

## Voucher Program Gets Final Approval D.C. Schoolchildren to Receive \$14M Annually in Tuition Grants

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The Senate gave final approval to the nation's first federally funded school voucher program today, ending nine years of acrimonious debate in Congress and sending \$14 million a year in private school tuition grants to District of Columbia schoolchildren beginning this fall.

The vote was an election-year victory for President Bush and his allies, who have championed a high-profile "education choice" experiment in the nation's capital. The President is expected to sign the measure shortly.

It was a major defeat for opponents of vouchers in the District and elsewhere. They argue that vouchers siphon funds from public schools at a time when previously pledged federal education reforms are going underfunded.

Some civil liberties groups also argue that because the vouchers can be used for church-affiliated schools, the programs violate constitutional separation of church and state. A court challenge is considered likely.

The program was included in a \$328 billion catchall spending measure that cleared the chamber after minority Democrats abandoned filibuster tactics against unrelated measures that delayed passage nearly four months into the federal fiscal year. The vote to end debate was 61 to 32, and the bill was approved 65 to 28.

The legislation permits Secretary of Education Roderick R. Paige to launch a five-year pilot program designed in consultation with Washington Mayor Anthony A. Williams (D) to provide annual, taxpayer-funded grants of up to \$7,500 a year for at least 1,600 District schoolchildren to attend

private and parochial schools beginning this fall.

"Opportunity scholarships" would be limited to children in families earning up to 185 percent of the poverty level -- about \$36,000 for a family of four -- with priority going to children attending low-performing public schools.

Williams, to the consternation of critics in the District, was a supporter of the voucher program.

The victory revives a national school voucher movement that was left moribund after landslide defeats in voter referenda in 2000 in California and Michigan and follows a Supreme Court decision that upheld their constitutionality 19 months ago.

The program also gives private educators and school choice advocates unprecedented access to reform the District's long troubled public schools at a time when the 65,000-student system is in turmoil.

Besides implementing the voucher program in coming months, Williams and District school officials will be working to name the system's fifth superintendent in eight years, overhaul a hybrid (elected and appointed) board governance system for the second time in four years and crack down on a chronically bloated \$900 million budget.

They are also attempting to raise some of the nation's lowest student test scores and mend crumbling schools.