

## Opinion Opinion: Shutting a Door of Opportunity in D.C. Coming Soon: New Commenting Experience

(Jan. 18) Back in 1947, Martin Luther King Jr., wrote in the Morehouse College campus newspaper, *The Maroon Tiger*, about his vision of a quality education. “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically,” he wrote. “Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education.”

But in the nation’s capital, that vision is far from being realized. And one of the most promising education reform efforts enacted in the city is now being allowed to die a slow death.

Washington, D.C, is a city with enormous educational problems. Two-thirds of the city’s public schools failed to meet federal standards of learning last year, and less than half the students who took the latest D.C. Comprehensive Assessment System exams were even deemed proficient. More than one in ten D.C. students report having been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.

Worse still, black and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age, on average, according to a McKinsey & Company’s report on racial and ethnic achievement gaps released last spring.

In 2003 a Republican-led Congress

passed the first federally funded private school voucher program. Since 2004, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has provided more than 3,000 scholarships of up to \$7,500 for students to attend private schools of their choice.

While school vouchers have traditionally been supported by Republicans and opposed by Democrats, the OSP has been gaining the support of local Democrats who have watched the program help children succeed.

Indeed, the program’s results are encouraging. Last spring, a congressionally mandated Department of Education study found that students participating in the D.C. OSP made statistically significant gains in reading that amounted to 3.7 months of additional schooling – evidence that the program was doing more than any other program the department was evaluating in helping to close the racial learning gap.

Many of D.C.’s leaders support the program. Last September Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee testified that it would take at least five more years to improve the city’s public schools to the point where she could look every parent in the eye and offer “every single one of them a spot in a ... high-performing

school.” Until that day comes, Rhee said, she believed D.C. families needed to have the option to use Opportunity Scholarships.

Rhee is joined in her opinion by D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty, former Mayor Anthony Williams, the majority of the D.C. City Council, and an overwhelming majority of D.C.’s residents. A July 2009 poll of registered voters by Braun Research, Inc., showed that 74 percent somewhat or strongly favored the voucher program, a figure that rose to 82 percent for parents of school-age children.

In an editorial supporting the voucher program, the Washington Post said that “political ideology and partisan gamesmanship should not be allowed to blow apart the educational hopes of hundreds of D.C. children.”

Nevertheless, congressional Democratic leaders, at the behest of the teachers’ unions and with the White House’s blessing, voted last year to cut off the programs’ funding. The White House later announced it would allow current students to remain in the program, but no new students could apply. This doomed the D.C. OSP to wither on the vine.

Last May, a predominately African-American crowd of parents and schoolchildren gathered at D.C.’s Freedom Plaza to call on Congress and President Obama to reauthorize the program that is providing an escape from crime, poverty and despair.

Supporters want President Obama and members of Congress who oppose vouchers to know how essential the D.C. OSP is. Many of them continue to believe that once President Obama, who attended a private school on a scholarship and whose daughters attend the elite Sidwell Friends School, hears their stories, he will decide to fight for the program. They believe that poor children, and not just D.C.’s wealthy students, should be allowed to benefit from educational choice.

As Dr. King passionately declared in his historic 1963 speech, “Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children.”

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