June 12, 2008

Member
 Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
 Committee on Appropriations
 U.S. House of Representatives
 Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

The undersigned organizations of the National Coalition for Public Education (NCPE) wish to comment on the expiring Washington, D.C., private school voucher program in conjunction with the markup the subcommittee will hold Tuesday, June 17 on the District of Columbia appropriations bill. NCPE strongly opposes the funneling of public money to private and religious schools through vouchers, and urges you to oppose the reauthorization or continued funding of the Washington, D.C., voucher program.

The nearly $15 million a year program provides vouchers worth up to $7,500 for approximately 1,900 students. Created as a five-year pilot, it is scheduled to expire in 2008. The program’s expiration, previously noted by members of both parties, should come as no surprise to voucher proponents. And, despite proponents’ claims five years ago that the vouchers would permit students to attend better schools, the Congressionally mandated federal evaluation released in 2007 found no significant differences in academic achievement between voucher students and their peers in Washington, D.C. public schools.¹

In addition to the lack of academic evidence supporting the program, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report also documented several accountability shortcomings in the program, including federal taxpayer dollars funding tuition at private schools that do not even charge tuition, schools that lacked city occupancy permits, and schools employing teachers without bachelor’s degrees.² It also noted that children with physical or learning disabilities are underrepresented in the program compared to the public schools.³

Despite the program’s dubious record, President Bush’s FY09 budget request actually calls for an increase to $18 million for vouchers. NCPE believes that money should instead be invested in the public schools. We also note that despite receiving public money, the participating private schools are not subject to all federal civil rights laws, and do not face the same public accountability standards, including those in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, that all public schools face. We also believe this program continues to raise problems under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

³ Ibid.
NCPE believes the objective evidence does not support the reauthorization or continued funding of the only federally funded school voucher program. We urge you to oppose the program’s continued funding in the subcommittee and full committee markup, and as the appropriations bill moves forward. Thank you for your consideration of our views on this important issue.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Women
American Association of University Women, Washington D.C. Branch
American Civil Liberties Union
American Federation of Teachers
Americans for Democratic Action
Americans for Religious Liberty
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Council of the Great City Schools
Interfaith Alliance
International Reading Association
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Directors of Special Education
National Education Association
National Parent Teacher Association
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National School Boards Association
People For the American Way
Secular Coalition for America
Union for Reform Judaism
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism