

Myths *vs.* Facts

Myth **The federally-mandated Institute for Education Sciences (IES) evaluation** of the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) shows that children are no better off in the voucher program.

Fact **The OSP is one of only four IES studies (out of 14)** that showed any positive results and OSP had the second largest academic gain. The 2010 report from IES showed that students who used their scholarships had a 91 percent graduation rate – 21 percent higher than students who were not offered a scholarship. By contrast, the most recent data from Education Week’s 2011 Quality Counts report shows a D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) graduation rate of 59.5 percent. The IES evaluations also show that OSP students are making gains in reading. The Obama Administration’s own “What Works Clearinghouse” has validated the Institute for Education Sciences research on the OSP. The OSP is a clear example of funding what works in education.

Myth **The Opportunity Scholarship Program takes money away** from D.C. Public Schools.

Fact **In the seven-year history of the Opportunity Scholarship Program,** not one dime has been diverted from public schools to pay for scholarships. The Opportunity Scholarship Program has actually generated nearly \$300 million in federal funding for D.C. Public Schools and charter schools since FY 2004. The three-sector federal initiative for educational improvement in the District of Columbia required equal funding for all three sectors—funding for DCPS and charters would not have been appropriated without the OSP.

Myth **The Opportunity Scholarship Program lacks** any kind of administrative, financial, or academic accountability provisions.

Fact **The law requires participating schools** to have a valid certificate of occupancy issued by the District of Columbia, and calls for regular site inspections. The SOAR

Act would strengthen financial accountability by requiring proof of adequate financial resources for schools operating less than five years, as well as adequate financial systems, controls and policies to ensure that funds are used in compliance with the program. It requires that core teachers of OSP students have a bachelor's degree or equivalent degree. The SOAR Act would require annual testing of each enrolled student receiving an opportunity scholarship, with results going to the parents or legal guardian and to IES for the purposes of program evaluation. The SOAR Act would also reinstate a comprehensive and scientifically-valid federal evaluation of the OSP.

Myth **The Opportunity Scholarship Program violates** the separation of church and state and fails to adequately protect the civil rights of all students.

Fact **The United States Supreme Court ruled** that appropriately-designed voucher programs are constitutional in the 2002 *Zelman v Simmons-Harris* case because aid goes to the parents, who then choose between religious and non-religious schools for their participating child.

Myth **The Opportunity Scholarship Program discriminates** against some students.

Fact **Participating schools in the OSP abide by all applicable local, state,** and federal regulations. Schools are prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin, in accordance to the law. The U.S. Constitution and federal law ban many kinds of discrimination, but they do allow for federal funds to flow to public and private schools that are all boys or all girls schools. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which applies to all programs receiving federal financial assistance—including private schools—permits private schools to be single-gender schools at all levels, including college.

Myth **The Opportunity Scholarship Program uses public funds** to subsidize a private education for families who would otherwise pay for private school, and also takes the highest achievers out of public schools.

Fact **To be eligible for the OSP,** families must qualify for free and reduced lunch and be below 185 percent of the poverty line. In fact, the average family income for an OSP

family is \$25,000 per year, which is well below the maximum threshold for eligibility. First preference is also given to students who are coming from the Schools in Need of Improvement list. More than 93 percent of participating children are on that list.

Myth **Many scholarships go to students attending Catholic schools,** and the Opportunity Scholarship Program is really only a benefit to Catholic families.

Fact **Between 45 and 80 percent of students attending** Archdiocese of Washington schools and the Consortium of Catholic Academies are non-Catholic.

Myth **There's an abundance of choice in Washington, D.C.,** making the Opportunity Scholarship Program unnecessary.

Fact **Washington, D.C. has a robust charter school sector,** which currently educates more than one-third of K-12 children. However, there are waiting lists at many of these schools, leaving the city's most vulnerable children without access to educational choice. The District also has out-of-boundary exceptions — giving some parents access to better traditional public schools — but those selections are done by lottery. The OSP is a necessary part of the District's K-12 system because it ensures that children from the lowest-income families have access to educational options.

Myth **Opportunity scholarships are regularly being used** at schools that do not charge tuition.

Fact **OSP scholarships are only used to allow students to attend a non-public school** that they would otherwise be unable to attend. All non-public schools charge for the cost of the education they provide — there are no “free” schools. Scholarships at non-public schools — offered by all participating schools to some students — are payments for these costs by a third-party donor. Five OSP participating schools are “scholarship only” schools, for which third party funds are solicited to pay the tuition for all its students. The funding provided through the OSP creates a space for that student.