

## **School Choice Is Change You Can Believe In**

By William McGurn

Barack and Michelle Obama send their children to an upscale private school. When asked about it during last year's YouTube debate, Sen. Obama responded that it was "the best option" for his children.

Several hundred low-income parents in our nation's capital have also sent their children to private and parochial schools, with the help of a federal program that provides Opportunity Scholarships. Like Mr. and Mrs. Obama, most of these parents are African-American. And like Mr. and Mrs. Obama, they too believe the schools they've chosen represent the "best option" for their children.

Now these parents have a question for Mr. Obama. Is Mr. Change-You-Can-Believe-In going to let his fellow Democrats take away the one change that is working for them?

Just a few days ago, Democrat Eleanor Holmes Norton (D.C.'s congressional delegate) told the Washington Post that "the Democratic Congress is not about to extend this program." Today that program will come under the congressional spotlight, when a House subcommittee takes up the annual appropriations bill for the District of Columbia that includes funding for Opportunity Scholarships for the 2009-10 school year. If Mrs. Norton and her allies in the teachers unions have their way, hundreds of African-American children with these scholarships will be forced back into one of the most miserable public school systems in the United States.

Just how rotten are the D.C. public schools? In a recent survey by Education Week, the D.C. public schools ranked fourth from the bottom in terms of graduation rates. Test scores for basics like math and reading are also near the bottom. It's not for lack of money: A recent U.S. Census Bureau report says the district school spending clocks in at more than \$13,400 per child -- third highest in the nation. It takes a lot of money to run a school system as lousy as D.C.'s.

This dismal performance helps explain why so many have been willing to cross the usual political and ideological lines to try to give the district's kids a better shot at a decent education. Opportunity Scholarships have been endorsed by both the Washington Post and Washington Times. They have the support of the Republican president as well as the current and past Democratic mayors -- Adrian Fenty and Anthony Williams.

Even some of Mr. Obama's Democratic colleagues -- e.g., California's Dianne Feinstein -- have said that D.C. should be allowed to give the program a chance. In contrast, Mr. Obama's silence is thundering across the district.

This silence is all the more striking, given that the Ivy League-educated Democrat puts education reform at the top of his agenda. He has decried the "achievement gap" that is leaving African-American children behind. He has also noted -- rightly -- that America's system of public education is producing hundreds of thousands of children who will be condemned to the margins of American prosperity because they do not have the tools they need to succeed.

The question is whether, to paraphrase Hillary Clinton, Mr. Obama offers these children anything more than a good speech. It's true that Mr. Obama has endorsed merit pay, and in the past has suggested that schools should be able to sack bad teachers. But apart from a few feints and jabs around the margins, his proposals would do little to challenge a status quo that today serves teachers unions at the expense of students.

Back in D.C., those who have benefited from Opportunity Scholarships hope that the Democrat's presidential nominee will stand up for them. Tiffany Dunston used her Opportunity Scholarship to attend Archbishop Carroll High School, and graduated earlier this month as class valedictorian. Miss Dunston plans to attend today's markup session on Capitol Hill. She says she'd like Mr. Obama to "stand up" -- so more kids could get a chance for a good education.

Carleen McCarley hopes for the same. She looks at the Opportunity Scholarship that will allow her daughter Gabrielle to attend Metropolitan Day School as a lifeline. "I have a friend who does some work for Obama," she says, "and I tell her she needs to keep putting this in his ear."

April Cole-Walton hopes the candidate will be listening. Thanks to an Opportunity scholarship, her daughter, Breanna, will enter fourth grade this fall at St. Peter's Interparish School -- a safe and caring environment where she can learn. "If I could talk to Senator Obama," Ms. Cole-Walton says, "I would say, 'Give me a choice and give my daughter a chance.'"

These people have change they can believe in. The question is whether Mr. Obama will help them keep it. Or whether he'll be one more Beltway pol who speaks eloquently about public schools -- while making sure his own kids never have to step inside one.