

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

"Growing Bipartisan Support for School Choice in D.C."

Dear Colleague:

Attached for your attention is an op-ed from Sen. Diane Feinstein expressing support for school choice in the District of Columbia. Even those lawmakers who have traditionally opposed school choice are acknowledging that parents and families in under-performing D.C. schools deserve the chance to choose from a wider pool.

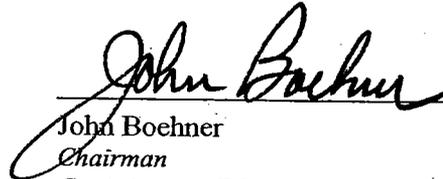
The D.C. Parental Choice Incentive Act, introduced by Government Reform Chair Thomas Davis (R-VA) and Education and the Workforce Chairman John Boehner (R-OH), would give parents and students the right to choose a school that meets their educational needs, by offering up to \$7,500 in scholarship funds for children to attend a private elementary or high school in Washington, D.C. These scholarships will be drawn entirely from new funds, ensuring that no money is drained from the public school system. Furthermore, research has shown that the competition introduced by school choice improves the overall academic atmosphere for the parents, teachers and students who continue to work to improve the existing public school system.

We urge you to join us, Senator Dianne Feinstein, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams, and leaders across the ideological spectrum in supporting increased educational options for the children and parents of Washington, D.C.

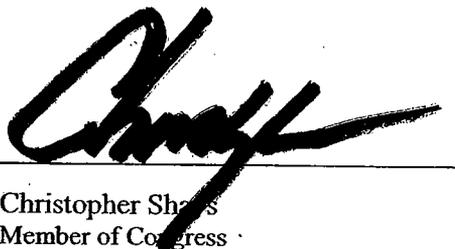
Sincerely,



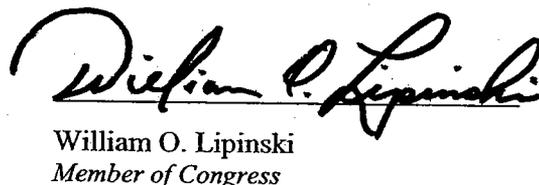
Tom Davis
Chairman
Committee on Government Reform



John Boehner
Chairman
Committee on Education & the Workforce



Christopher Shays
Member of Congress



William O. Lipinski
Member of Congress

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Dianne Feinstein

Let D.C. Try Vouchers

Mayor Anthony Williams has proposed a five-year pilot program that would offer low-income parents a choice in where they send their children to school in the District. This proposal has the support of the president of the school board and thousands of District parents.

But because of the unique relationship between the District and the federal government, members of Congress also have a say in whether such a pilot program will be funded and implemented. As a former mayor and a current member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I am inclined to support Williams's effort to experiment with this program. I believe that education is a local issue and that if the mayor wants this program, it should be given the chance to work.

The program would provide scholarships up to \$7,500 to pay for tuition, fees and transportation to any private school in the District. These scholarships would go to children whose parents earn less than 185 percent of the poverty level (\$34,040 for a family of four), and priority would be given to students in the worst schools. My understanding is that a lottery would determine admission when there are more youngsters applying to a school than spaces available.

This program is part of a larger effort to dramatically improve the District's education system, including a \$13 million effort to improve student achievement and teaching at public schools and a \$13 million grant program to renovate the District's charter-school program.

Before I vote to fund these efforts, however, I want to be clear that the proposal passes constitutional muster, particularly as it relates to the separation of church and state. I also want to know that the District will have in place a fair method of acceptance for students and that there is full accountability and sufficient oversight. I have also asked the mayor to provide me in writing his plans for administering this program.

I have never before supported a voucher program. For 30 years, I have advocated strongly for our public schools, because I believe that they are the cornerstone of our education system. In my view, we must continue to do everything we can to strengthen and improve our nation's public schools.

But as a former mayor, I also believe that local leaders should have the opportunity to experiment with programs that they believe are right for their area. This is the case in San Francisco. This is the case in Wichita. And I believe it should be the case in the District as well.

We all know D.C. public schools need improvement. According to the most recent census, the District spends \$10,852 per student annually—the third highest level of per-pupil spending in the nation—yet test scores lag far behind. In the most recent math and reading assessments administered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress:

- Seventy-six percent of D.C. fourth-graders performed below grade level in math, and only 10 percent read proficiently.
- Seventy-seven percent of eighth-graders performed below grade level in math, and only 12 percent were proficient in reading.

Based on the substantial amount of money pumped into the schools and the resultant test scores, I do not believe that money alone is going to solve the problem. This is why I believe the District should be allowed to try this pilot—particularly for the sake of its low-income students.

Ultimately this issue is not about ideology or political correctness. It is about providing a new opportunity for good education, which is the key to success. Unless a youngster has learned the fundamentals of education, he or she will find it extremely difficult when older to find work in the competitive marketplace.

If supporting the mayor's proposal will help us to better understand what works and what doesn't in terms of educating our youth, then I believe Williams should be allowed to undertake this experiment.

The writer is a Democratic senator from California.