



How Congress Should — and Shouldn't — Bolster School Choice

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This week, the House Committee on Education and the Workforce held a hearing on “Expanding Education Opportunity through School Choice.” As I’ve written before, there are lots of great reasons to support school choice policies, but Congress should not create a national voucher program:

It is very likely that a federal voucher program would lead to increased federal regulation of private schools over time. Once private schools become dependent on federal money, the vast majority is likely to accept the new regulations rather than forgo the funding.

When a state adopts regulations that undermine its school choice program, it’s lamentable but at least the ill effects are localized. Other states are free to chart a different course. However, if the federal government regulates a national school choice program, there is no escape. Moreover, state governments are more responsive to citizens than the distant federal bureaucracy. Citizens have a better shot at blocking or reversing harmful regulations at the state and local level rather than the federal level.

That said, there’s at least one area where Congress both has the authority to act and can do a lot of good: Washington DC.

Despite spending close to \$30,000 per pupil, DC’s public schools are ranked among the worst in the nation, and it’s the students from the poorest households who are assigned to the worst schools:

In nearly all D.C. neighborhoods where the median three-bedroom home costs \$460,000 or less, the percentage of students at the zoned public school scoring proficient or advanced in reading was less than 45 percent. Children from families that could only afford homes under \$300,000 are almost entirely assigned to the worst-performing schools in the District, in which math and reading proficiency rates are in the teens.

Ideally, Congress would enact a universal education savings account program, similar to the one that Sen. Ted Cruz is proposing. At the very least, Congress should work to reauthorize the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) that is set to expire this year. At about \$9,000 each, OSP vouchers cost taxpayers a fraction of what it costs per pupil at the public schools yet a random-assignment study found that OSP students were 21 percentage points more likely to graduate from high school than the control group. Moreover, researchers Patrick Wolf and

Michael McShane calculated that the total benefits to the taxpayer are even greater than the immediate savings:

Because a high-school diploma makes an individual less likely to commit crimes, it therefore decreases both the costs incurred by victims of crimes and those borne by the public in administering the justice system. Coupled with the increased tax revenue made on the increased income, this yields an extra benefit for society of over \$87,000 per high-school graduate.

Multiplying the number of additional graduates by the value of a high-school diploma yields a total benefit of over \$183 million. Over the time of our study, the OSP cost taxpayers \$70 million, so dividing the benefits by the cost yields an overall benefit-to-cost ratio of 2.62, or \$2.62 for every dollar that was spent.

Sadly, the OSP is threatened by the Obama administration's war on school choice:

Since coming into power, the administration has actively opposed policies that empower low-income minorities to enroll their children in the schools of their choice. Obama's proposed budgets repeatedly zeroed out funding for the Washington, D.C., Opportunity Scholarship Program... Last year, more than 95 percent of the D.C. voucher recipients were black or Hispanic.

The program survived only because of its champions in Congress, particularly former House speaker John Boehner, who ensured that the program would continue to receive funding. However, the program is set to expire later this year, and while the latest omnibus bill funds it for fiscal year 2016, it failed to reauthorize the program, spurring the Wall Street Journal in December to wonder "how Nancy Pelosi prevailed despite Republican majorities in both houses."

Even though he was a scholarship student who now sends his own children to private school, it's unlikely President Obama will sign any legislation creating new school choice options in his final year in office. If federal lawmakers are serious about expanding school choice, they should make reauthorizing the OSP a top priority.

To learn more about the impact of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program and the Obama administration's efforts to shut it down, watch [this short documentary](#) from *Reason Magazine*.

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