

>> **Lenore:** Hello, I'm Lenore Maune from the Hoover Institution. Today, Paul Peterson and Terry Moe, Hoover senior fellows and members of the Hoover task force on K-12 education, are discussing the controversy around the Washington, DC school voucher program.

>> **Paul:** Terry, there's a big issue in Congress these days. They're trying to kill a bill they passed back in 2004. It's the Washington DC, school voucher program for low income kids. There's about 1,700 of them that are going to private schools, and the parents love the program. They get a scholarship of about \$7,500 dollars a year in order to go to private school. And now Congress is going to kill it. So what's going on?

>> **Terry:** Well most democrats are opposed to vouchers. And a big reason is that they're firmly allied with the teachers' unions, and the teachers' unions are very powerful and vehemently opposed to vouchers. What it really comes down to is money and jobs. When kids move from public to private with their vouchers, money and jobs flow out of the public system, and that's the last thing that the unions—and therefore the Democrats—want. Their solution is to force these kids to stay in public schools that their families don't want them to be in. And what they're saying is: well okay, we're going to fix these schools. But of course the schools don't get fixed. And if they are going to get fixed, it's going to take decades. In the meantime, these kids' lives are being ruined.

>> **Paul:** The DC voucher program is sort of a personal thing with me. Because, like the Obama family, our family moved from Chicago to Washington, DC. And we lived in the same neighborhood as the Obama's in Chicago, and so we sent our kids to private school there, as did the Obama's. The same one, in fact: the University of Chicago Laboratory School. And then when we moved to Washington, D.C., we put our children in DC public schools and it was a pretty terrible experience. We finally we put our children in a private school, and it was really interesting for me to see that the Obama's did the same thing. They said no public school for our children, we're going put them in a private school.

>> **Terry:** It's pretty clear that the Obama's didn't want to put their kids in the regular Washington, DC, public schools. And because they had enough money, they were able to just put their kids in private schools, which is great. But what the DC voucher program does is it allows poor families to do exactly what the Obama's did.

>> **Paul:** Yeah. I always felt like I had to support vouchers from that point on, because I'd be a hypocrite otherwise. And I'm hoping that Obama comes around to that position as well.

>> **Terry:** Well you know, I mean, what they did makes perfect sense. The DC public schools are abysmal performers. If you compare them to districts nationwide, they're among the worst. And ironically, they're also among the very top spenders. They spend somewhere in the neighborhood of \$20,000 per child, depending on how you count things. And you know, that's basically enough money to send a kid to a top line university. Parents are aware of all this, and a lot of parents don't want to send their kids to the DC public schools, so they're voting with their feet. A lot of them send their kids to

schools in Maryland or Virginia, and about a third of all kids in Washington, DC, actually go to charter schools. This is the highest percentage of kids in charter schools in the entire country. And the reason obviously, is parents want options.

>> **Paul:** And if the voucher program hadn't put a limit of 1,700 students, there'd be a lot more parents in the voucher program. Four times as many have applied as were able to get in. The parents are really enthusiastic about the voucher program.

>> **Terry:** Well, the good news in DC is that they have a dynamic new superintendent, Michelle Rhee, and a fantastic mayor, Adrian Fenty, who is supporting her. They're standing up to the teachers unions, and they're trying to turn this thing around. But it's going to take a long time. In the meantime, Michelle Rhee has come out in favor of the DC voucher program. She says that it's important for kids to have options.

One criticism of vouchers that we haven't talked about yet is that they really don't help kids learn more. That when kids move from public schools to private schools with vouchers, they don't learn any more than they would if they had stayed in the public school system. Now I know you've done a lot of research on this. What do you think?

>> **Paul:** Well, the best evidence is that private schools work the best for disadvantaged kids. They're the ones least likely to use the private schools because they don't have the money, but they're the ones who gain the most from going to private schools. The evidence could be better—and what's really interesting in DC is that there's a very good congressionally mandated study underway to find out how effective a voucher program can be. And with the killing of the law, it means that a really good study is going to come to an end, and that's unfortunate too.

Obama just gave a big speech on education policy, so do you think his administration is going to be more supportive of choice in the future than the Democratic party has traditionally been? Are they undergoing a change?

>> **Terry:** Well, with charter schools maybe. But I think that basically Obama is under intense pressure from fellow democrats, and especially from the teachers unions—who are powerful, core supporters of the Democratic party—to oppose vouchers. And he is opposing them. He's going to let this program go down. This is another sad example of the dilemma that the democrats have faced for decades now. They see themselves as champions of the poor. And I think in virtually all policy areas they are champions of the poor. But not in education. And really, it's because of their alliance with the teachers unions. That alliance leads them to stand up for the interests of the adults who run the system. When money and jobs are threatened, they're perfectly willing to force children to stay in schools that aren't educating them. What they do in the end is to protect the status quo. This isn't what champions of the poor are supposed to be doing. But it's what they're doing in this case.