

# The Washington Post

## A Plea to Mr. Duncan

There are 216 D.C. children who could still be rescued.

Friday, July 10, 2009

AMAJORITY OF the D.C. Council has petitioned Education Secretary Arne Duncan to reverse his decision to deny private school vouchers to families counting on them for this fall. We hope that Mr. Duncan agrees to help these needy families who want only a quality education for their children. If he doesn't, then we hope that these same council members will use District resources to achieve their worthy goal.

Seven council members -- including those who represent the poorest sections of the city -- wrote to Mr. Duncan on June 22 challenging his decision not to admit new students to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The federally funded program provides vouchers of up to \$7,500 so that low-income students can attend schools of their choice. Because the program's future is uncertain, Mr. Duncan decided -- disappointingly to our mind -- to rescind scholarships awarded to 216 families for this upcoming school year. Thankfully, the administration did commit itself to funding the program so that children currently enrolled can continue their education uninterrupted until high school graduation. Moreover, there is still a chance that Congress could reauthorize the program.

But that doesn't help parents such as Latasha Bennett, who's in an understandable panic over where her daughter will go to kindergarten next month. She had planned on the private school where her son (already a scholarship recipient) excels, but, without the voucher she was promised, she can't afford the tuition. She looked into her neighborhood public school and discovered that less than a third of the students there are proficient in reading or math. Charters weren't an option because most had filled up by the time she learned of Mr. Duncan's decision. D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee's office recommended four other places, but two have no kindergarten openings and the others are more than an hour's commute (by bus) away.

A review by D.C. Children First showed that nine out of 10 students who were shut out of the scholarship program this year are assigned to attend failing public schools. We realize that helping these 216 families is no substitute for fixing the problems that afflict D.C. and other urban schools. But, as Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) and Ms. Rhee work to improve the city's schools, what is to be gained by denying educational opportunities to children such as Ms. Bennett's 4-year-old Nia?