

UC Request to put Materials Into the Record

Mr. Chairman, I ask unanimous consent to insert into the record a February 16 article from CQ Today, entitled “D.C. Mayor Argues Against Republican Plan to Reinstate School Voucher Program.”

The article discusses how the supporters of this bill basically threatened DC Mayor Vincent Gray and told him that if he doesn’t accept vouchers, he might not get funding for regular public schools and public charter schools.

The article also makes very clear Mayor Gray’s position that the voucher money would be better spent on public schools and public charter schools.

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D.C. Mayor Argues Against Republican Plan to Reinstate School Voucher Program

By Lauren Smith, CQ Staff

House Republican appropriators are proposing cuts in education programs, but they included \$15.5 million in their seven-month spending plan to reinstate a voucher program that allows low-income District of Columbia public school students to attend private and parochial schools.

The voucher program is a longtime priority of Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio. And when D.C. Mayor Vincent C. Gray reiterated his opposition to the program on Wednesday, Senate backers told him he risked losing other school funding.

“I think the extra funds that come to D.C. . . . will be in serious jeopardy if the opportunity funding is not in this three-part program” of public and charter schools, and vouchers, said Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

If the program were expanded as Lieberman and Boehner propose (S 206, HR 471), new funding for the vouchers would also mean additional funding for the public schools and charter schools under the “three-sector funding approach” instituted during the George W. Bush administration.

But Gray testified that funding for the program, which provides public funds to enable some low-income students to attend private and parochial schools, would be better spent improving the quality of public education, especially given the existing charter school options.

“My emphasis was, and continues to be, on building a solid public education system consisting of traditional public schools and charters,” he said.

Congress authorized vouchers for 1,000 D.C. students in 2004 as a five-year pilot program, but funding for new students was halted by the Obama administration.

Supporters say vouchers help underprivileged children escape troubled schools to get a quality education. Critics, including many Democratic lawmakers, argue that public funds should not be used to support private schools. They also contend that students receiving vouchers do not necessarily perform better than their public school counterparts.

Lieberman and Boehner, longtime supporters of vouchers, see the DC program as essential to overhauling public schools. Their bill would increase the \$7,500 maximum award to \$8,000 for students in kindergarten through 8th grade, and to \$12,000 for high school students. The measure also would provide additional money for D.C. public schools.

The effort to restore the voucher program has also sparked opposition from groups that argue that since most students use vouchers to attend parochial schools, taxpayer money is effectively being funneled to religious organizations.

“The program weakens the separation of church and state,” said Michael Keegan, president of the People for the American Way, a civil rights group. “It is contrary to basic America values for the government to use taxpayer funds to empower churches to expand religious outreach.”

Boehner tried unsuccessfully to reauthorize the voucher program in the Democratic-controlled 111th Congress, but his chances of moving legislation through the House are now much improved.

“Whenever Speaker Boehner is at the table, we have a strong advocate,” Lieberman said. “I can’t state how deeply he feels about the program. It may very well be the only piece of legislation he puts his name on this Congress.”

Lieberman faces a more difficult task in the Democratic-controlled Senate. He said he will try to attach the bill to unrelated legislation as an amendment. He tried that twice unsuccessfully in the last Congress, attracting only a few Democratic supporters, including Dianne Feinstein of California, Bill Nelson of Florida and Mark Warner of Virginia.

While the spending package being debated on the House floor would provide new funding for vouchers, it would cut other federal education programs by almost \$10.6 billion, or 15.4 percent, from current levels.

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