

HOW CONGRESS CAN HELP TRIGGER REFORM IN D.C.'S SCHOOLS

Nowhere in America is there a greater need for innovative approaches to education than in the nation's capital. Amid the intense debate in Congress and around the country over education and the future of America's schools, little is being done to improve the educational system for the children of the District of Columbia. Fortunately, however, at the request of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), the Task Force on D.C. Schools and Representative Steve Gunderson (R-WI) have developed a plan that takes the first step towards giving the District's children the education they have a right to expect.

The dismal record of the District's schools is a national embarrassment. The city spends an average of almost \$9,000 per year on its more than 80,000 enrolled students. This is the third-highest spending rate of any state or equivalent jurisdiction, some \$3,000 above the average. Its student-teacher ratio (14.4 to 1) is the fourth-lowest of any state or equivalent jurisdiction. Yet SAT scores in the District rank 49th out of 51 (50 states plus D.C.), and its graduation rate is also 49th out of 51.

It is time for a drastic overhaul of the District of Columbia school system. Ideally, the pressure for this should come from within the District, but reformers have been frustrated by the fierce opposition to change, led by the school bureaucracy and the teachers union, that so far has stymied action from within the city. Congress, however, has a unique role in the District. Within the District of Columbia appropriations bill, it has an opportunity to help trigger local reform by adopting Representative Gunderson's proposal to improve educational opportunities for the District's children.

The Gunderson proposal authorizes the establishment of independent public charter schools, using existing D.C. public and private schools as well as new schools created with the help of universities in the District. It even authorizes many federal institutions within D.C., including the National Science Foundation and Smithsonian Institution, to help establish public charter schools.

The establishment of charter schools would help restructure the existing public school system, allowing innovative school principals and teachers to work with parents and academic institutions to overhaul the system. Under the Gunderson proposal, lower-income parents would have the right to choose an effective private school if they are not satisfied with their child's public school. This would hold the public schools to account.

Specifically, Representative Gunderson's proposal gives scholarships of up to \$3,000 for students whose family income is at or below the poverty level and up to \$1,500 for students whose family income is not more than 185 percent above the poverty level. These scholarships would allow low-income D.C. families to send their children to any private, independent religious or non-religious school located in the District of Columbia and the surrounding counties of Northern Virginia and Maryland. They also would cover the cost of fees and other expenses for tutoring and instructional services after school hours and the costs of transportation for a student enrolled in a District of Columbia public school, public charter school, or private school participating in the tuition scholarship program.

The Gunderson proposal establishes a special panel to develop tests to monitor the progress of the District's schools so that parents have real information on which to evaluate D.C.'s schools. This World Class Schools

Panel would be responsible for developing a core curriculum for kindergarten through 12th grade. In addition, it would encourage more private-sector involvement in the District's schools.

The Gunderson proposal does not tell D.C. residents what schools they must have. Rather it creates the conditions and incentives for change. It is still up to parents, teachers, principals, and District institutions to take advantage of this opportunity.

The plan is not without its weaknesses. For one thing, it does nothing to help the D.C. Superintendent or parents break down the suffocating bureaucracy that swallows education dollars and thwarts reform. And while a "D.C. Desk" in the Department of Education might help D.C. schools locate resources and expertise to assist reform, there is a real danger that it will become just another force blocking reform. Despite these weaknesses and its limited scope, Representative Gunderson's proposal would be the crucial first step in ending business as usual in the District's school system. It would give parents, students, and innovative educators the tools they need to force change on a fossilized system. And it would give low-income families the chance to escape those public schools that refuse to give children the education they should expect in the nation's capital.

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