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D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Study Supports Expansion

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With the 111th Congress scheduled to consider its reauthorization, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (DCOSP) may be in jeopardy. But a new evaluation highlights how the DCOSP is benefiting families, adding to the reasons why Congress and the Obama Administration should continue this successful program.

Program Background. The DCOSP was passed by Congress in January 2004. The program, which provided more than 1,700 children with scholarships of up to \$7,500 in 2008 to attend a private school of their choice, has repeatedly shown improved family satisfaction and increased parental involvement. Since 2004, approximately 7,200 children have applied for spots in the program, or about four applicants for each available scholarship.¹

The program has served as an alternative for families with children underserved by the D.C. public school system. Although the District spends far above the national per-pupil average (\$14,400), D.C. students lag well behind the academic achievement of their peers nationwide, and only slightly more than half of students graduate.²

Past Program Evaluations. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released the first results of an academic evaluation, comparing the academic achievement of students who were offered scholarships with their non-scholarship peers after 19 months of instruction. The evaluation found that students who received vouchers realized slightly higher academic achievement than students who were not awarded a voucher.³

A new academic evaluation is expected in 2009. Past qualitative evaluations have examined the impact that the program has had on participating families. Surveys and interviews of participating families reveal that parents are more satisfied with the safety and quality of their children's school after receiving a scholarship.⁴

The New Program Evaluation. In December, University of Arkansas researchers released the findings of a new evaluation entitled "Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program." The project sought to "capture the contextual nuances of what is happening in the lives of the families experiencing the Program"⁵ by conducting a qualitative assessment of the DCOSP.

- **What Families Look for in Private Schools.** Families reported a number of reasons for choosing their private schools, such as a religious or values-based environment, small class size, and school safety. After spending several years in the program, families shifted their most important criterion from safety to curriculum quality.
- **Information Gathering by Program Participants.** The report asked parents how they chose their child's private school and found that families

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sought information from a number of sources, including information from the Washington Scholarship Fund. This suggests that parents are making informed decisions about where to enroll their child in school.

- **Feelings of Inclusion.** Families were also shown to become more comfortable in the DCOSP over time. Prior to enrolling in their chosen school, many parents were concerned about the stigma associated with being a scholarship recipient. After having spent a year in the program, parents reported a “moderate level of stigmatization that ranged from feelings of discomfort at home-school meetings to teachers ‘singling out’ their child as a scholarship student.”⁶ By the end of the second year, however, families unanimously said they were comfortable in their schools, as was the case with the third and fourth years.
- **Parental Assessment of Student Progress.** Parents cited improving grades, motivation, enthusiasm, and self-esteem as indicators of academic progress. Furthermore, over time, families’ concepts of school success changed. “The high school parents initially emphasized positive school conditions such as safety, and students’ attitudes toward learning as indicators of success. As their children approached high school graduation, these parents began to shift their focus to end outcomes such as student grades, graduation, preparation for higher education,

and college plans as measures of student and Program success.”⁷

- **Parental Satisfaction.** Parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their children’s experience in the program. The survey found that reasons for parents’ higher satisfaction included changes in their children’s outlook toward learning and improved homework habits. Parents—even those that had withdrawn their children from the DCOSP—repeatedly reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. Common reasons for this higher level of satisfaction included appreciation for the ability to choose their child’s school, the success their children are having in new school environments, and the support provided by the Washington Scholarship Fund.⁸
- **Family Recommendations.** The University of Arkansas report asked for parent recommendations for improvements to the Opportunity Scholarship program. Parents recommended an independent evaluation of participating schools and increasing the amount of slots available in middle and high schools.

Families also identified “earn-out” as a potential concern.⁹ Fortunately, legislation passed by Congress in 2006 raised the eligibility requirements from 200 to 300 percent of the federal poverty line for parents already enrolled in the program.¹⁰ The result of this legislative change was that approximately 70 low-income children who

1. Dan Lips and Evan Feinberg, “Improving Education in the Nation’s Capital: Expanding School Choice,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2137, May 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2137.cfm>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Shanea Watkins, “Safer Kids, Better Test Scores: The D.C. Voucher Program Works,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1965, June 20, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm1965.cfm>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Thomas Stewart *et al.*, “Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program,” School Choice Demonstration Project, Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, January 2009, at http://www.uaedreform.org/SCDP/DC_Research/2009_Final.pdf (February 17, 2009).
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Press release, “Brownback Applauds Passage of H.R. 6111,” office of Senator Sam Brownback, Tuesday, December 12, 2006, at <http://brownback.senate.gov/pressapp/record.cfm?id=266873> (February 13, 2009).

would have been ineligible to continue in the program were allowed to remain in their private schools.

- **Summary of Findings.** The University of Arkansas study revealed that parents and students are overwhelmingly satisfied with their experiences in the DCOSP. Families feel that their children are safer, have a better attitude toward school, and are excelling academically. The greatest concern among families appears to be that their children are flourishing in the program but may not be permitted to stay due to the limited amount of slots available at the middle and high school levels. The report indicates that DCOSP parents move from the margins of their children's academic lives to the forefront. Perhaps most notably, "it appears that parent satisfaction stems more from the opportunity to make a choice for their child's education and participate in the pro-

gram, rather than from concrete academic test results or grades or other outcomes."¹¹

What Congress Should Do. Congress and the Obama Administration should support the reauthorization and expansion of the DCOSP. Policymakers should learn from the past five years of experience and take steps to improve the program and address parents' concerns. While several thousand children have been the fortunate recipients of an Opportunity Scholarship, thousands more languish in a school system failing to serve their academic and personal safety needs. Members of Congress should give more children the opportunity to attend a school of their parents' choice by expanding the program to offer more scholarships.

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11. Stewart *et al.*, "Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program."