

**House Report 108-214 - DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA APPROPRIATIONS
BILL, 2004**

**ADDITIONAL VIEWS OF THE HONORABLE CHAKA
FATTAH**

I commend the Chairman for working with me to address the financial needs of the District to the best of our ability, given the limited funding allocation provided to the subcommittee. However, I continue to have two fundamental concerns with the bill.

HOME RULE

This bill continues the disturbing trend of undermining District self governance and, therefore, District residents. Instead of deferring to the District's elected leaders, the Appropriations Committee has once again decided to meddle in local affairs. During Full Committee consideration of the bill, an amendment was adopted that would effectively prohibit the District from pursuing legal recourse in a particular case. Without speaking to the merits of the litigation, I strongly believe that the District should be allowed to pursue whatever policies it deems appropriate in the same manner that other local jurisdictions would.

The citizens of the District have elected their own officials. These officials are capable of pursuing policies consistent with the views of their citizens without Federal intervention. If these local officials fail to do so, they will not be reelected. This process is a fundamental component of democracy. When the Congress of the United States undermines this process--as it has done in adopting this most recent provision, as well as others, such as a prohibition on a needle exchange program--it is denying American citizens access to democracy. I urge my colleagues to reject this undemocratic and disrespectful approach to the District.

VOUCHERS

This bill also contains \$10 million of public funds for a voucher program that would subsidize the private education of a limited number of District residents. Rather than improving public school education, thereby ensuring a sound basic education for every child, this bill pursues a policy that would allow a small percentage of students to attend private schools. It is unthinkable for us to speak about private school vouchers when 90 percent of American students are enrolled in public schools. Furthermore, these

private schools would most likely not be held to the same standards of accountability as public schools since private schools are not required to adopt the reforms put in place by the No Child Left Behind Act, such as the hiring of highly qualified teachers.

Vouchers have little support among the American people in general, nor District residents in particular. Since 1972, vouchers have been soundly defeated every time they have come before the voters, and over the past decade, legislatures in 37 states have rejected vouchers. Serious questions have been raised about the appropriateness of public funding for private schooling and the effectiveness of voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida. These types of concerns led the Appropriations Committee to reject the President's proposal for a national vouchers program. It is unfair to use the District as a laboratory for unproven models and approaches to educating the District's children that were deemed unacceptable for children elsewhere.

A study of District residents found that 76 percent of voters oppose providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to parents to pay for their children to attend private or religious schools if it meant less money for public school students. By taking funds that could be invested in the public school system and redirecting funds to private schools, we are doing exactly that. The District Board of Education also opposes vouchers and has noted 'it would be hypocritical for Congress to impose vouchers on the District, as it rejected a proposal to impose vouchers on other jurisdictions and on the country as a whole during the recent debate on the President's education bill.'

In a brief filed with the U.S. Supreme Court, the National Education Association said that private school vouchers 'are not a solution to the problems of urban education, but rather an impediment to the development and the funding of effective solutions to the public schooling problem.' I concur with this belief. That is why I proposed two amendments to the bill during Full Committee consideration. My first amendment proposed that instead of promoting an inequitable educational system, \$10 million should be provided to high-performing public schools and charter schools. My second amendment would have withheld funding for vouchers until such time that at least 90 percent of District public school students were being taught by highly qualified teachers and had access to adequate educational materials comparable to the highest-achieving schools in the DC Metropolitan region. Unfortunately, both efforts were unsuccessful.

CONCLUSION

I would like to reiterate my strong support for the Chairman. I believe he has been fair and inclusive in crafting this bill. However, I cannot support an education initiative that diverts scarce dollars away from the public education system to support an untested and unaccountable private school subsidy that

will aid relatively few children. I intend to push for additional public school funds as this bill moves forward. I also remain committed to home rule and minimizing any inappropriate intrusions into the local governance of the District of Columbia.

