

School vouchers called a success

Associated Press – January 13, 2006

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By Derrill Holly

Officials who run the D.C. school voucher program are calling it a success, though they said yesterday that it has been more expensive to operate than expected.

Still, the Washington Scholarship Fund (WSF) is hoping Congress will reauthorize the program -- the first federally funded program in the U.S. -- and has offered its experience as a blueprint for expanding the program to other cities.

"We now are serving 1,700 students, and we will be giving out about \$12 million in scholarships to those students," said Sally Sacher, president of the nonprofit group administering the program for the D.C. government and the U.S. Department of Education.

Congress capped allowable administrative expenses at \$375,000. The WSF has met its \$1.6 million operating costs with grants from foundations.

When the five-year program began in the 2004-05 school year, 1,011 students were placed in 53 schools. Scholarship recipients now are enrolled at 58 schools, and the overall retention rate has been about 90 percent.

Miss Sacher encouraged applications for the coming school year, though the program will accept new recipients only in grades one through six because of a space shortage in secondary schools.

The program provides as much as \$7,500 a year per student to cover fees and other educational expenses. It is open to families earning less than 185 percent of federal poverty-level wages, or

\$34,873 for a family of four.

Annual tuition rates at participating schools range from \$3,000 to more than \$22,000.

Inner-city Catholic elementary schools have accepted hundreds of non-Catholic scholarship recipients. At Assumption Elementary School in Southeast, 70 of the school's 170 students receive the federal grants.

"We're grateful that it's a way that we can help serve these families," Principal Chris Kelly said.

"This report confirms what I've been saying for years: A well-designed, federally funded school choice program can have a huge impact on the lives of low-income schoolchildren," said Mayor Anthony A. Williams, a Democrat who backs the vouchers