

# The Washington Post

[Back to previous page](#)

## D.C. school voucher program lacks oversight, GAO says

By [Lyndsey Layton](#), Published: November 15

The local agency that administers D.C.'s school vouchers, the nation's only federally funded program that gives tax dollars to poor children to attend private schools, has so many faulty internal systems and missing policies that it can't manage the program, according to [a scathing report by the Government Accountability Office](#).

GAO investigators also found that the U.S. Education Department, which is responsible for oversight of the city's vouchers, has provided limited help and monitoring of the program.

The federal government has poured \$152 million into the [D.C. Opportunity Scholarships Program](#) since it was created by Congress in 2004. About 5,000 students have received vouchers to attend private schools in the District.

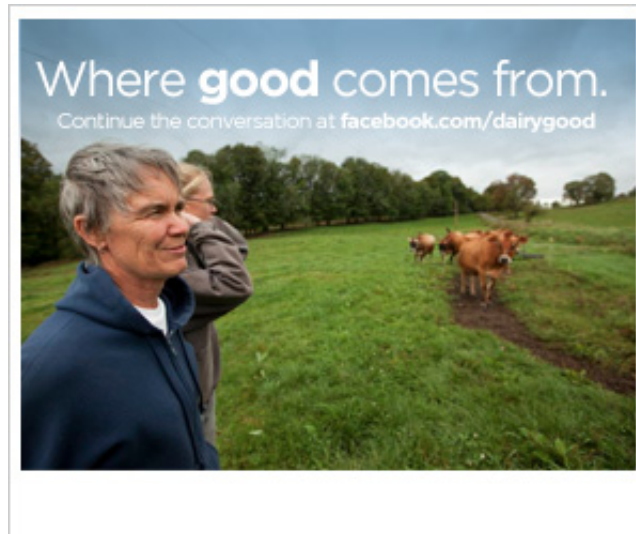
The execution of the voucher program has been rocky, with inadequate safeguards over the millions of dollars in federal funds, insufficient information for parents and a student database that is riddled with incomplete information, the GAO said.

The nonprofit Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation “does not effectively oversee participating schools, has not implemented effective policies and procedures, and is unable to efficiently manage day-to-day program operations,” federal investigators found.

Ed Davies, the trust's executive director, said Friday that his organization inherited numerous management problems when it assumed control of the voucher program in 2010 from the Washington Scholarship Fund.

The GAO investigation began in early 2013 “as we were already trying to clean up things that we had inherited previously,” Davies said. “The GAO audit was a snapshot in time of a program in transition, a program we all agree needs a major overhaul.”

Nadya Chinoy Dabby of the Education Department disputed the notion that her agency had not provided enough technical help. In a written response to the GAO report, she said the department had forged a new



agreement with the trust in June that was designed to improve oversight. She also noted that the Children and Youth Investment Trust has undergone leadership and staffing changes that affected its work.

The GAO found the trust's policies and procedures "lack detail in several areas related to school compliance and financial accounting, which may result in little overall accountability for program funds."

Those conclusions echo a [Washington Post investigation](#) published last November, which found that the 52 D.C. private schools approved to participate in the voucher program are subject to few quality controls and offer widely disparate academic experiences.

The Post found that hundreds of students use their voucher dollars to attend schools that are unaccredited or are in unconventional settings, such as a family-run K-12 school operating out of a storefront, a Nation of Islam school based in a converted Deanwood residence and a school built around the philosophy of a Bulgarian psychotherapist.

At a time public schools face increasing demands for accountability and transparency, the voucher schools operate in relative isolation. The government has no say over curriculum, quality or management.

The Post identified a number of schools that were heavily dependent on tax dollars from the voucher program, with more than 90 percent of their students paying with federal vouchers. Investigators for the GAO flagged five schools that have the highest concentration of voucher students, noting that one of them, the Academia de la Recta Porta International Christian Day School, consists completely of D.C. voucher students.

When Congress created the voucher program, it required that the schools be financially stable and sustainable. A school entirely dependent on the voucher program for income, for example, likely would not meet that standard.

The trust lacks a policy detailing how to respond to a school that does not meet federal requirements, the GAO said. In her response, Dabby of the Education Department noted that the trust has the right to suspend a school from the program if it does not comply with federal rules.

The GAO also found that a trust handbook for parents was inadequate. The agency said the handbook did not have enough information about school tuition and fees, did not contain accurate information about the accreditation status of various schools and was published too late in the school year to be helpful to parents.

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