

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 3, 2009 at 12:07pm

Washington DC children scholarships should continue

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NCR Today

The Washington Post this morning endorsed an extension of D.C.'s Opportunity Scholarship program. The program provides scholarships to poor children in the District whose local public schools are failing and who enroll in private schools, including parochial schools. Earlier this year, the program was nixed entirely under pressure from Illinois Senator Richard Durbin but then the Obama White House stepped in and agreed to a compromise that would allow students currently in the program to continue to receive scholarship assistance through their graduation but did not permit any new enrollees.

The Post echoes a call last week from D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee and Mayor Adrian Fenty to extend the program and, ideally, to increase its range. Rhee cited the city's parents' and its schools' need for a "choice dynamic." The parents need the scholarships because they cannot wait until long-term reforms improve the public schools. Those same public schools need the competition that school choice encourages to motivate them to succeed. Fenty is close to the President, as is Sen. Durbin, so it is difficult to predict how the struggle will turn out. As the *Post* noted, the scholarship program enjoys bi-partisan support.

The issue of state aid to Catholic schools is an old one. In the 1840s, Archbishop John Hughes of New York requested a share of state funding for the parochial schools of the city. The public schools were then administered by a private institution called the Public School Society, and it was dominated by Protestants. In 1842 the legislature removed the Public School Society from the superintendence of the schools but also forbade any public moneys going to religious schools. Similar battles were fought in many states and one arrangement, the Faribault-Stillwater plan in Minnesota played a role in the papal condemnation of "Americanism" as a heresy in 1899.

While we work out our constitutional difficulties, however, the poor children of D.C. suffer. The city's

public schools are a disaster and until the public fixes them, steps to help parents provide for their children should be encouraged. Let's hope the Congress and the President see it that way too.

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