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Attrition & subtraction

EDUCATION | D.C.'s voucher program failing under not-so-benign neglect | *Emily Belz*

WASHINGTON—In a city where public schools graduate 70 percent of students (a 20 percent increase from 2006), where students have some of the worst scores in the country, and the government spends the third-most per pupil of any state in the country, the federal government is ending one small program that has raised student reading scores and parent satisfaction in its five-year existence.



LUKE SHARRETT FOR WORLD

Over a three-year period, a Department of Education study showed that students in the Washington, D.C., voucher program moved four months ahead of their public-school counterparts in reading skills, and the lead researcher from the study, Patrick Wolf, said the program showed the "largest achievement" of any federal education experiment that has undergone similar studies.

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But the voucher program is disappearing by attrition because Congress has cut off funds for new students and the local government hasn't stepped up to provide those funds.

About 1,700 students from low-income families received scholarships to attend private schools for the 2008-2009 school year, but without new students this school year, the enrollment in the program dropped to about 1,300. Voucher advocates have little hope that Congress will renew funding for the current scholarship recipients over the next 13 years, when the last admitted student to the program will graduate from high school.

"I'm not even ready to entertain the thought that this is it," said Patricia Williams, a short, fierce Latina who whipped her cell phone out to show me the school picture of her 13-year-old son Fransoir. He receives a voucher to attend a local private school called Sacred Heart. Her youngest, Pierre, 7, got into the voucher program two years ago, right before they quit accepting new students, and she admits that she's worried the scholarships will end before he finishes his education. She has raised the boys on her own while working as a nurse.

Fransoir was in a public school before he received the scholarship to go to Sacred Heart in second grade. His mother said the teachers were excellent, but the classrooms were overcrowded and she worried about his safety. She discovered that he was hiding in a bathroom stall and "hurting himself" because he was failing academically. One day when she

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authentically christian

was riding a city bus, she noticed an ad that said, "Do you want a scholarship?" She cried. Then she called the number listed.

"When the child is OK, the mother is OK," she told me. At first the change was hard for Fransoir. "He couldn't stand that every thing was proper," she said. But as he settled in he discovered something he liked studying: dinosaurs. Grades went up. Now in eighth grade at Sacred Heart, he plays basketball and writes music. More importantly to Williams, her sons are learning about integrity and faith at the Catholic school. "I want them to pray, to know we're not here accidentally," she almost whispers. "It gives me chills when they talk because I realize they get it."

More than 8,000 families have applied for the scholarships since the program began in 2004, and it has served about 3,000 students. As the program shrinks it only serves 2 percent of students in Washington.

With the \$14 million program's dimming future, the program's administrator, a nonprofit called the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF), has warned the Department of Education that it won't be able to continue next year unless new funding is approved: "WSF simply cannot obtain the funding commitments required to serve families and fulfill school oversight responsibilities in a wind-down, declining-enrollment environment," wrote WSF president Greg Cork to the Department of Education last month.

The slow death of the Washington voucher program comes as other voucher programs have spread around the country—in Louisiana, Florida, Ohio, Wisconsin, Maine, Utah, Vermont, and Georgia—though those programs for the most part haven't taken root and remain a focus of controversy. Public education nationally is trending toward providing more and more options through charter schools as well as through tuition tax credits for families sending their children to private schools. Charter schools in Washington, like the voucher program, have a waiting list. More than 25,000 attend charter schools here, while traditional public-school enrollment has declined to about 45,000 students.

Rep. Jose Serrano, D-N.Y., who oversaw the bill to end the Washington vouchers in the House, pointed out, "If D.C. local officials would like to use their local authority to expand the program, they should do so. There is nothing stopping them." Further, according to a 2006 study by the Cato Institute, if the program were locally funded, the city would save over \$258,000. But the D.C. mayor's office has said that the recession has left local coffers empty for a program even as small as vouchers.


Local political leaders also are impediments: Vincent Gray, chairman of the D.C. council, doesn't support the program and he "sets the agenda," according to former D.C. council member and voucher supporter Kevin Chavous. D.C. congressional delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton's longstanding opposition to vouchers also hampers efforts to keep it funded—she lobbies members of Congress against increased funding. Democrats also fear going against another opponent of vouchers, President Barack Obama: "I'm frustrated particularly as an African-American that this president hasn't jumped to help us," said Virginia Walden Ford, director of D.C. Parents for School Choice.

But with the program's obvious decline, Chavous said, "Democrats are coming to me out of the closet. We've unearthed support we didn't even know we had."


Meanwhile, the vast majority of the 216 students who were accepted into the program last year—but lost their scholarships because the Department of Education cut funding to new students—now are back in public or charter schools. Chancellor Michelle Rhee has overseen a recent surge in math scores in part by closing schools, firing teachers, extending school days, and leaning heavily on charter schools and the independent environment they provide (including less influence from teachers unions). Rhee's initial support for the voucher program was tepid, but she has said more recently that while the program is not a solution to all of education's ills, it "continues to make sense" and forms part of the "choice dynamic." Testifying before a Senate committee last summer, she underlined that "the tri-sector approach"—vouchers, public, and charter schools—"needs to be maintained and continued into the future." While the majority of the liberal city council have expressed support for the opening of the program to new students, voucher advocates say they want to keep the focus trained on the federal government's role in shutting down a successful program. They also worry that if federal voucher funding disappears in Washington, Congress will begin to siphon off other streams of funding for education in the federal dollars'-dependent district—like charter schools.

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