The debate over whether vouchers still make sense is striking political chords across the country. There are locally funded voucher programs in Ohio, Florida, Utah, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Georgia. Traditionally, Republicans support vouchers because they say choice puts pressure on neighborhood public schools to improve and vouchers offer options to parents who would otherwise have to send their children to failing schools. But Democrats, teachers unions, and other opponents argue that vouchers prevent public schools from improving by taking dollars away from them.

Vouchers also have raised constitutional issues because some students use them to attend private religious schools. Approximately 20,000 Milwaukee students are in the program this year, and 80 percent of the participating private schools are religious. In 2002, a case involving the Cleveland voucher program went all the way to the Supreme Court; the 5-to-4 decision in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* affirmed that vouchers are constitutional when used to fund children's education at religious schools, provided that the program has a secular purpose. These political questions might soon be rendered irrelevant by the increasing popularity of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are operated independently from their native school districts. These schools have become school-reform advocates' leading tool for offering more options to families.

President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appear to be favoring charter schools over vouchers in the requirements school systems have to meet to collect additional funding from the federal government. Duncan has spoken against vouchers, saying

that they usually serve only 1 to 2 percent of the students in a community and that the federal government, local governments, and local school districts must be "more ambitious than that."

But some education advocacy and reform groups, citing the \$100 billion in education monies appropriated under last year's economic stimulus package, have challenged that argument. They say the voucher program represents but a single drop of water in an ocean of federal spending.

"We have vouchers for cars through the 'cash for clunkers' program," says Jeanne Allen, president of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform. "We have housing vouchers. We have day-care vouchers."

It is possible for voucher programs and charter schools to coexist. Says Nelson Smith, president of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "There's nothing in supporting charters as a form of parent choice that should work against any other form of parent choice." Indeed, vouchers provide low-income families who are seeking a religious option a choice they would not be able to get from a charter school. "There are certain children who are only going to be saved by a faith-based school," says John Kirtley, chairman of the nonprofit Florida School Choice Fund.

In the District of Columbia, there is evidence that the federal voucher program is delivering results. An independent evaluation mandated by the government has revealed that students in the program are making academic gains in reading. (An improvement in math scores was deemed statistically insignificant.) A separate Georgetown University survey has shown that parents overwhelmingly support the program and feel it provides a safe, high-quality education for their children.

Students appear to be enthusiastic about the opportunities the OSP has provided them. Mercedes Campbell, a senior at Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School, says that before vouchers enabled her to switch schools, she was bored and felt disengaged from her studies. "I see things differently now," she says. "I've been given a good foundation, and I feel I can always refer back to what I learned here."

Parents like Ingrid Campbell say that they will keep putting pressure on lawmakers and President Obama to save D.C.'s vouchers. "My middle child is the one I'm fighting for all the way, because I might have to put her back in public school next year if we lose the vouchers," she says. "I would get two or three jobs to keep her in her private school."