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Federal cuts to voucher program force parents to look elsewhere

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Recent moves at the federal level to cut funding for the District's private school voucher program has forced parents and school choice advocates to regroup and plan anew.

"The prospects look pretty bleak for school choice in D.C.," said Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Cato Institute's Education Freedom Center.

Since 2003, the federally funded D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has granted vouchers for about 1,700 low-income students to attend private schools. It was passed by a Republican Congress more ideologically disposed to support school choice.

This year, as the voucher program faces reauthorization in a Democratic Congress, support has been more scarce. And in April, the U.S. Department of Education informed more than 200 students awarded the scholarships for the 2009-10 school year that they would no longer receive the money. While Secretary Arne Duncan has supported reform initiatives like charter schools, he has publicly questioned the effectiveness of voucher programs, saying studies have proven inconclusive at best.

In June, seven of the D.C. Council's 13 members wrote a letter to Duncan and Mayor Adrian Fenty expressing support for the continuation of the program, including new students.

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, said the key for continuation of D.C.'s program will be keeping pressure on Democratic senators and on the Obama administration.

"People who support school choice are growing in number and influence," Allen said. "I think Obama will have egg on his face if this dies -- he can't keep saying he supports change, but not support proven efforts like this."

McCluskey said that while the outlook is grim for D.C., the movement has seen growth elsewhere, especially through the use of tax credits for private education and for donations to educational scholarships.

"There's a lot of good movement at the state levels for school choice," McCluskey said. He added, however,

that "vouchers as a way of delivering choice are on the defensive."


For Rivenia Boyd, the demise of program has left her in a quandary. Her two children had been awarded vouchers for the coming school year, and by the time they were rescinded, it was too late to apply for most of the city's charter schools. Instead, Boyd said, she likely will send her children back to their struggling elementary school in Northeast D.C.

"We were looking forward to more structure and opportunities at a new school," she said. "This means having to start over on something I thought was final."

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