

More than 1,000 students rally at US Capitol for school vouchers

WASHINGTON - More than 1,000 students from the District of Columbia stood near the U.S. Capitol Sept. 30 urging members of Congress to support federally funded school vouchers through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The "Save School Choice" rally was a grass-roots effort to save the endangered scholarship program that provides 1,700 low-income students with an opportunity to attend the school of their choice in the district.

Among the rally speakers were Rep. John Boehner, R-Ohio; former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings; Howard Fuller, founder of the Black Alliance for Educational Options; and many students and parents.

Students wore bright yellow T-shirts that read "Put Kids First."

Bill Eager, the principal of St. Anthony's School, brought more than 200 students to the rally. He said St. Anthony's currently educates 51 students with Opportunity Scholarships, and students came to the rally to show legislators that "this is a cause worth fighting for."

The principal said many of the scholarship students would be in a failing school if they hadn't received the funding.

"Their parents want them to get a quality education, and they see St. Anthony's as a provider of that ... without that choice they would be going back to a failing school," he said.

Rudolph Knott, who has three children in the Opportunity Scholarship Program, said the scholarships give students an opportunity to receive a high quality education while the public schools are in the process of improving. Knott has one child at Gonzaga College High School and two at St. Anthony's.

LaTasha Bennett, a parent of an Opportunity Scholarship student and another

student who had her scholarship revoked this year, spoke at the rally. She said just because parents of voucher students are low-income that doesn't mean they will accept "low standards."

The scholarship students "are able to excel above and beyond what they believe," she said.

But the program faces an uncertain future. In July, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to allow current scholarship students to remain in the program, while barring new students from enrolling in it. The Senate Appropriations Committee voted similarly, but it also added restrictions to the program that some scholarship supporters say could kill the program.

Both votes adhere closely to President Barack Obama's proposal to allow students already in the program to remain until they graduate from the 12th grade, but not permit any new students to enroll in it. Federal funding for the program is decided from year to year, and there is no guarantee of students remaining in the scholarship program until they graduate.

But if a reauthorization bill – introduced by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., and five other senators – passes, it would trump earlier votes to end the program.

The scholarship program is part of a three-sector approach to improve education in the district. Five years ago, federal dollars were given to the city to support public and charter schools as well as the Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Ronald Holassie, an Opportunity Scholarship student who is a junior at Archbishop Carroll High School in Washington, told rally participants he wouldn't be "standing before you if it wasn't for the Opportunity Scholarship Program."

"I have evolved into the young man who stands before you now. This is what the program has made of me and others – a success," he said.