Eleanor Holmes Norton, Democratic delegate for the District of Columbia, went to the floor of the House last week, huffing and puffing that if Congress allows school choice in the nation's capital it will blow the doors off public schools nationwide.

"If Members vote for vouchers," she said, "they will send a signal to every private school, every organization of private schools, to every organization of religious schools, that this is the time to bring pressure to get the same kind of private school deal that the District of Columbia got."

May Norton's nightmare come true. Public schools need competition, and the District of Columbia is the perfect place to start.

The public schools in the nation's capital are the nation's worst. They excel at failure: No state can match them in overcharging taxpayers or under-serving students.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the District spends more money per pupil in its public schools than any state. Yet, in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading tests, District public school students score worse than students in any state.

In 2000-01 (the latest school year available), says NCES, the District spent $12,046 per pupil on its elementary and secondary schools. But, in the latest NAEP tests, 94 percent of the District's fourth- and eighth-graders scored below proficiency in math and 90 percent scored below proficiency in reading.

These schools are not teaching students the basic skills needed to succeed in any society, let alone in America's advanced economy.

On the House floor, Delegate Norton said the problem is a lack of money. "Schools," she said, "are in the worst crisis that they have been in our country since World War II, the worst funding crisis, according to all the data coming forward."

Maybe she should take a math test herself.

According to NCES, American elementary and secondary schools spent $1,214 per pupil (in 2001-02 dollars) in the 1945-46 school year. In 2001-02, they spent $8,745. That's a seven-fold increase.

The amount of spending is not a problem. The direction of it is.

The District, says NCES, spent $5,982 per student on actual "instruction" (defined as "activities directly associated with the interaction between teachers and students," including the cost of textbooks and teachers' salaries and benefits). But it spent another $5,726 per student -- or 48 percent of its school budget -- on "support services." These include "operation and maintenance of buildings, school administration, student support services (e.g. nurses, therapists and guidance counselors)."
counselors), student transportation, instructional staff support (e.g. librarians, instructional specialists), school district administration, business services, research and data processing."

This $5,726 per student for "support services" is more than the $5,200 in total that, according to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., local Catholic elementary schools will spend per student this year.

Even some of Washington's most elite Catholic prep schools charge less than the District spends per student. Gonzaga, an all-male Jesuit prep school just a few blocks from the Capitol, charged $10,150 last year. St. John's, a Christian Brothers academy where many students join a military-style Corp of Cadets, charged $9,000.

If the District closed its own schools and sent every one of its students to a clone of St. John's, it could save more than $3,000 per student. Does anyone honestly believe students given that opportunity would achieve less academically?

Yet, in the school choice proposal for the District that President Bush is now pushing through Congress, he is not asking that every student be sent to a cloned school. That, after all, approximates what they do now. He is asking that for a five-year trial period, students from District families whose income is 185 percent of the poverty level or less be offered $7,500 scholarships to opt out of public schools. The scholarships would be funded by Congress, but administered by public and private foundations.

They would come with no strings. Religious schools would not sell their souls to take students in need. And because Congress has explicit constitutional authority over the District, the program does not violate the right of states to run their own schools.

In warning that D.C. choice will inspire school choice nationwide, Delegate Norton revealed her true fear: It is not that District children will fail in less costly private schools, it is that they will succeed.

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