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House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1501

Testimony of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“The Value of Education Choices for Low-Income Families: Reauthorizing the D.C.
Opportunity Scholarship Program”

November 4, 2015

As the only member privileged to represent the residents of the District of Columbia in Congress, I very much appreciate the opportunity to testify today. Chairman Johnson, I begin by thanking you for working with me on your bill (S. 1629) to make improvements to D.C. criminal justice agencies under federal jurisdiction. I appreciate your leadership as this bill is on its way to passage.

I recognize that the bill (S. 2171/H.R. 10) to reauthorize the D.C. voucher program may pass. Therefore, as the bill moves forward, I want to work with my colleagues who support this \$182 million program to ensure that the voucher students, who I am proud to represent as my constituents, receive a high-quality education. I will offer some suggestions shortly.

President Obama and I have always supported allowing current voucher students to remain in this program until they graduate high school, but we oppose admitting new students, a reasonable compromise considering that D.C. is one of the few jurisdictions in the United States that has built significant alternatives to its traditional public school system. I oppose this program because it has failed to improve academic achievement, including for the students it was designed to most benefit, those from low-performing public schools; it violates D.C.’s right to self-government; it deprives students of federal civil rights protections; and it is unnecessary for our city, which, unlike most jurisdictions, has robust public school choice programs. Few jurisdictions enjoy the quality or quantity of our charter schools, which 44 percent of our public school students attend, or have 75% of their students attending out-of-boundary schools.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found that this program lacks quality controls and transparency. I appreciate that the bill attempts to improve this program, especially by requiring students, at the very least, to attend accredited schools. However, accreditation is a relatively low bar, and is not sufficient to ensure quality.

While there are a number of high-quality schools in this program, Congress should not fund low-quality schools that would not exist but for this program’s virtually unconditional federal funds. These voucher mills are often fly-by-night schools in low-income neighborhoods that sprang up only after Congress created this program. For example, GAO found that voucher students comprised more than 80% of the total enrollment of six schools. *The Washington Post*, in an investigation titled “Quality Controls Lacking for D.C. Schools Accepting Federal

Vouchers,” spoke to officials at some of these schools. The founder of one said, “If this program were to end, this school would end.” If a school can only survive by relying primarily or solely on federal funds, it suggests there is limited private market demand for the education that school provides. I hope to work with this program’s supporters to eliminate voucher mills.

To accomplish this purpose, I offered an amendment in the House to limit voucher students to 50% of a school’s total enrollment, a fairly liberal requirement. My amendment was rejected, but I appreciated that the majority indicated they support eliminating voucher mills. Perhaps the cap should be higher, or perhaps there are better, less blunt quality controls. However, the burden is on Congress to ensure that the high-quality schools funded by this program, such as our fully accredited Catholic schools, do not have to compete for these federal funds with voucher mills.

I am also concerned that the bill eliminates the requirement from the prior authorizations that this program’s evaluation be “conducted using the strongest possible research design.” Thus far, this program has been evaluated with the gold standard of scientific research, a randomized controlled trial (RCT). In contrast, the bill requires the evaluation to be conducted “using an acceptable quasi-experimental research design,” and expressly prohibits an RCT. However, the researchers conducting the current evaluation have indicated that an RCT “is especially important in the context of school choice because families wanting to apply for a choice program may have educational goals and aspirations that differ from the average family.”

Some suggest that it is unfair to deny students a voucher by putting them in a control group for an RCT. Others suggest that it is too difficult to administer an RCT. Given that this program is the first and only federally funded or created voucher program, we owe it to these students and the nation’s taxpayers to understand whether it is improving academic achievement and attainment.

I appreciate this committee’s interest in improving access to a high-quality education. I look forward to working with you to accomplish this goal.