

Why Do Religious Leaders and Organizations Oppose DC Vouchers?

Religious Education Is Important, But Government Funding is Inappropriate

All American religious groups value religious education, and recognize that parochial schools can serve a valuable role for many children. However, because most parochial schools either cannot or do not wish to separate the religious components of the education they offer from the academic programs, these schools must be funded by voluntary contributions, not taxation. Although a narrow majority of the US Supreme Court has upheld vouchers under certain circumstances, it did not rule that they were *per se* constitutional, as one of the most dearly held principles of religious liberty is that government should not compel any citizen to furnish funds in support of a religion with which he or she disagrees, or even a religion with which he or she does agree.¹ The DC voucher program, however, violates that central tenet: it uses taxpayer money to fund primarily religious education. Indeed, approximately 82% of the students participating in the program attend religious schools.² Parents certainly may choose such an education for their children, but no taxpayer should be required to pay for another's religious education.

DC Vouchers Weaken Religious Schools By Making Them Dependent on Government Funds.

Religious organizations and schools that rely on voluntary participation and contributions are likely to flourish. Government funds, however, threaten to shift religious schools' monetary source from the followers of their religion to the government treasury. And, with that shift, they also risk losing their religious identity, teachings, and message. To remain healthy, a religious school should follow the dictates of its adherents rather than the dictates of a government uninterested in its religious mission. To do this, they must reject government funding.

DC Vouchers Threaten the Autonomy of Religious Schools.

Private religious schools exist to provide religious education and, when such education is funded with private tuition, the government should have no role in directing that religious education. When private religious schools accept federal funds, however, they should adhere to government rules. Thus, in accepting government funds, they run the risk of being mired in political debates, battles over regulation and accountability, and disruptive inquiries into their school standards and curricula. Control over these religious institutions would not be beneficial for either religious institutions or the government.

DC Vouchers Violate Religious Conscience By Permitting Government Funded Discrimination.

Under the DC voucher program, private religious voucher schools are permitted to discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring and on the basis of gender in admission.³ Allowing government money to flow to these institutions without holding them to non-discrimination laws is a clear violation of one of the central principles of our constitutional order: "the Constitution does not permit the State to aid discrimination."⁴ When funding any school, whether public or private, the government should not surrender the longstanding principle of equal treatment for all regardless of religion. Taxpayer money should not fund programs that harm the fundamental civil rights of students and teachers.

DC Vouchers Undermine the Public Schools.

Many religious denominations believe that access to a high-quality education is a fundamental right and an issue of social justice. Open and non-discriminatory in their acceptance of all students, American public schools are the unifying factor among the diverse range of ethnic and religious communities in our society. Vouchers undermine this vital function, however, by placing the "best and the brightest" into private schools, leaving the so-called "difficult" students behind in the public schools. The DC voucher program also diverts desperately needed resources away from the public school system to fund the education of the few voucher students. The government would better serve our children by making the public schools safer, stronger, and more accountable.

¹ Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, 1789.

² U.S. Dep't of Education, *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts After Three Years*, at 14-16 (April 2009) (In accordance with the Report, participation "in the program" includes all students offered a voucher, regardless of whether they used the voucher.).

³ Compare *Ohio Rev. Code § 3313.976 (A)(6) with P.L. 108-199 Stat. 3 (2004)*; see also *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris*, 536 U.S. 639 (2002).

⁴ *Norwood v. Harrison*, 413 U.S. 455, 465-66 (1973).