

Voucher vote a double negative for Democrats

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On Tuesday evening, the Senate rejected an amendment to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarships program, which provides private school tuition vouchers to 1,300 poor D.C. children.

The nearly party-line vote was a serious mistake for Democrats—both educational and political.

Only three Democratic senators— Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Ben Nelson (D-Fla.), and Mark Warner (D-Va.)—in addition to Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) voted with Republicans to save the program. Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) co-sponsored the reauthorization amendment, but did not vote. A single Republican, Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine, voted with the majority.

Why do Democrats oppose school choice for poor families so strongly?

Senator Dorgan (D-N.D.) questioned the need for vouchers, arguing that they rob public schools of desperately needed funds. He also asserted that public schools are not failing. “Whose boot print is on the Moon?” he exclaimed.

That is cold comfort for D.C. public school students. Few of them will ever make it beyond the Earth’s atmosphere—roughly half don’t make it out of high school in four years. The District’s on-time graduation rate has been pegged at [just 48.8 percent](#) ^[1]. By the eighth grade, most D.C. students score below “Basic” in both mathematics and science on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Senator Dorgan’s fiscal argument rests on even shakier ground. Far from reducing D.C. public school spending, the Opportunity Scholarships were originally packaged with *an extra \$13 million* for D.C. public schools. Nor has the District’s spending been slashed to the bone. The city spent \$1.3 billion on fewer than 46,000 students last year—\$28,000 per pupil.

By comparison, average tuition at voucher-accepting schools was \$6,600. According to a Department of Education study, students attending those private schools are outperforming their public sector peers: better results at one quarter the cost. So how does killing the program enhance fiscal discipline?

A final justification offered by Sen. Dorgan for killing Opportunity Scholarships is that vouchers allow more children to flee public schools, as though public school attendance were an end in itself.

But public schooling is a *means* not an end.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure that all children have access to a good education, and are prepared for both success in private life and participation in public life. Anyone who truly cares about that ideal will pursue it by the most practical and effective means. The Opportunity Scholarships program yielded better academic results at a quarter the cost of the District-run system. And as for the civic aspects of education, the most comprehensive review of the scholarly research, published by Patrick Wolf in 2007, finds that private schools consistently outperform public schools.

None of this evidence is obscure or hidden. Yet it has been ignored by virtually all national Democratic politicians. The reasons for this neglect are hardly secret either.

In her Senate speech on Tuesday, Feinstein noted that the teachers unions adamantly oppose vouchers (private schools are mostly nonunionized) and that there has been tremendous lobbying against the D.C. program. The NEA and the AFT are consistently among the largest political donors in the nation, and they give almost exclusively to Democrats. So the political calculus for Democrats in the House and Senate, not to mention the

administration, seems elementary: do what the unions want on education, boost your prospects for re-election.

But that calculus has started to change. At the state level, Democrats are beginning to stand up to the unions. A vote to expand Florida's tax credit-funded private school choice program garnered the support of over a third of Democrats, half the black caucus, and the entire Hispanic caucus. It is perhaps not a coincidence that one of the votes for reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarships program came from Democratic Senator Nelson of Florida.

There are also signs that the Democratic base has begun to sour on the teachers unions. Davis Guggenheim, director of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and an Obama campaign donor, recently debuted his documentary *Waiting for Superman* highlighting the virtues of school choice, and faulting the unions for their obstructionism. It won the documentary audience award at the Sundance Film Festival and was promptly picked up by Paramount Pictures.

If national Democrats continue to ignore these tectonic shifts at the state level, and among the cultural vanguard of the Left, they will soon lose a key political asset: the public's perception that they are the party of education. In the short term, they're crushing the educational dreams of 1,300 poor kids. In the long term, they will be shooting their party in the heart.

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[2] Market Education: The Unknown History: **<http://www.amazon.com/Market-Education-History-Studies-Philosophy/dp/0765804964>**

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