

American Federation for Children Executive Counsel Kevin P. Chavous Responds to President Obama's Decatur, Georgia Speech

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Last week, President Obama delivered a speech in Georgia in which he said the following:

“The size of your paycheck shouldn't determine your child's future.”

-President Obama, February 14, 2013

Mr. President, we couldn't agree more.

For the past four years, supporters of educational choice have wondered why the Obama Administration has so vigorously opposed providing children in low-income families with access to more educational options. Right here in Washington, D.C., the highly successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) has given thousands of children hope for a better future and yet the Obama Administration has consistently opposed it. In fact, despite signing the FY 2011 budget agreement which included a five-year reauthorization of the program, the President's subsequent budget proposals zeroed out funding for the program.

According to the last federal study of the D.C. OSP, children who used their opportunity scholarships had a 91 percent graduation rate – 21 percent higher than those who sought, but did not receive a scholarship. Subsequent research by the program administrator showed that 94 percent of participating students graduated in 2010 and 2011, with 89 percent of those students going on to enroll in a two- or four-year college or university. My friends, the OSP is education program that works for kids.

It's not just Washington, D.C., however, where putting all educational options on the table helps disadvantaged children. There are now 32 publicly-funded private school choice programs in 16 states, plus D.C. which are currently educating more than 245,000 children – most of whom are children from low-income families. And, like D.C., we know these programs are helping kids. In Milwaukee, home of the nation's longest running voucher program, the graduation rate of students receiving a voucher is 7.2 points higher than students in Milwaukee Public Schools. In Florida, tax credit scholarship program students tended to be the lowest-performing students at low-performing public schools, yet they achieved gains in reading and math on par with all students nationally, not just students from low-income families. In Louisiana, three years of surveys show that parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the New Orleans scholarship program, which is a big reason more than 10,000 families applied for participation in the statewide program this year.

I support many of the Obama Administration's education policies, but when it comes to opposing putting every option on the table to help kids, they're just dead wrong. Education Secretary Arne Duncan says we don't support vouchers because we're trying to help all the kids, not just some of the kids. Imagine if you're the parent of “some of the kids” and the U.S. Secretary of Education says something like that. You would be outraged, and appropriately so!

I urge the Obama Administration to heed the words of the President: “The size of your paycheck shouldn't determine your child's future.”

The Administration will have a chance to put those words into action by calling for full funding of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program in their FY 2014 budget.