

BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Answering Objections to School Vouchers in D.C.

President Clinton has vetoed a federally funded voucher bill that would have given about 2,000 scholarships of up to \$3,200 each to children from low-income families in the District of Columbia's troubled public school system.

The vetoed bill, called the D.C. Student Opportunity Scholarship Act, would have enabled students to transfer to other public or private schools in the area. It would also have provided another 2,000 public school students from low-income families with \$500 each for after-school tutoring assistance.

The State of District Schools. Per pupil spending in Washington's public schools is among the highest in the nation — \$8,290 in the 1994-95 school year compared to a nationwide average of \$5,528, according to the National Center for Education Statistics [see Figure I]. Yet student performance is among the worst.

- Average scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress standardized tests are the lowest of any U.S. school system.
- Seventy-eight percent of fourth graders tested below basic proficiency in reading in 1994, and 80 percent of eighth graders tested below basic proficiency in math in 1996 [see Figure II].
- Forty percent of high school students drop out.
- The University of the District of Columbia reports that 85 percent of the district's public school graduates who enter college need remedial education, averaging two years, before they can begin course work toward a degree.

The problems go beyond academics. Both students and teachers are subjected to levels of violence twice the

national average, according to a 1996 report by the National Education Goals Panel.

A control board created by Congress and the president in 1995 took over the city's finances and also governs its schools. There have been some improvements to the system, but progress is snail-paced and parents are seeking help. One source of help has been the Washington Scholarship Fund, which provides privately funded vouchers paying up to half the private school tuition of children from low-income families. The fund, which provided 460 scholarships in the 1997-98 school year, added another 1,000 elementary school scholarships for the 1998-99 school year. It received applications from 7,573 students

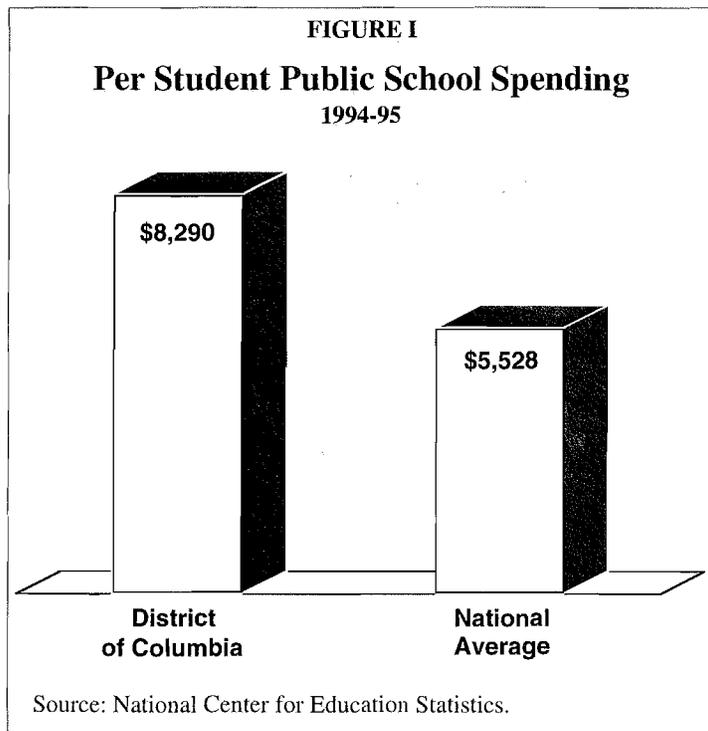
— about one of every six eligible children — even though the families have to pay half the tuition themselves.

Despite the condition of District schools and the desire of parents for school choice, the Clinton administration, teachers' unions and others have attacked the concept of using tax-funded vouchers.

Objection: Vouchers Would Harm the Role of Public Schools as Unifying Institutions in a Democratic Society. Washington's public schools are already segregated both racially and economically. Only 4 percent of the student

body is white. Thousands of families, both black and white, have already exercised school choice either by enrolling their children in private schools or by moving to the suburbs. Of the 77,000 students remaining, 72 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches because of their families' low incomes.

Objection: Vouchers Would Leave Many Students Behind. This is one of the arguments made by U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley and such voucher opponents as the National PTA and People for the American Way. Said Riley, "If a school is failing, the



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solution isn't to give 50 scholarships to 50 children and leave 500 behind, but to fix the problem, fix the whole school." Sponsors of the legislation reply that this is the "if the Titanic doesn't have enough lifeboats for everybody, nobody should use one" argument.

Objection: The Voucher Money Should Be Spent on the Public Schools. Sandra Feldman, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said, "There are programs with proven track records that enable children to flourish, and they exist in hundreds of public schools already. ...For example, Success for All, an intensive program for elementary students, focuses on getting it right from the start." However, the deterioration of public schools in the district has occurred while it was spending more per student than all but a handful of other school districts in the nation. Furthermore, funds for the voucher bill would not come out of the district's school budget and, with 2,000 fewer students in the schools, per student spending in public schools actually would increase under the bill.

Objection: Private School Tuitions Are So High That the Vouchers Won't Help. The tuition at 88 private schools is less than \$4,000, and at 60 of those it is less than \$3,200. The maximum voucher from the private Washington Scholarship Fund is only \$1,700, but students from low-income families are using them at more than 70 schools.

Objection: Vouchers for Religious Schools are Unconstitutional. Should President Clinton's veto be overridden, opponents of tax-funded vouchers have pledged to take the constitutionality issue to the courts. However, Rep. Dick Armey (R-Texas), one of the main sponsors of the voucher bill, says it meets requirements set forward in other cases by the Supreme Court. Specifically, parents, not government, choose where to use the vouchers; the voucher program does not involve the government in school affairs; and because the amount of the scholarship is equal to or less than the cost of tuition, the program does not create a financial incentive to

choose private schools. This approach is similar to that of the GI Bill, under which veterans used government money to attend both public and private colleges and universities, and even theological seminaries.

Objection: Voters in the District Oppose Vouchers. Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia delegate in Congress, has said, "I think I can say with confidence that the people I represent would deeply resent the imposition of vouchers." However, a recent poll in the District found 44 percent favoring vouchers and only 31 percent against. Support among blacks was

higher, with 48 percent favoring vouchers and 29 percent against.

Widening the Use of Vouchers. Both proponents and opponents of tax-funded vouchers recognize that a victory for vouchers in the District of Columbia would be an incentive for their spread elsewhere in the country. The National PTA's talking points opposing the bill say if vouchers are approved, it "will set a new precedent for education policy, giving lawmakers justification to expand the federal education voucher program to other districts throughout the country."

Currently, 92 percent of all money spent nationally on elementary and secondary education goes to public schools. The Clinton administration, the teachers' unions and their supporters are determined to maintain the public school monopoly on elementary and secondary education. But when Secretary Riley called a news conference last year for the specific purpose of making the case against tax-funded vouchers, *The Washington Post* noted that national polls show growing support for vouchers among parents, particularly minorities, and said, "To voucher supporters, the timing and tenor of Riley's comments yesterday suggested that the administration senses public sentiment changing."

This Brief Analysis was prepared by NCPA Senior Scholar Dorman E. Cordell.

