New Voucher Report Underscores Need for Program's Reauthorization

WASHINGTON. D.C. – House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Ranking Member Darrell Issa (R-CA) sent a letter today to Committee Chairman Edolphus Towns (D-NY) calling on him to schedule a hearing on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) following the release of an independent report, sponsored by the Department of Education, evaluating the program's success. The Committee majority has previously indicated that they do not intend to continue the successful D.C. School Choice program. Specifically, the report examined the performance of students who applied for the program and found students who participated in the program performed at "statistically higher levels in reading equivalent to 3.1 months of additional learning."

"This report is demonstrative of the successes we can have if we continue to invest in providing expanded education opportunities to students who come from low-income families," Issa said. "Choice of schools shouldn't be limited to those who are fortunate enough to come from an affluent family – every child deserves the chance to unlock their limitless potential and this voucher program is central to that effort."

The program was authorized by Congress in 2004 to provide low-income residents, particularly those whose children attend failing public schools, with "expanded opportunities to attend higher performing schools in the District of Columbia." The scholarship, worth up to $7,500, could be used to cover the costs of tuition, school fees, and transportation to a participating private school. Ninety-nine percent of scholarship recipients are black or Hispanic, and there are more than four applicants for each scholarship.

“This program should be judged on its merits, not political agendas,” Issa said. “Rather than allow a predetermined political agenda affect the future of this successful program – we should schedule a hearing to get the facts and make an informed decision, not a political one.”

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee have scheduled hearings on the program for May. Both the Senate Committee and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee share jurisdiction over the District of Columbia and the voucher program.

The report found that:

- **After 3 years, there was a statistically significant positive impact on reading test scores, but not math test scores.** Overall, those offered a scholarship were performing at statistically higher levels in reading equivalent to 3.1 months of additional learning but at similar levels in math compared to students not offered a scholarship (table 3). Analysis in prior years indicated no significant impacts overall on either reading or math achievement.

- **The OSP had a positive impact overall on parents' reports of school satisfaction and safety** (figures 3 and 4)**, but not on students' reports** (figures 3 and 4). Parents were more satisfied with their child's school (as measured by the percentage giving the school a grade of A or B) and viewed their child's school as safer and more orderly if the child was offered a scholarship. Students had a different view of their schools than did their parents. Reports of safety and school climate were comparable for students in the treatment and control groups. Overall, student satisfaction was unaffected by the Program.

- **The OSP improved reading achievement for 5 of the 10 subgroups examined.** Being offered or using a scholarship led to higher reading test scores for participants who applied from schools that were not classified as "schools in need of improvement" (non-SINI). There were also positive impacts for students who applied to the Program with relatively higher levels of academic performance, female students, students entering grades K-8 at the time of application, and students from the first cohort of applicants. These impacts translate into 1/3 to 2 years of additional learning growth. However, the positive subgroup reading impacts for female students and the first cohort of applicants should be interpreted with caution, as reliability tests suggest that they could be false discoveries.