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FINAL EVALUATION OF DC OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM REVEALS MIXED RESULTS FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT, GRADUATION RATES

Overall, low-income students awarded vouchers to attend private schools through the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) were performing at similar levels in reading and math at least four years later as students who also applied to the program but were not awarded scholarships, according to findings from the final report released today by the Institute of Education Sciences.

The report found, however, that students awarded vouchers (and old enough to have graduated from high school) graduated at significantly higher rates than did their counterparts, according to parent reports. The OSP also had a positive impact on parents' satisfaction with their child's school and their perceptions of the school's safety, but students themselves rated school satisfaction and safety the same whether they received a voucher or not.

"As we found in the previous studies, this follow up found no significant achievement impacts for students in either reading or math," said IES Director John Easton. "What is new here is finding that students who received vouchers were more likely to graduate from high school than students who did not."

Called the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program since its inception, the federally funded program provided scholarships (or vouchers) of up to \$7,500 for low-income residents of the District of Columbia to send their children to participating private schools. This program, passed by Congress in early 2004, provided the first federal funds—about \$13 million each year—for private school vouchers.

The law specified that random selection, through lotteries, be used to award scholarships if there were more applicants than available funds or open slots in private schools. Congress also required that applicants attending public schools identified as "in need of improvement" (SINI) get the highest priority for entry to the program. Language in a federal appropriations statute closed the program to new applicants in the spring of 2009.

Nearly 5,500 students eligible for the program applied between 2004 and 2009 and more than 3,700 have been awarded scholarships. Each year, between 52 and 68 of the approximately 90 private schools in DC agreed to take OSP scholarship students, with a large drop in participation in 2009 when seven former Catholic private schools converted to become public charter schools

and therefore could no longer be part of the OSP. About 80 percent of students in the study attended a faith-based school and 14 percent attended a school that charged more than the \$7,500 scholarship.

The evaluation was directed by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance within IES and conducted by researchers from Westat, the University of Arkansas' Department of Education Reform, and Chesapeake Research Associates. It focused on 2,300 eligible applicants selected during the first 2 years of the program in 2004 and 2005.

These applicants were randomly assigned by lottery to either receive an offer (treatment group) or not receive an offer (control group) of an OSP scholarship. Not every student in the study's treatment group actually *used* the scholarship; about 22 percent of students awarded a voucher and still eligible to use one after 4 or 5 years never used it to attend a private school.

Although data on most of the outcomes studied—scores on research-administered achievement tests, high school graduation, perceptions of school safety and satisfaction—were collected annually over 4 to 5 years, each year's estimated impacts are cumulative and represent students' entire educational experience between their application to the program and the year the data were collected. Thus, the impacts described in the final report represent the longer term effects of the program.

This final report on the impacts of the OSP adds to the growing body of evidence on private school voucher programs in the United States. Before this study of the OSP, there were more than 10 analyses of six voucher programs in urban areas. There is no clear consensus, however, on whether such programs have meaningful effects.

The key findings include:

- The study found no evidence that the OSP affected student achievement overall, or for the high priority group of students who applied from "schools in need of improvement." On average, after at least 4 years, students who were offered scholarships had reading and math test scores that were statistically similar to those who were not offered scholarships—both overall and for those who applied from schools in need of improvement.
- By 2009, about 500 of the 2,300 students in the study were old enough to have graduated from high school. Parents of these students were surveyed about their child's progress through school. Based on parents who responded, the offer of an OSP scholarship increased students' probability of completing high school by 12 percentage points overall --82 percent for the treatment group compared to 70 percent for the control group. The offer of a scholarship improved the graduation prospects of students from SINIs by 13 percentage points (79 percent graduation rate for the treatment group versus 66 percent for the control group).
- The same pattern of findings holds true for students who actually *used* their voucher, instead of just being awarded one. For those who used the vouchers, there were no significant effects on reading and math achievement. The improvement in graduation rates, however, was even higher for those who used the voucher.