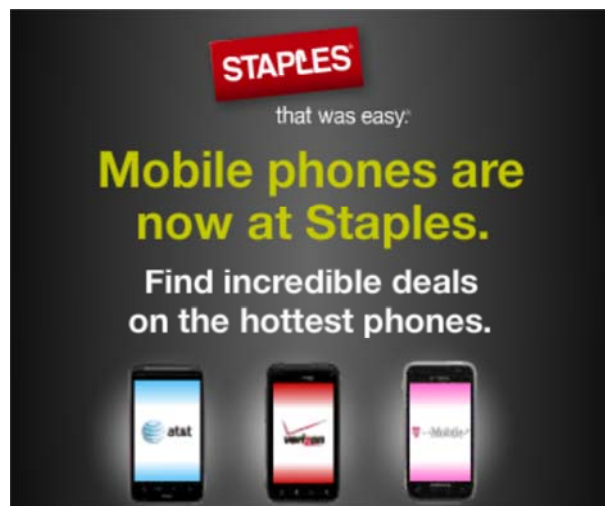


# The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)



## House Speaker Boehner promotes funding for D.C. school choice program

By [Ben Pershing](#) and [Paul Kane](#), Published: March 15, 2011

In these dire fiscal times, when even the sacred programs are no longer sacred, Republican leaders have still been able to identify a few that they think deserve more money.

Security for congressmen is slated for a boost, after the Tucson shootings. Aid to Israel would grow. Veterans would get more money for their health care.

And then there's a little-known program, which gives money to disadvantaged District students to attend private schools, that would get an additional \$2.3 million — thanks largely to one powerful patron, House Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) .

In his opening gambit as the House's top leader, Boehner has put his name and new-found clout behind a pair of efforts to give poor students a chance to attend private schools and, in the process, boost the city's struggling Catholic schools.

In addition to the extra \$2.3 million in the House-passed spending bill for 2011, Boehner has also submitted a bill that would authorize an additional \$20 million per year over the next five years. That bill, the only one that bears Boehner's name this year, was approved by a House committee last week.

The speaker's actions renew a fight he lost two years ago, when opponents killed a voucher program over concerns that it robbed resources from public schools. On Monday, after [President Obama](#) renewed

his push for [education reform](#) at an Arlington County middle school, House Republicans linked the president's success on his goals to his willingness to embrace Boehner's.

City leaders remain divided on the issue, and some resent the speaker's efforts, saying they are just the latest unwanted example of Republican lawmakers using the District as a testing ground for their pet policy experiments.

At a House hearing this month, Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton said that if Republicans were really concerned about improving education in the District they would devote more funding to public alternatives, such as charter schools.

"The inescapable conclusion is that the Republicans believe they can indulge their personal and ideological preferences with impunity here in the District," Norton said.

Congressional Democrats and D.C. officials have long accused Republicans on the Hill of imposing their own agendas on the District. In 1998, for instance, District residents voted to allow medical marijuana use, but congressional Republicans quickly put a stop to it. City officials were finally able to go forward with the idea a dozen years later, after Democrats had taken control of Congress.

The GOP also forbade the District from using its own money to run needle-exchange programs for drug addicts and provide abortions for low-income women. Those prohibitions were lifted by Democrats in 2009, but House Republicans are trying to reinstate the bans.

Boehner argues that his plan would create opportunities, rather than restrictions, for city residents. He wants local students to have the same chance he did: to follow a Catholic school path that he credits with helping him rise from the working-class suburbs of Cincinnati to the most powerful man in Congress.

"I just think it's horrendous that you've got one of the worst school districts in the country right here in the District of Columbia," Boehner said in a late January interview in his Capitol office, adding: "We've cut a lot of money out of the budget over the last month. We've got a lot more we're going to cut. But I think we can afford to do this."

Boehner's closest allies on the Hill said the issue will serve as an early test of his relationship with the Obama White House.

"This is very, very important to him," said [Rep. John Kline](#) (R-Minn.). "So the White House would be wise to take that under consideration."

Boehner said that Obama's willingness to compromise on the D.C. measure would foster goodwill, and perhaps smooth the path for Obama's ambitious school reform agenda, which includes revising the No Child Left Behind law.

"Of course, it would," Boehner said. "It's human nature. He's got things that are important to him; I've got things that are important to me."

Before he became speaker, Boehner, 61, was a regular at Catholic schools in the District, visiting more than a dozen and serving several times as a "mystery reader" in classrooms.

"It's just Boehner and the kids," said Elizabeth Ross, director of development for the Consortium of

Catholic Academies, who was present for the visits.

At January's State of the Union address, Boehner devoted his entire suite in the gallery above the House floor to students, parents and teachers from District Catholic schools. The next day, he joined Sen. [Joseph I. Lieberman](#) (I-Conn.) to introduce their bill renewing the voucher program.

Students who were already getting scholarships two years ago continue to receive money, and the program has benefited about 3,000 students over the past seven years, giving them up to \$7,500 a year.

Boehner "has been the one person that we could always depend on," said Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of D.C. Parents for School Choice, who was a guest at the State of the Union.

While his legislative work on school choice traces back 25 years to his tenure in the Ohio state House of Representative, his first exposure was more personal.

When Boehner attended [Archbishop Moeller High School](#) in Cincinnati, his parents paid half the tuition and the local Catholic parish paid the other half.

The second oldest of 12 children, Boehner said he paid for several of his younger brothers to attend Moeller — and that experience taught him a lesson he later incorporated into his thinking about school policy.

"Competition makes everyone better," Boehner said. "One of the problems with education in America is that there's not enough competition in the K through 12 arena."

Aside from working to provide vouchers for students, Boehner has also tried to help out some of the District's Catholic schools. Working with a fellow Catholic, Sen. [Edward M. Kennedy](#) (D-Mass.), and, after Kennedy's death, with Lieberman and former D.C. mayor Anthony A. Williams (D), Boehner has hosted fundraising dinners for the schools.

The dinners have raised more than \$6 million since 2003 — not enough to prevent some Catholic schools from closing and reopening as public charter schools.

Boehner's increased clout has meant larger corporate donations, something that critics contend is an effort by wealthy special interests to gain more favor with the speaker.

In 2009, when Boehner was minority leader, the dinner raised \$72,000 from big corporate foundations. In October, on the verge of the GOP sweep that made Boehner the leader of the House, nearly \$200,000 came in from corporations for the speaker in waiting's favorite charity.

"The speaker makes decisions about public policy based entirely on what he believes is best for his constituents and the future of the United States," Steel, Boehner's spokesman, said.

Nathan Saunders, president of the [Washington Teachers' Union](#), said that even though the federal government is paying for the scholarships now, they will inevitably become a burden on the District budget.

"Eventually it will become an unfunded mandate," Saunders said. "It will raise expectations among individuals that will not come to fruition."

The scholarship program has long divided local leaders and continues to do so. Mayor [Vincent C. Gray](#) (D) opposes its continuation, as does Norton. But City Council Chairman Kwame R. Brown (D) supports it, as do former mayors Williams and Marion Barry (D).

Critics of the program say that studies have not shown much improvement in the performance of scholarship recipients versus public school students, although the overall record is mixed.

A “final report” on the program issued in June 2010 by the [U.S. Education Department](#) found “no conclusive evidence” that it raised test scores. But it also found that the scholarships “significantly improved students’ chances of graduating from high school” and that parents were largely satisfied with the program.

Saunders noted that the amount of money the opportunity scholarships provide — as much as \$8,000 annually for elementary school students and \$12,000 for high school, in the new bill — might be enough to pay tuition at Boehner’s beloved parochial schools, but not at the city’s elite private schools.

Saunders said he had no problem with Boehner taking an interest in D.C. schools. But instead of focusing on vouchers and a relatively small percentage of students, the union chief said, “I would love to see him throw all of his energy into the concept that a rising tide lifts all boats. Throw the money at the bottom . . . increasing the quality of education for all children.”

*Staff writer T.W. Farnam contributed to this story.*

### **Sponsored Links**

#### **1.01% APY- Free Checking**

5X the National Average Guaranteed for 1 Year plus Free ATMs. No Fees.  
[www.capitalone.com](http://www.capitalone.com)

#### **#1 Stock Pick: EMBA**

#1 Cloud-based Tech Stock to own. Get in early now. Read more today  
[www.GreenGainers.com/EMBA](http://www.GreenGainers.com/EMBA)

#### **The Next Internet Boom**

Stock Investment with 1,000% Potential Gains.  
[www.smauthority.com](http://www.smauthority.com)

[Buy a link here](#)

© The Washington Post Company