Initial Findings from an Evaluation of School Choice Programs in
Washington, D. C.

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Initial Findings from an Evaluation
of the School Choice Program in Washington, D. C.

(Executive Summary)

In the summer of 1998 President Bill Clinton vetoed congressional legislation that would have established a pilot school voucher program for low-income families in the District of Columbia. However, a similar privately-funded program, the Washington Scholarship Fund Pilot Program (WSF), was established in 1997 through the expansion of an already existing scholarship fund. WSF awarded scholarships by lottery, thereby making it possible to conduct an evaluation designed as a randomized experiment. This initial report compares the responses of qualified families with children currently in public schools with those of families with children in private schools. Parental responses are from all applicants; most student responses are from pupils in fifth and sixth grades.

Students in private schools are significantly more likely than students in public schools to report a positive educational climate in their school. Differences were as follows:

- Reporting "I do not feel safe at this school" -- 5 percent of private-school students as compared to 21 percent of public school students.
- "Strongly agree" that "teachers care about students" -- 72 percent of students in private schools as compared to 55 percent of public-school students.
- "Strongly agree" that "teaching here is good" -- 68 percent of private-school students as compared to 52 percent of public-school students.
- Reporting "a lot" of cheating at school -- 18 percent of private-school students as compared to 39 percent of public-school students.
- Strongly agree that "some teachers ignore" cheating -- 13 percent of private-school students as compared to 25 percent of public-school students.
- Satisfaction "with the way my education is going" -- 90 percent in private sector as compared to 75 percent in public sector.
- Encouraged "a lot" by teachers to study current events -- 47 percent of private-school students as compared to 37 percent of public-school students.
- "Strongly agree" that "student misbehavior makes it hard to learn" -- 19 percent in private sector as compared to 36 percent in public sector.
- Reporting "there are many gang members in school" -- 8 percent of private-school students as compared to 22 percent of public-school students.

Parents echo student reports. Parents from private schools are more likely to "strongly agree" with the following statements about their current school:
• School is safe;
• Teaching is good;
• Teachers help all the students;
• School listens to parents;
• Parents work together to support school;
• Rules for behavior are strict;
• School puts high priority on learning.

Differences between the responses of private and public school applicants ranged between 30 to 40 percentage points; they remain large even when statistical adjustments are made for the demographic characteristics of the two groups of parents.

Parental satisfaction with private schools was much higher than with public schools. Nearly 60 percent of private-school parents gave their school an "A," as compared to less than a fifth of public-school parents. This difference in the degree of satisfaction with public and private schools is evident when you ask about a wide variety of specific aspects of school life:

• When it comes to safety, for example, private school applicants are much the more satisfied group of parents.

• Two-thirds of the private-school parents, but only a quarter of the public-school parents, were “very satisfied” with school safety.

• Nearly two-thirds of the private-school parents, but less than one-fifth of the public-school parents, were "very satisfied" with their school's academic program.

• Two-thirds of the private-school parents were "very satisfied" with safety at the school, as compared to less than one-fourth of the parents of students still in public schools.

Private schools demonstrated a greater capacity to stimulate conversations, community participation and other forms of social capital among low-income, inner-city families. For example,

• Nearly a third of the parents of Washington's public-school applicants "seldom or never" discussed school affairs with other parents, as compared to only 17 percent of private-school parents.

• 74 percent of families of applicants from private schools, but only 63 percent of public-school applicants, said they felt part of their community, feeling it was more than just a place to live.
The applicant families with children in public schools said the most important reasons for applying for a private-school scholarship was to find a school with higher standards and a better curriculum. Parents also said they were interested in smaller class sizes and improved safety for their children. Least important was the school’s location.

The WSF program reached a segment of the disadvantaged population not previously served by Washington's private schools. Over 85 percent of the applicants from both public and private schools were African American. Applicants from public schools consisted of mothers less likely to have a college education, parents who were less likely to be married, and families more dependent on government aid.

Established for the first time on a large scale in 1997, WSF offered lottery winners annual scholarships of up to $1,700 to help pay tuition at a private school for at least three years. Over 7,500 telephone applications were received between October 1997 and January 1998. In response to invitations sent by WSF, over 3,000 applicants attended verification sessions, where eligibility was determined, students were tested, older students filled out short questionnaires, and adult family members completed longer questionnaires while waiting for testing to be completed. The lottery selecting scholarship winners was held on April 29, 1998. WSF announced that it expected to award over one thousand scholarships, with a majority going to students not previously in a private school. The data reported in this paper are taken from responses from parents and students at these verification and testing sessions.

Inasmuch as these findings are based on information from public and private school parents prior to the beginning of the scholarship program, they could be due to the self-selection of parents who chose to send their children to private schools. However, most findings hold after statistical adjustments have been made for demographic characteristics.

The evaluation of these pilot programs is a joint activity of the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and Northern Illinois University's Social Science Research Institute.