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## NYC May Win a Chance to Try Out Vouchers

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WASHINGTON - The nation's first federal school voucher experiment is still in its early days in Washington, but President Bush has already asked Congress for money to expand it to other cities, and New York City would be a "strong contender" for the proposed \$50 million pilot project, a senior Education Department official said yesterday.

Under the proposed Choice Incentive Fund program, cities could apply to receive federal funds to pay for tuition vouchers at private and religious schools.

"We would have an open competition and cities that are interested could apply," said Michael Petrilli, who oversees grant programs for the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the Education Department. "New York would be a strong contender," he said.

It is unlikely that New York would apply for the money, should Congress approve it in the spring appropriations process, since most city leaders are opposed to school vouchers.

But the issue of school choice arose again this week in Albany, when Cardinal Egan called on state government to give tuition tax credits to parents who want to educate their children outside of public schools.

The experiment in Washington's public schools began last year, when Congress approved \$13 million for tuition vouchers to allow inner-city children to transfer out of public schools into the schools of their choice. Families with incomes below 185% of the poverty line - or roughly \$35,000 for a family of four in Washington - could enter a lottery for the vouchers.

The 5-year pilot project had the support of the District of Columbia's Democratic mayor, Anthony Williams. At \$7,500 a child, the vouchers are generous compared to vouchers attempted in other cities, and in most cases they exceed the cost of private school tuition for all but the most exclusive schools.

There are now about 1,000 children enrolled in 53 Washington schools, ranging from religious schools to small independent schools aimed at African-American children. A handful of students are enrolled at elite institutions such as Sidwell Friends School, which boasts Chelsea Clinton among its alumni. Administrators expect the number of enrollees to grow next year, when they can pay for as many as 1,700 or 1,800 vouchers.

So far, the Department of Education considers the program a "tremendous success," Mr. Petrilli said. "I think it's fair to say that this particular program was about giving needy children an opportunity that they couldn't have otherwise - and an opportunity we think could really change their lives," he said.

Critics say the case for vouchers is simply not there.

"New Yorkers should know this would be a terrible use of public funds," said Judith Schaeffer, the legal director of People for the American Way, which has published a report critical of the program. "There is no genuine evidence that vouchers work anywhere," she said.

To settle the dispute, the department has hired a team of investigators headed by a professor at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Patrick Wolf, to produce an independent evaluation of the program. Their preliminary report is due in a month. The investigators will analyze various aspects of the program, including parental satisfaction and the performance of voucher students in grades 6 to 12 compared to those who applied to the lottery but did not get vouchers.

The five-year study, called the School Choice Demonstration Project, will also look at how the vouchers affect public schools and participating families' neighborhoods.

"We are only in the first year of the program so it's a little early to be determining lessons learned," Mr. Petrilli said.

But already the voucher experience in Washington has taught some political lessons.

Supporters of the program are quick to point out that the city's public schools did not lose funding when a student used a voucher to transfer out. While some economists argue that such funding cuts are desirable because they give public schools financial incentives to improve their performance, critics contend that such cuts weaken public schools and throw them into a downward spiral of degradation.

In the Washington case, Congress appropriated an additional \$13 million for public schools, and another \$13 million for charter schools as part of the voucher legislation.

The president and CEO of the organization chosen to administer the voucher program, the Washington Scholarship Fund, Sally Sachar, said extra funding for Washington public schools was key to building local political support in an overwhelmingly Democratic city.

"Most people we are working with are also interested in improving the public schools. They do not want to think that this program is running at the expense of public schools," Ms. Sachar said.

The program's critics insist that any voucher money would be better spent in public schools. "If there are education dollars, they should be use for public schools," Ms. Schaeffer said.

Another criticism of the program is that it allows public funds to flow to religious schools, blurring the line between church and state. About three-quarters of the students who use the vouchers have enrolled in religious schools, more than half of them Roman Catholic. Mr. Petrilli said he is not surprised by the numbers because many religious schools set out to serve poor neighborhoods.

Under the congressional mandate, priority was to be given to students who wanted to transfer out of underperforming public schools that were flagged as needing improvement under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

But the program gave vouchers to some 200 students who were already enrolled in private schools, a fact that led critics to charge the vouchers are not helping the families for whom Congress intended them.

Mr. Petrilli said some of the students in private schools were there because their parents had scrimped for tuition. "We are talking about dirt-poor families who are struggling to make ends meet, and yet were still taking \$1,000 or \$2,000 out of their pockets - a remarkable sacrifice. We did not feel it was fair to penalize these families for making their own sacrifice," he said.

Senator Feinstein, a Democrat of California, whose vote in favor of the legislation allowed it to pass through a divided Senate committee, has expressed concern that vouchers did not go to the neediest students. Others argue they might simply be replacing private scholarships.

Ms. Sachar said there is no evidence that this is the case. She said the vouchers allow her organization to give scholarships to additional students, and that private schools have also been able to take more needy children as a result.

Supporting its criticism of the program, People for the American Way issued a report showing that only 75 students out of 1,000 had come from schools rated in need of improvement, but the program's administrators said the numbers were misleading.

The No Child Left Behind Law requires that schools must have failed to demonstrate adequate progress for two years or more before they can get a "needs improvement" rating. Since the law was new, none of the schools had track records long enough to qualify, so the district school board created a temporary measure that identified 15 schools. Last year, that number rose to 91 underperforming schools under the federal criteria.

By the most recent list, 469 students came from the weakest schools, Ms. Sachar said.

There have also been practical lessons from the Washington program, where the costs added up to more than the value of the scholarships. Congress appropriated \$375,000 for administrative costs, but Ms. Sachar said the costs of getting the program up and running, and helping families navigate the application process, have amounted to three times as much.

The fund has raised money from private donations and foundations to make up the difference, much of which went toward getting information to parents.

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