

Kids or clunkers?

WHERE WOULD YOU WANT YOUR TAX DOLLARS TO GO: buying clunker cars or making sure a child gets a good education? We vote with education. Unfortunately, some in Congress don't seem to agree. They recently voted to end vouchers that give low-income kids the opportunity for a good education, then turned around a few weeks later and approved spending millions of tax dollars on vouchers to buy aging gas guzzlers. While we are all for better gas mileage, it is hard to understand how anyone could vote for clunker cars over kids.

And, with Congress killing the successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, where will those kids go? Back into failing public schools. The *Washington Post* recently reported that 90 of 123 D.C. public schools "are under some form of federal notice to improve" and that just 8 percent of eighth graders in the D.C. public schools are reading at an eighth grade level. (Contrast this with the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which is achieving a "statistically significant positive impact on reading test scores.")

Even Michelle Rhee, the chancellor for the District of Columbia Public Schools, and a champion of educational reform, recently admitted to the *Post*, "the reality in Washington, D.C., is that we continue to fail the majority of kids who are put in our care every day."

IS THAT WHAT THESE KIDS DESERVE? We support efforts to improve the public schools. Every child deserves an excellent education, whether it is in a parochial, private or public school. But, as Opportunity Scholar Ronald Holassie recently testified during a Senate hearing, "at the present time the public schools are not at the stage where they should be academically. They didn't get bad overnight and they won't get better overnight."

Not only that, but the demise of the Opportunity Scholarship program means a loss of funds for education in the District, which will make rebuilding the public schools that much harder. The Opportunity Scholarship Program doesn't cost D.C. residents a dime. Without it, D.C. residents may be looking at a loss of \$54 million in federal education funds (the scholarships were part of a three-sector approach that also brought federal funds for public and charter schools) plus millions more to pay for kids pushed out of their non-public schools and back into failing public schools.

That would mean a significant additional burden for city taxpayers at a time when chief financial officer Natwar Gandhi is projecting a \$340 million shortfall over the next two

years. This, after struggling to close an \$800 million gap this year.

Considering the high stakes for the kids and fiscal disaster the loss of the program will mean for the city, why haven't more local leaders stepped forward?

Some have. D.C. Councilmember Harry Thomas, Jr. spoke at a D.C. school choice rally this spring and he was the keynote speaker at a ceremony celebrating the success of eighth and twelfth grade Opportunity Scholarship students. Michelle Rhee is on record, saying, "I don't think vouchers are going to solve all the ills of public education, but parents who are zoned to schools that are failing kids should have options to do better by their kids."

YET, MORE IS NEEDED. Sure, Mayor Adrian Fenty did say he would favor an appropriations amendment that would provide funding for siblings of current opportunity scholars. That's money that would keep families together and ease the concerns of parents who can't imagine sending their other children to D.C. public schools after tasting the sweet success of OSP.

It's a step, but it will take a lot more than that to keep the hope alive for the kids and the funding in place that the city simply can't afford to lose. Today's children need heroes and advocates, not just another amendment to make a bitter pill of lost educational opportunity go down a little better.

The kids have some champions in Congress, like Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT) and Rep. John Boehner (R-OH) who are ready to support our kids. Rep. Boehner introduced the Preserving D.C. Scholarships Act in May. Sen. Lieberman is expected to introduce Senate legislation soon, giving hope back to low-income District children. The senator, a passionate supporter of opportunity scholarships, wrote a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, praising the Opportunity Scholarship concept, saying "without programs such as this one, (the students') opportunity will be lost forever."

We are grateful for their support. Now we need our Mayor and Council to show theirs. It is likely some members of Congress will look to them. After all, Opportunity Scholarships exist in the first place because leaders in this city once stood up for the children.

So, Mr. Fenty, can the kids count on you? Believe us, they are a much better investment than a clunker car.