

# The Washington Post

## Topic A: Obama's Compromise on D.C.'s School Vouchers Program

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*The Post* asked education and political experts to assess the president's plan for D.C. students. Below are contributions from [Andrew J. Rotherham](#), [Dick Durbin](#), [Tom Davis](#), [Randi Weingarten](#), [Michelle Rhee](#), [Michael Bennet](#), [Lanny J. Davis](#), [Margaret Spellings](#), [Andrew J. Coulson](#), [Ed Rogers](#), [Michael J. Petrilli](#), [Anthony A. Williams](#), [Joseph E. Robert Jr.](#), [Harold Ford Jr.](#) and [Lisa Schiffren](#).

ANDREW J. ROTHERHAM

*Co-founder and publisher of Education Sector; writes the blog Eduwonk.com*

If President Obama wanted the issue to go away, he just made a mistake. His compromise proposal will breathe new life into the debate over school vouchers in Washington and nationally.

Although he did voucher supporters a favor by giving political cover for efforts to protect participating students, ardent supporters are not satisfied with an arrangement that basically terminates the program through attrition. Meanwhile, voucher foes are aghast at the prospect of the program slowly turning into a bloody shirt for school reform. They understand that every year students are enrolled in private schools through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is a year the voucher issue remains alive. Thus, the fight over what is really a marginal program in the broader landscape of American public education has become an intense battle.

The president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union, recently called the voucher program "an ongoing threat to public education in the District of Columbia" and urged Obama to oppose any effort to extend the program. That's not really the language of moderation.

The real test of Obama's political style is how vigorously the administration pursues this compromise on Capitol Hill. The president's critics say he will not cross swords with Democratic special-interest groups. Even many admirers wonder when smoothness will give way to steel on a tough question. Oddly, protecting a school voucher program is emerging as a test.

DICK DURBIN

*Democratic senator from Illinois and assistant majority leader*

President Obama's compromise on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program -- namely, allowing currently enrolled students the opportunity to graduate -- is a fair solution that I support. But an honest examination of the program's overall effectiveness is still necessary.

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When the voucher program was created in 2003, it was designed to be a five-year pilot project to give District students federally paid vouchers to attend private schools. The point of a pilot program is to establish a model that can be evaluated before it is replicated on a larger scale.

Studies by the Education Department and others have, at best, mixed findings -- modest gains by some students in a few subjects, but serious problems with the administration of the program, schools with significant health and safety issues, and teachers lacking college degrees or basic teaching credentials. Most problematic, the Education Department's recent report could not show that voucher students are performing better than their public school counterparts.

Some argue that despite these findings, the program should continue and should be replicated nationwide. But we owe it to students and taxpayers to look at the facts. Congressional hearings this summer will provide an opportunity for voucher advocates to make their case. If a fair analysis can show that voucher students are significantly outperforming their peers in public or charter schools, or that voucher schools are first-rate learning centers, it will go a long way toward winning support beyond the president's proposal.

TOM DAVIS

*Former congressman from Virginia; president of the Republican Main Street Partnership*

As the original sponsor of the voucher program, I am disappointed that congressional Democrats failed to approve its reauthorization. Initial passage of this program was tough. With the large Democratic margins in the House and Senate, the program has been a dead man walking since November.

Some of the blame lies with congressional Republicans and the previous administration -- whom I urged to push for reauthorization before the 2006 elections. Unfortunately, they didn't respond, and the 2006 elections turned both chambers of Congress over to Democratic control.

Democrats in Congress are beholden to organized labor. Labor was a powerful part of the Democrats' electoral success in 2006 and 2008 -- and the unions have made it very clear that they strongly oppose reauthorization of the voucher program.

Practically speaking, President Obama's decision to end the program, while protecting those already in it, is about the best supporters could have reasonably hoped for. I am not sure that even Obama, had he wanted to save the program, would have been able to do so in the face of opposition from unions and Democrats in Congress. The one certainty? It would have been a crime to force the D.C. children benefiting from the program out of their high-performing private schools and back into their failed public schools.

RANDI WEINGARTEN

*President, American Federation of Teachers*

President Obama's budget supports early-childhood education, rigorous K-12 education and better access to college and health-care services. Yet some have portrayed his decision to "grandfather" D.C.'s voucher students as being anti-union. The bigger decision is that the budget ends the voucher program as soon as all current students have graduated.

It's true that we have a problem with the voucher program. But our beef is with the well-funded

foundations that pressured the president to use public money for private vouchers. These foundations easily could have helped the children already participating in this program. Instead, they used these children, who are blameless, as pawns in an ideological battle.

If there is an insight here about the way Obama makes decisions, it's that he focuses on the right priorities, setting policies in his budget that improve education for the more than 50 million children who attend our public schools.

MICHELLE RHEE

### *D.C. schools chancellor*

Regardless of people's positions on vouchers, one thing is clear: The president's decision puts children first. As the public debates the merits of this program, the individuals most at risk are the 1,700 kids whose families are terrified about what their futures will hold. President Obama is firm that their education will not be hindered.

A strong leader protects children from shifts in policy that occur with every change of administration. That is exactly what happened here. Before making decisions, Obama looks at the evidence on both sides and concludes with what he thinks is in the best interest of kids. Such thoughtful consideration is what the children of this city need and deserve.

Let's bring perspective back to this contentious issue. Consider the evidence of this president's commitment to children: the significant stimulus funds he sent to schools with accountability for using the funds in ways best for students; his stance on the importance of teacher quality in advancing student achievement; the time he and the first lady have spent with students in schools and at the White House. Rather than slinging arrows over who cares for kids the most, we would do better by our children if we directed our energy toward making sure that students in every neighborhood received an education that would allow them a variety of positive choices for their futures.

MICHAEL BENNET

### *Democratic senator from Colorado; former Denver schools superintendent*

Apart from the children directly affected (who deserve our attention), the fight over vouchers, whatever you think of them as a policy, is, fundamentally, a distraction -- the kind of "here today, gone tomorrow" argument that in too many areas of public life shifts our attention from the real, hard issues we should be addressing.

In education, for example, we need, as President Obama has said, to create a new army of teachers.

The talent is all around us -- in the veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, the baby boomers who have spent their careers running successful businesses or working in manufacturing or medicine or law, and the college graduates looking to find a rewarding vocation. We need to pay them in ways that reward their success and provide incentives for them to stay in the profession. We need to train them and offer meaningful professional development. Overall, our system of hiring, compensation and training, designed deep in the last century, is utterly inadequate for 21st-century labor market realities.

The issues we should be discussing are how to attract and reward the best teachers; having states sign on to voluntary, meaningful national standards; turning our schools into centers of community and

incubators of innovation -- because they could have an impact on most children, not just a few.

LANNY J. DAVIS

***Special counsel to President Bill Clinton from 1996 to 1998***

Barack Obama strongly supports strengthening the public school system and the separation of church and state. Vouchers, mostly used for religious, sectarian schools, threaten these important principles.

But the president agrees with his education secretary -- it makes no sense "to take kids out of a school where they're happy and safe and satisfied and learning" -- which is what Democrats in Congress decided that they would do cold turkey in 2010 by not continuing to fund the program.

So what to do when two valid principles clash?

Ideologues see clear-cut choices. Conservatives would say yes, keep the program going regardless of its effect on public schools. Liberals would say kill it, regardless of the effect on the students who love their schools.

Obama says: There is a third way -- let's think of the children and let's also support public schools. We can both keep the program going until the 1,716 students already receiving vouchers graduate from high school. But from now on, no more vouchers in the future; spend the money on strengthening public schools.

Obama has just taken us out of the purely ideological approach and gotten us back into the solutions business.

MARGARET SPELLINGS

***Secretary of education from 2005 to 2009***

One of my daughters attends a private school with students who are in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. As a mother of two girls, I cannot imagine the gut-wrenching conversations happening in homes around this city when parents of current scholarship recipients heard about President Obama's compromise. His plan allows those currently receiving scholarships to continue in the program but closes this opportunity to their younger sisters and brothers.

I have met many of these families; they have been lifted by the progress they have seen their children make in this program. They don't want to go back to the D.C. schools that failed to serve them. I cannot imagine trying to explain to my daughters why one had a chance to soar and the other didn't. Like me, some people have the means or the position not to have to make such a choice. Many of them serve in public positions beholden to the unions that helped elect them, and not to the families who seek education and opportunity for every single one of their kids.

ANDREW J. COULSON

***Director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and author of the study "Markets vs. Monopolies in Education: A Global Review of the Evidence"***

President Obama's decision isn't much of a compromise. NEA President Dennis Van Roekel wrote to

congressional Democrats demanding that they kill the D.C. voucher program, and they complied. Obama has merely tried to alter the manner of destruction -- choosing attrition over summary execution.

During the campaign, Obama said that if vouchers worked he would support them. The Education Department recently revealed that students who joined the voucher program in 2004 are now more than two school years ahead of their public school peers in reading.

In his initial budget, Obama declared that when it comes to education, we cannot waste dollars on programs that are inefficient. Average tuition at the voucher schools is \$6,620, while the District is spending \$26,555 per pupil this year on K-12 education.

So contrary to his promises, the president has sacrificed a program he knows to be efficient and successful in order to appease the public school employee unions. If he will do this for the NEA, he will do anything.

America finally has an "education president," and his name is Dennis Van Roekel.

ED ROGERS

***White House staffer to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush; chairman of BGR Group***

By any measurable standard, President Obama is governing from the left. Increased spending, raising taxes, exerting government control over private business. What domestic initiative has he taken that should be considered moderate? Allowing a few students to continue with school vouchers in the District wasn't a move to the center; it was a tactical retreat to avoid more bad press. He wanted to please the union bosses, but the kids who were hurt turned out to be sympathetic on television and wouldn't go away. Just as it did with the Air Force One photo-op debacle, the White House tried to make a joke about it, but no one laughed. Tactical retreat to cover up your liberal bias or blunders does not equal moderate governance.

Obama's liberalism doesn't appear to be like that of FDR or Hubert Humphrey, and it isn't new like Clinton's. We may be in for an era of rule by the cold, hard left. No limits to spending on government bureaucracy, taxes that are punitive rather than part of an economic plan, government takeover of private business, and look out for the faux religion of extreme environmentalism that will dictate a lifestyle for the rest of us while the priestly class exempt themselves. The challenge for Republicans is that Obama sounds sensible and reassuring on television and in meetings. Is he deceitful? Clever? Sincere? No one knows, and it has Republicans muttering to themselves.

MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

***Vice president for national programs and policy at the nonpartisan Thomas B. Fordham Institute***

The typically fleet-footed Obama administration has made a series of missteps with the D.C. voucher program. First it believed that the issue was a sideshow, hardly important next to its larger efforts to reform the nation's schools through the stimulus legislation. But voucher advocates and opponents attach symbolic importance to the program, in part because it is in the nation's capital. Now the administration is bogged down in a quagmire that is attracting a lot of negative media attention.

Its second mistake was to ignore the recent federal evaluation of the program, which found it to be boosting participants' reading skills. Such strong findings are rare in rigorous social science research,

and few of the president's other pet issues (including worthy ones such as charter schools and merit pay for teachers) have similar evidence of effectiveness. Yet his team played down the findings rather than seizing a chance to live up to its lofty rhetoric about supporting programs that work.

Obama strives to be seen as a "good government" type, above petty politics and ideology. But to earn that label, he would need to admit that the evidence in support of vouchers is compelling, and that the program should thus continue indefinitely. In trying to split the baby, he shows himself to be a rather typical politician, looking for the most palatable solution rather than the one that is most just.

ANTHONY A. WILLIAMS

*Former mayor of the District*

President Obama is a visionary with an agenda of change. Education is among his top priorities. But he also strikes me as a very pragmatic leader. He understands that people want results. So you might think that a program requested by local leadership that gives low-income parents a choice to educate their children would be the kind of pragmatic innovation the president would support. Especially since independent reports show that the children who receive scholarships have higher math and reading scores, and that their parents are highly supportive. This program has a long waiting list.

Still, partisan and special-interest politics carried the day. Without new scholarships, unless Congress overrules the president's decision, the program will die. This is not an abstract argument; the consequences are very real for the families involved, and they affect the success of our children, which is vital to our economic future.

Consider a D.C. family lucky enough to have received a scholarship. Their child is doing well and happy at school. That child's younger brother or sister won't have that same opportunity or school choice. Why should President Obama, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and a few members of Congress from other cities around the country get to tell that younger sibling no? Why does the teachers unions' preference take precedence over what parents want?

I thought we wanted people working for change to move our country forward. What is needed is courage to stand up for our kids.

JOSEPH E. ROBERT JR.

*Chairman and CEO, J.E. Robert Cos. and board member of D.C. Children First*

Compromise is a wonderful feature of our system of governing. Unfortunately, President Obama's decision to curtail the D.C. scholarship program is nothing but political capitulation.

Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan know the program is working -- they wouldn't keep children in a program that's failing, would they? In fact, independent studies report on the gains children in the program have made. The students like it and so do their parents. I'm not sure why politicians think they can make good decisions for their own kids but low-income parents are somehow incapable of making the right judgments for their kids.

Beyond that hypocrisy lies a sad reality: By deciding to allow no future scholarships, Obama and Duncan have protected the two scholarship kids who go to Sidwell Friends, avoiding a public relations disaster. But for the independent schools serving the poor in our inner city, the lack of scholarships for

new students means they will eventually be forced to close.

The president and his education secretary have simply decided to capitulate to the politically powerful teachers union and the members of Congress who carry their water by effectively killing the program. They wanted peace with the union, even at the cost of the families and children who depend on scholarships. But D.C. kids deserve these Opportunity Scholarships. It is wrong for our leaders to pretend they saved a program they just, in fact, undermined. And it's immoral to take it away.

HAROLD FORD JR.

*Former House member from Tennessee; chairman of the Democratic Leadership Council*

For some in my party, education reform is a great campaign brochure -- acceptable as an issue to promote so long as it does not upset certain constituencies. That is unacceptable. America's chance to shape the future, rather than chase it, is eroded each time we reject education reforms that work, rationalize classroom mediocrity and accept abysmal results.

We can -- and must -- shape our future. The president's voucher compromise, though not ideal, affirms that he's ready to do just that.

The president has taken a first step toward reform. He and Education Secretary Arne Duncan should convene a White House summit with school superintendents, principals, teachers, governors and mayors so that proven reformers such as Geoffrey Canada of the Harlem Children's Zone charter schools, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin of the KIPP charter schools, New York schools chancellor Joel Klein, and the Gates and Broad foundations could tell them which reforms are working -- and why.

Such a summit would allow Obama to recognize and reward successful efforts and urge leaders in failing school districts to adopt best practices.

LISA SCHIFFREN

*Speechwriter to Vice President Dan Quayle; contributor to National Review Online's "The Corner" blog*

For the 1,700 D.C. students enrolled in private schools with the aid of federally financed vouchers, President Obama's decision to let them stay there through high school -- after announcing the program's cancellation -- is a blessing. For the rest of us, it is a clue about what to expect in the way of political compromises from Obama: on substance, not much.

The administration backed down because it was stuck in a public relations nightmare. Pundits showed pictures of the black children who were going to be booted from the same schools the president's daughters attend. While I'm glad it worked out for the students, it would have been amusingly ironic to see the first black president, a man who never attended an American public school himself, barring needy, talented minority children from the schoolhouse door. His staff feared that picture.

So this is a sop to sensibilities, like pardoning the ceremonial turkey. The vast majority of D.C. students remain stuck in a failing system. But Obama won't compromise either his big-government ideology or fealty to his backers, instead focusing on programs that don't threaten the teachers unions or the government monopoly on education.

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