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Voucher Bill Debated

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NCR Today

The House of Representatives just voted down an amendment (offered by Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton) to the Washington DC voucher bill that would have gutted the program.

Soon to be debated: a voucher program that would provide \$500 million over five years in direct assistance to poor families in the District of Columbia. Among the program's supporters: former DC public schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, ex-mayor Adrian Fenty, and the Catholic Church. House Speaker John Boehner, who along with Senator Ted Kennedy used to co-chair an annual dinner to raise money for DC's Catholic schools, also strongly backs the bill. Some have termed it his "pet issue."

If that's the case, Boehner has chosen well.

Generally speaking, DC's public schools are terrible, just awful. Few of us would choose to place our own children in the DC school system. That is, if we had the money. The poor families that have benefited from the program in the past, and others with young children just entering school, support the program by large margins.

The bill will get near universal support from the House's Republican majority, strong opposition from the Democratic minority.

Education reform is a complicated topic, but the issue is not very complex from the point of view of a parent with a child to educate in DC. In fact, it's a no-brainer.

Though the electoral risk is low (few voters actually cast ballots based on a federal representative's stance on the DC voucher program), Democrats who oppose such practical education reform risk placing themselves on the wrong side of history.

It is true that some opponents of the voucher bill (Delegate Norton among them), do so for principled reasons. Others, it seems, reflexively oppose any measure that faces hostility from the American Federal of Teachers or the National Education Association. It is the Democratic equivalent to Republicans and the National Rifle Association.

It is also a shame that our politics is so poisoned that a program that would help poor families get their kids a decent education faces knee-jerk opposition from many members of the party that claims to look out for them.

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