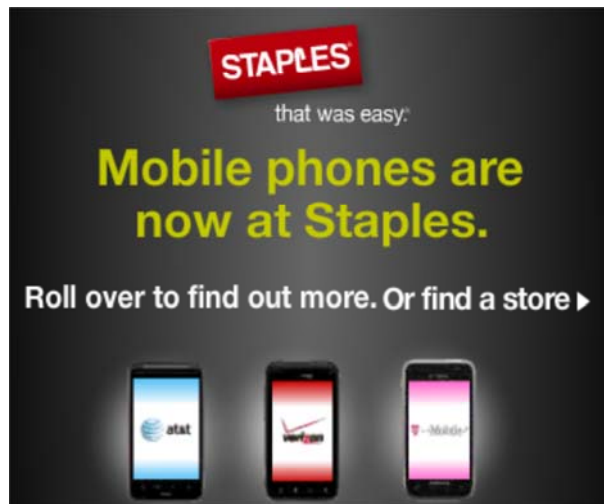


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School vouchers

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AN EFFORT IS being launched in Congress, aided by the considerable clout of House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio), to revive the District's unique program of [federally funded private school vouchers](#). No sooner was it announced than Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) attacked it as an [assault on D.C. home rule](#). Others with opposing views called it a test of the Obama administration's promise to work across party lines for the good of the country. Both claims are unfair burdens for a program that should be judged by the only criterion that matters: whether it helps children.

The [D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program](#), created in 2004 to give students from low-income families the choice and ability to attend private schools, fell victim to ideology when the Democrats who controlled Congress siphoned off support, eventually refusing to reauthorize it. About 1,000 students in the program were allowed to continue, but the program stopped enrolling new students after 2008.

Particularly galling was U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan's decision in March 2009 to [rescind 216 scholarships](#) that had been promised. Never mind that rigorous research showed encouraging progress in student achievement or that parents were overwhelmingly satisfied. Far more persuasive, it seemed, was opposition from teachers unions.

The bill unveiled Wednesday by Mr. Boehner and Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (I-Conn.) is backed by a bipartisan group of prominent co-sponsors in both chambers. It would reauthorize the program for five years, increasing the annual value of scholarships from \$7,500 to \$8,000 for elementary and middle school students and \$12,000 for high school students. The measure, in keeping with the legislation that created the program, provides for matching funding to the city's traditional and charter public schools;

each sector would get \$20 million of the \$60 million authorized. This approach ensures that aid for vouchers doesn't come at the expense of public schools.

Mr. Gray, then chairman of the D.C. Council, said as much when he and then-Mayor Adrian M. Fenty appeared before a House Appropriations subcommittee in 2008 to testify in support of continued federal funding for vouchers. That he has now staked out a position of opposition to the program is as perplexing as it is disappointing. And it's in contrast to the views of many of his former colleagues on the council, including, it appears, new Chairman Kwame R. Brown (D).

Yes, a flourishing range of charter schools offers more choices than in years past. Yes, the reform started by Mr. Fenty and former Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee is starting to take hold. Yet too many parents in the District still have little choice but to send their sons and daughters to failing schools. If Congress is willing to give them an alternative, at no cost - in fact, at great benefit - to traditional and charter schools, what's the argument against? We'd like to hear Mr. Gray's explanation to those parents.

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