



Washington  
Scholarship  
Fund



# Changing the Status Quo

A Year One Chronicle of the  
D.C. OPPORTUNITY  
SCHOLARSHIP  
PROGRAM



The Annie E. Casey Foundation



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Since 1948, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) has worked to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.



**Washington  
Scholarship  
Fund**

The Washington Scholarship Fund, founded in February 1993, is committed to providing low-income Washington, D.C. families a choice in where they send their children to elementary, middle, and high school and to helping fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity for all. During the past 12 years, WSF has provided nearly \$18 million in scholarships to nearly four thousand students through the federally funded Opportunity Scholarship Program and the privately funded Signature Scholarship Program. The U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with the office of D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams, awarded WSF the grant to operate the Opportunity Scholarship Program in late March 2004.



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by Susan Brenna



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## **About the Author**

Susan Brenna is a journalist based in New York City and a consultant to nonprofit organizations serving children and families. She has reported extensively on education for several newspapers including *The New York Times*, and magazines including *New York*, *Atlanta*, *Child*, *Parents*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Parenting*, *Currents* and *The Children's Beat*.



## In January of 2004, Congress created the country's first federally financed initiative to provide low-income students with scholarships

to attend non-public primary and secondary schools. Students in the District of Columbia were chosen to be the beneficiaries of this five-year, pilot school choice program.

Several states and cities have launched publicly funded private school scholarship programs in the past 15 years, most notably in Florida, Cleveland, and Milwaukee. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, however, is precedent-setting in many ways. It is the first joint scholarship initiative of the federal government and a local entity, and the first to be created in conjunction with an ongoing independent evaluation of effects on scholarship students and their families.

It breaks ground in helping low-income families handle costs beyond tuition in non-public schools. Opportunity Scholarships cover school-related fees (within a cap) to help students pay for transportation, to subsidize students' full participation in school activities and to avoid the stigmatizing that other low-income scholarship recipients have reported experiencing. In the spring of 2004, thousands of District families flocked to public meetings at the

Washington Convention Center and throughout the city to learn more about scholarships, and to fill out applications. Within three weeks the families of nearly 2,700 District children had submitted multi-page applications, with 1,366 applications complete in every aspect. In the meantime some 58 private schools signed on to admit scholarship students for the upcoming school term (with another nine private schools joining within a year).

For the 2004-2005 school year, a total of 1,027 students from kindergarten to twelfth grade enrolled at non-public schools, bearing scholarship packages of up to \$7,500 each. Several schools (some with tuitions as high as \$24,000 a year) pledged to cover full tuition for any child admitted, and to assure those children would receive full financial aid until they graduated, even if the scholarship program ceased to exist beyond the pilot stage. "If the funding ran out after two or three years, we were not going to close the door on these students" said Bruce Stewart, Head of Sidwell Friends School.

Just one year later – by the start of the 2005-2006 school year – the program was fully subscribed, with more than 1,700

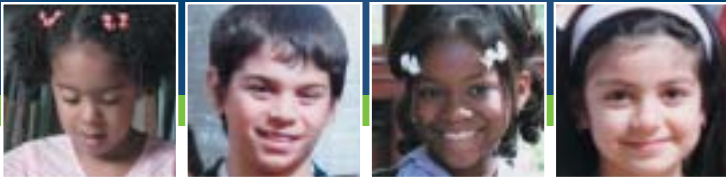
students matriculating. In fact, the demand for scholarships from eligible students exceeded supply in year two by more than two-to-one.

*"Rashawn's already come a long way up in a year. He got a tutor, and the scholarship paid for that."*

— Joseph Kelley  
Parent

Soon, the program would face new challenges: to expand the supply of high school placements, and to provide all students and families the support they need to stick and thrive in their new schools. Providing students the best possible chance to succeed is pre-eminent, but a secondary goal in preventing drop-outs is to preserve the integrity of the evaluation. Through surveys and annual testing over five years, the evaluation team at Westat and Georgetown University is following the program to test whether scholarships have a positive impact on achievement for the low-income students who are participating.

Early signs are favorable. According to a survey of 45 participating families, parents and guardians in year one had



become more involved in their children's education. They also perceived the new schools as safer, with smaller classes and more challenging expectations, to which students were responding by hitting the books harder. Students, who nearly unanimously reported a desire to attend college, felt their new schools were moving them closer to that goal.

*"Anything that changes the status quo has to be tried. The system is so broken, it requires a radical response."*

— Bruce Stewart  
Sidwell Friends School Head

"My 12-year-old son was two years behind his grade level, and what I told his school was, 'The main thing I want from you is to get him ready for high school,'" said Joseph Kelley, the parent and guardian of four children in the program. "I asked a lot of questions before we chose a school, and the principal promised me she would do it. Rashawn's already come a long way up in a year. He got a tutor, and the scholarship paid for that," Kelley said. The program's first year attrition rate of less than five percent also speaks to the value that OSP families put on their children's education, despite the challenges families experienced as they attempted to navigate through an educational landscape — the world of non-

public schools — that felt more foreign to many than they had anticipated.

Many participating schools absorbed new students in greater numbers than they had ever previously admitted in a single year. Schools faced the need to help families acclimate, and to provide many students with tutoring, counseling and encouragement to fully involve themselves in school life.

"For the most part students did very well here the first year," said Josh Schmidt, an administrator at Rock Creek International School, which enrolled several Opportunity Scholars in the program's first year. "A lot eased right into the classrooms and began picking up new languages with pretty impressive speed" at the dual-language school.

"But for some children and parents there was a culture shock, even though we're not an elite or exclusive school, and half our population are children of color. Some parents, for example, did not understand that being asked to come to a school conference does not mean that their children are in trouble," Schmidt said. "They had never been called to school before unless their children were in trouble."

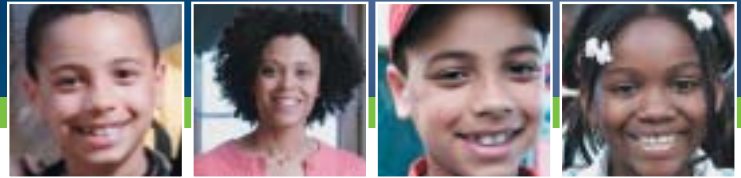
The Opportunity Scholarship Program was born out of support that crossed partisan and philosophical boundaries. Democratic Mayor Anthony A. Williams backed this key

education initiative of a Republican president. Non-public schools across the District supported the program and welcomed this extension of their own outreach and financial aid efforts. Some secular independent school leaders were initially cautious in their embrace of the program; others embraced it enthusiastically.

In part due to Sidwell Friends School's commitment to community service and educating low-income students, Stewart personally lobbied other independent schools to join in this experiment. Referring to the persistent nationwide racial and economic achievement gap, he said, "Anything that changes the status quo has to be tried. The system is so broken, it requires a radical response."

The requirement by Congress to provide scholarships only to children who live in very difficult economic circumstances was realized immediately. The average scholarship family in the first year of the program — a family of one adult and three children — earned an annual income of \$18,742, far below the statutory cap of 185% of the federal poverty level, which for a family of four in 2004-2005 was \$34,873.

In 2004, the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funds to support the operation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. As part of that support, the foundation will chronicle



the workings of this precedent-setting scholarship program as it unfolds. Insights into program operations could benefit both legislators who craft new publicly financed programs, and organizations that serve participating families and schools.

“There are many aspects of this program that on the surface may seem straightforward, but are actually quite complicated,” said Sally Sachar, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Washington Scholarship Fund, which administers the program. “We spend a great deal of time working out details with schools, with the evaluation team, making sure legal and financial oversight is airtight, and briefing leaders at every level of the community, in the press and on Capitol Hill. We are constantly working to refine all of our systems to lessen the burden on schools and families, to make the best possible use of our community partnerships and to strengthen communications.”

This is the first of a series of reports that will track the implementation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program over the course of its five year authorization. Each report will include a chronicle of activities, profiles of scholarship families, and an account of lessons learned. This report was prepared with the cooperation of the staff of WSF. Families of students who received scholarships in school year 2004-2005,

as well as representatives of participating schools contributed their insights through interviews conducted in August, 2005.

## A NEW MODEL

Because this program is the first of its kind, no model for its operation existed. The Washington Scholarship Fund, a 501(c)(3) non-profit group charged with running the program, created virtually from scratch systems for community outreach, school placement, family and school support, the billing and payment of school tuition and fees and for general oversight and accountability. WSF (which also runs a privately funded K-12 scholarship program) received help from partnering community organizations including the Greater Washington Urban League, Capital Partners for Education and DC Parents for School Choice.

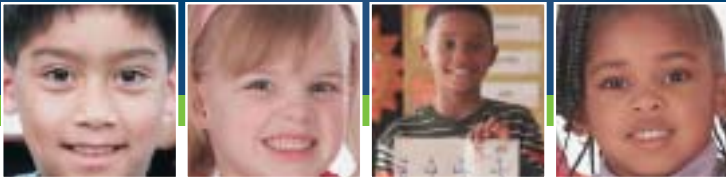
Coming shortly after the widely publicized Congressional enactment of the scholarship program, a great deal of momentum led up to enrollment events in the spring of 2004. Nevertheless, scholarship families and the first 58 schools to sign on made an impressive leap of faith, as the program got up and running on extremely tight deadlines, under intense scrutiny from the press and advocates on all sides of the blazing school choice debate.

The late winter timing of the passage of the federal law meant applications had to be collected during an extremely brief period of only twenty-one days. Congress passed the legislation in January, 2004; the federal and city governments chose the program administrator in late March. In April and May, WSF and the evaluation team collaborated to design an application form that would document students' eligibility, and also incorporate a baseline attitude and awareness survey (for the federally mandated evaluation). Sally Sachar and her team called on numerous school leaders individually to explain the workings of the program and to review the academic, fiscal and other responsibilities of participating schools.

*“There are many aspects of this program that on the surface may seem straightforward, but are actually quite complicated.”*

— Sally Sachar  
President and Chief Executive Officer,  
Washington Scholarship Fund

In April and May, WSF and its partners distributed and collected applications. A subcontractor, the Private School Aid Service, then verified family eligibility, and WSF entered the applicants into grade-level lotteries programmed by the evaluation team to appropriately reflect the priorities in the



**DENISE JEFFERSON,  
AARON (6TH GRADE) AND  
DOMINIQUE (1ST GRADE)**

Denise Jefferson, a substance abuse counselor and mother of four, struggled for years to secure scholarships for her younger sons to attend D.C. non-public schools. In the early grades Aaron attended religious schools on a partial, privately funded scholarship, but left when Denise could not keep up her portion of payments. "You don't like the late notices, or when your child is not going to after-care because you can't afford it this week," she said.

Aaron had his ups and downs after transferring to public school, then had an excellent fourth grade year in the classroom of a male teacher he admired. So when Denise won Opportunity Scholarships for both boys, she enrolled Dominique in the non-public Metropolitan Day School, but kept Aaron in his public school.

Aaron began to have work and behavioral problems in fifth grade. In December, he told Denise he would have to fight another boy at school to protect his reputation. Denise immediately called Senior Manager for School Initiatives and Family Support Elizabeth Plant at WSF to see if the scholarship offer still stood.

The answer was yes, but Aaron's first private school match, in January of 2005, didn't take; he was too far behind that school's accelerated curriculum. In March Aaron transferred to the school Dominique attended, where a teacher who runs the after-school program became his mentor.

Denise approved when Aaron's mentor temporarily suspended him from basketball practice this year, in sixth grade, after he stopped completing homework. Since that happened, "He is doing great in his classes," she said, "but he still has to catch up in math."

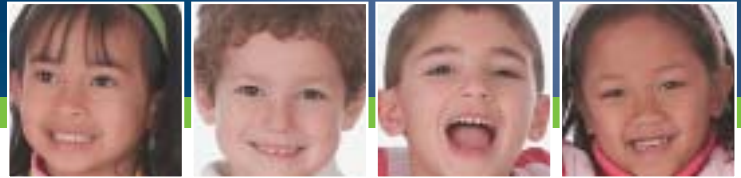
Denise considers the scholarship a benefit and a responsibility. Aaron will graduate from his school in June, and she wants to make his next move stick. She'd like to send both boys to the school with the accelerated curriculum, "but Aaron will have to prove he can do the work." It's hard to keep pushing herself and her sons, she said, "but this is something I've always wanted."

legislation. The highest priority recipients are students attending schools identified under No Child Left Behind as in need of improvement or corrective action. (15 elementary, middle and high schools in Washington fit that description in the 2004-05 school year; 88 in the subsequent school year.)

In June scholarships were distributed through the lotteries, and parents were invited to meet representatives of participating schools at an evening school fair. "I was just praying my kids got scholarships," said parent Pamela Battle. The mother of fourth grader Calvin and eighth grader Carlos, Battle knew many parents who held back from applying out of a misplaced concern that families would lose other federal benefits, such as food stamps or Medicaid, if they accepted federally funded scholarships. (WSF subsequently cleared up those misunderstandings in ads and printed materials.)

"Once they saw our children actually going to these other schools, and doing well, then people started saying to me, 'I wish I would have signed up for this,'" Battle said. "But this whole process takes a lot of effort for parents" who must apply to receive a scholarship, and then apply separately to private schools for admission. "The ones who are a little bit skeptical about it might not follow through."





## OUTREACH AND ENROLLMENT FOR YEAR ONE

With \$12.1 million dollars in scholarship funds available per year, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has the capacity to fund scholarships for between 1,600 and 1,700 students. Scholarships are distributed through a scrupulously designed system that demands a broad outreach effort, and a multi-step verification, school search and enrollment process. Because the program is being evaluated with a control group/random assignment design, recipients must be chosen through lotteries, rather than a rolling first-come-first-served enrollment system that might favor the children of the most motivated families.

In the spring of 2004, WSF surveyed all participating private schools to determine how many openings each school could offer scholarship students. This allowed WSF to issue an appropriate number of scholarships at each grade level. Once the scholarship lottery was held on June 17, WSF used a telemarketing firm to immediately communicate the results to the families of more than 1,600 lottery participants. In the meantime, schools made arrangements to process the hundreds of students who would now need seats.

Each school or conglomeration of non-public schools was allowed by the legislation to

follow its own application procedures although the schools made adjustments given the late timing. The Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, for example, uses a standard screening process to determine appropriate grade placement for students in any of its 22 schools. Chris Kelly, the principal of Assumption Elementary, reported that Catholic schools organized mass testing sessions and made an energetic push to quickly assess every applicant's admissibility. "We turned these applications around in an unbelievably short period of time," Kelly said.

In mid-July families had to submit to WSF a form indicating which schools had deemed them admissible in which grade, and their order of school preference. WSF encouraged the families to apply to more than one school so they would have the best chance of making a match.

Many families took advantage of the school fair to meet school administrators, receive information about participating schools and to begin to compile their lists of preferred schools. A significant portion of parents took days off from work to visit and inspect schools they were considering.

About half the scholarship recipients managed to apply and get admitted to preferred schools by the July 12th deadline. These students entered the school placement lottery pro-

grammed by Westat, a Maryland-based research organization which worked with Dr. Patrick Wolf, who leads the Georgetown University evaluation team.

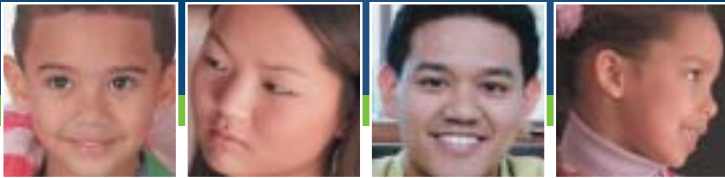
*"Once they saw our children actually going to these other schools, and doing well, then people started saying to me, 'I wish I would have signed up for this!'"*

— Pamela Battle  
Parent

The remainder of students either had not completed the application process, or else had not gained admittance to schools of their choice. As families completed their admissions and preference paperwork, throughout the rest of the summer WSF staff matched these students in groups to openings.

The final placement rate of 75% of scholarship recipients was considered high by researchers in the school choice community. Given the concerns about many D.C. public schools, some observers wondered why the scholarship program was not completely subscribed with 1,600 students in its first year. Others were impressed that the program was more than half-full given its late start in the spring of 2004.

D.C. is atypical in that, before the scholarship program was established, many families seeking options beyond the neighborhood D.C. Public Schools



already had enrolled their children in public charter schools. These charter schools now accommodate about a quarter of all D.C. students (the third highest proportion in the nation).

*“Teachers don’t know who’s who in the classroom. Most are just great kids, very appreciative, and some have parents who come and help all the time. Others have absent parents, just like other kids do.”*

— Chris Kelly  
Assumption Elementary Principal

Families who did not use their scholarships cited reasons that included family shifts, such as changes in guardianship, or a move out of the District. Some concluded they would receive more special needs services in other schools, or received financing through D.C.P.S. for attendance at schools which serve children with disabilities. In other families older students had personal or social objections to switching schools. A small group of parents lacked the ability or motivation to complete the school search process after they received scholarships. Others were concerned by the academic demands of schools they were considering, or by requirements that a child repeat a grade.

According to Assumption principal Chris Kelly, children are often asked to repeat a grade when they transition from public schools. This can be caused by differences in age policies, or by students’ inadequate preparation for a target school’s work level.

Kelly said his school probably was not unusual in lacking the personnel to do intensive remediation for students who performed significantly more than two years below grade level. Children who tested two years below grade level were accepted to Assumption Elementary, but assigned to repeat their previous grade. “If they stay with us for three to five years, we will get them to grade level,” Kelly said. “Many parents were well aware that their children were behind, and they were completely supportive of our asking them to repeat a grade.”

Because Assumption Elementary is an inner city school, there was minimal culture shock among entering families and school staff. “Are there some bright kids who have discipline problems? Yes,” Kelly said. “Are some of them really far behind, and need a lot of extra help? Yes. Are some of them in the middle of the road? Yes. We make a point in our Center City Consortium schools,” a group of 14 Catholic city schools, “not to identify anybody as anything,

including scholarship students. Teachers don’t know who’s who in the classroom. Most are just great kids, very appreciative, and some have parents who come and help all the time. Others have absent parents, just like other kids do.”

While the federal legislation assigned priority to students from schools in need of improvement or corrective action and other students in public schools, it did not prohibit scholarships from going to students already in private schools. Because WSF knew these students were not the intended focus of the legislation – even if they were otherwise eligible – it assigned a lower priority to applicants enrolled in private school students in the year one lottery. WSF felt that it was essential to reserve as many second year scholarships for public school students as possible. No new scholarships went to students already enrolled in private schools in year two. “This was one of the hardest decisions we faced given the way the legislation was written. We feel we acted in accordance with the federal law, but there were key leaders on both sides of the debate who were unhappy,” said WSF head Sally Sachar. “It’s something communities probably want to consider in advance when their authorizing statutes or provisions are established.”



## OUTREACH AND ENROLLMENT FOR YEAR TWO

If the challenge in year one was for program administrators, families and schools to condense a year's worth of school search and enrollment activities into one lightning-paced spring and summer, the challenge for year two was to create an outreach campaign that would bring scholarships to the attention of those living at the bottom of the income ladder. "Our goal was to reach every eligible family, whether they chose to apply for scholarships or not," Sachar said.

Outreach efforts through the launch period for the 2004-2005 school year had focused on radio, Metro and bus advertisements, direct mail targeted at eligible families, a mobilization of community partners, community meetings and a large citywide event. Only one-half of all applications had been received in the heavily advertised WSF citywide event at the Convention Center. Another 40% were collected when families visited WSF offices to complete applications with the help of staff, including former public school teacher and Outreach Director Alicia Robinson, and Family Application Coordinator Don Johnson, who has experience in social work. The balance of applications came through smaller, targeted community events.

At the end of the year one outreach campaign, WSF's Sachar, Robinson, and Chief Program Officer Jennifer Brown had deepened their conviction that many families must hear about scholarships from multiple sources before they become convinced of their validity or relevance to their own life. In addition to public advertisements, families may listen to the counsel of trusted ministers or other religious leaders; community advocates, friends and neighbors with children in private schools; and program staff who conduct small group information sessions on families' home turf, in such places as neighborhood libraries and housing developments.

"We wanted to be absolutely sure we reached the students who need scholarships the most, so we traveled to the neighborhoods where our eligible families were likely to be living," said Robinson.

WSF pursued a broad campaign in the second year that included up to six neighborhood application meetings each week of fall and winter; evening and weekend office hours; informational meetings for organizations including the Counsel for Child Abuse and Neglect, Asian-American LEAD, Vietnamese-American Community Service Center and the Spanish Educational Development Center; information and applications printed in five languages; Spanish-speaking staff at headquarters; a

25,000-piece mailing to D.C. recipients of food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and even home visits by WSF staff to disabled parents and guardians.

*"We wanted to be absolutely sure we reached the students who need scholarships the most, so we traveled to the neighborhoods where our eligible families were likely to be living."*

— Alicia Robinson  
WSF Director of Scholarship Programs  
and Outreach

The initiative which produced the greatest response was a 33,000-piece mailing sent to families of children attending schools in need of improvement. The scholarship program also collaborated with the District of Columbia's State Education Office, D.C. ParentSmart and the Charter School Association to inform 66,000 public school and 17,000 charter school families of all their options – public, private and charter.

WSF fully appreciated how heavy a burden the application and enrollment process places on very low-income families with difficult and complicated lives. Families must choose among scores of divergent schools, rooted in several religious denominations and secular constructs, some large and some tiny, some with state-



**NIKIA HAMMOND AND ZACKIA (7TH GRADE), ASIA (5TH GRADE), RONALD (3RD GRADE) AND LONDON (1ST GRADE)**

Nikia Hammond, a store clerk, said, "The scholarship program happened so fast that first year, I didn't know what kind of school I wanted for my kids." She chose Nannie Helen Burroughs, a small school in Southeast Washington that struck her

as well run and child-friendly. It was also near the home where she and her children were living with her mother.

It was not easy to convince her older daughter, Zackia, to transfer to an unfamiliar school, Nikia said. "She was worried about making friends, or having anyone be her friend." But Hammond was convinced that the smaller class size would benefit her children, some of whom hovered on the borderline of needing to repeat a grade.

The family's resolve was tested when an apartment became available to Nikia an hour's commute by bus from the school. The family took the apartment, but stayed in the school. Nikia said she felt she had become part of an ongoing conversation about her children's education; that she felt welcomed at school, that teachers made themselves available whenever she had an issue to discuss. She feels distant from the other parents, however. "I don't really talk to anyone except the teachers."

That's a feature of neighborhood schools she misses.

"Some people don't have a choice" about where they attend school, she said. "I didn't have a choice." For her a better learning environment trumps all inconveniences. "If you have it in you that you want something better for your children, you have to take advantage of having a choice."

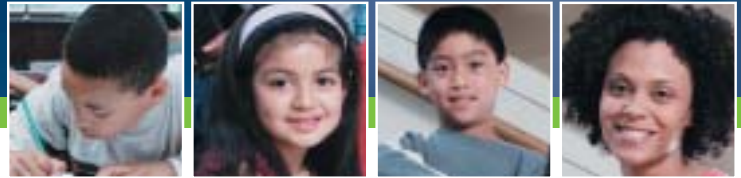


of-the-art facilities and others quite modest, some traditional and some alternative in pedagogical approach.

Many families are disenfranchised from the educational system and skeptical of government-linked programs. Some are homeless, move frequently and have poor English language or literacy skills. Many are single parents or grandparents who juggle multiple jobs and family responsibilities. All are living with children and on exceedingly low incomes.

Determining students' income and residence eligibility status is complicated by the circumstances of some families. Many do not have high enough incomes to file tax returns, which provide the simplest means of demonstrating income. These families must provide annual statements for any income they receive, such as pensions, Social Security or other forms of public assistance. In some cases agencies do not ordinarily provide annual statements to recipients. An individual who wants an annual statement of funds received through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) must go in person to a TANF office and request a print-out.

WSF presents income eligibility guidelines to families in printed tables, which show cut-offs based on the number of individuals in a household. Many potential OSP families house elderly parents or adult



children who are not earning income. Families may be living with other family members or friends to save money. Though it benefits families to count all members of a household, complicated webs of relationships can make it hard to define a household's economic unit.

WSF worked continually with families to remove obstacles associated with the application process. To save trips, WSF developed release forms so that parents could sign for schools and government agencies to send income statements and report cards directly to WSF. WSF also eliminated the need for families to find and pay notaries by training its staff.

## A NEW WORLD

WSF hoped to be able to collect approximately 80% of all applications for the coming year in an intensive, four-month outreach effort that would begin in October. The goal was to run the scholarship lotteries in February, before many of the District's more expensive schools distributed their financial aid budgets for the following year. (The \$7,500 scholarship cap does not cover full tuition at some primary and almost all high schools. It remains the intent of the scholarship program not to burden low-income families by asking them to cover significant portions of tuition – a situation that affected only a handful of families in year one.)

WSF soon came to accept that the original timeline would have to be extended, with a few openings in some of the independent schools lost. Many parents, used to the rhythm of public schools and very busy with the demands of their lives with school-age children, simply are not ready to think about the next school year during the previous autumn or winter. Public school parents typically register their children for their schools in August and September. This timeline is completely different from the one employed by many non-public schools.

Private schools tend to accept applications for the next school year early in the current school year. They host open houses for prospective families throughout the fall, schedule interviews and screen or test applicants. Because each private school might have a different mission, philosophy or curriculum, these processes have evolved to allow families and schools time to explore options and make good matches.

Though a majority of the scholarship program's participating schools have rolling admissions, and accept students continually from fall to the following summer as slots become available, some schools fill every class and commit their financial aid budgets by January or February. This is a much more accelerated timeline than most families are accustomed to facing.

In all materials mailed to District families and in neighborhood meetings, WSF tried to acclimate parents to the importance of going to autumn school open houses and applying early to non-public schools,

*"I talked to people in a few schools, and when I walked in (to Nannie Helen Burroughs School) it felt like a little home to me."*

— Nikia Hammond  
Parent

even before families knew if they would receive scholarships. To facilitate this process, WSF wrote and distributed a "How to Apply to a Private School" brochure which walked families through the steps and nomenclature associated with a typical non-public school admissions process.

To help families identify schools that would be good matches, WSF for the second year published a School Directory, listing a variety of information on each participating school, including nearby bus and Metro access, availability of before and after-school programs, and details on enrichment programs and facilities.

Both the unfamiliar timeline and the situation of having so many school choices actually prompted confusion in some families. Many had never been exposed to an environment of educational options where each



school was able to define a unique mission, implemented with independence from any governing body other than the school's trustees or a religious organization.

*"Every year you'll have a group who will be new to it all. The veteran parents will help the new ones."*

— Jennifer Brown  
WSF Chief Program Officer

Parent Joseph Kelley said that informally and through a family empowerment group that formed in year one, families began to exchange tips on cur-

and interactions with schools and each other. Even so, every year you'll have a group who will be new to it all. The veteran parents will help the new ones."

Some parents of potential applicants still lack the confidence to walk into unfamiliar schools and look them over, particularly in the company of their children, whom they are loath to disappoint if they fail to receive scholarships or admission to a favored school, Kelley said. "Some people have been down so long, it's hard for them to believe that anything good can happen from this."

Catherine Hill said, "Some of us did not have the best education ourselves. Maybe we dropped out of school in eighth grade, and our reading and writing skills are not so good." She suggested it takes time for some parents to develop their concepts of what a good school looks like.

In the program's first year, many parents cited school proximity and safety as key factors in choosing schools, while others cited the academic program and discipline. Many sought placements in the private schools that were closest to their homes or in schools of their religious denomination. Nikia Hammond enrolled her four children in the small Nannie Helen Burroughs School in part because the principal, Shirley Hayes, had been her mother's grade school

principal. "That made me feel comfortable," she said. "I talked to people in a few schools, and when I walked in there it felt like a little home to me."

Pamela Battle, the mother of Calvin and Carlos and an enthusiastic scholarship recipient, admits she worries about sending Carlos to a high school – even one with an excellent reputation – a distance from home. Carlos, on the other hand, got high marks on his seventh grade report card and entered eighth grade determined to apply to very selective high schools in the choice program, some far from his neighborhood. "I can do it," he said, "and I want to try."

### CROSSING THE FINISHING LINE

In January of 2005, WSF asked participating schools to report how many openings they had in each grade. By spring, WSF had collected enough applications to begin running grade-based lotteries for distribution of year two scholarships.

Some school leaders reported a challenge in holding slots open for scholarship students, even as non-scholarship students may have been applying for those spaces. "For us, the biggest problem with the program is that lag between reporting the openings and getting the applications," said Chris Kelly of Assumption School. Bruce Stewart, of Sidwell Friends School, said



Carlos, Calvin, and Pamela Battle.

riculum and other characteristics of schools. WSF's Jennifer Brown predicts this community base of knowledge will grow, "as parents have more experiences



many schools prepare budgets that depend on every grade being fully subscribed. Holding seats open is risky and difficult for planning purposes. This problem will ease in upcoming years as new scholarships open up mostly through attrition. The lotteries will not be affected by the needs of the evaluation (and therefore can be earlier in the year).

A significant minority of families who received scholarships through the year two lotteries had not secured admission to any school by spring of 2005. WSF adopted a “case management” approach to student placement, using a “Planning Your School Search” brochure it had produced to walk families through the process.

The document helps families rank school features that are most important to them, such as availability of after care. Rankings in hand, staff members could refer families to the schools which best matched their priorities, and had space.

As the clock ticked, each member of WSF’s program staff checked in on a regular basis to offer assistance to an assigned group of families without placements. “A lot of times we would call and the phone had been disconnected, or the family had moved in with another family, or you had to leave a message with the mother’s sister because she had a phone,” said WSF’s Don Johnson. “The

families were doing the best they could in their situations.”

Perhaps the greatest challenge in the year two enrollment process was finding places for students of high school age. Some 47 had to give up their scholarships because participating D.C. high schools had no openings for them. The statute limits the schools that can participate to those in the District.

If students have to abandon their scholarships, the validity of the independent evaluation is threatened. It is based on comparing the progress of students who received scholarships with that of students who applied for scholarships but did not receive them. For evaluators to be able to analyze a complete set of data, a large percentage of scholarship students must remain in the program for its full five years.

## FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND OVERSIGHT

In the program’s first year, developing sound financial management systems was a top priority for WSF. The law stipulates that scholarships must be paid to families, not schools. It was important, however, to create a system where scholarship money could be spent only on school-approved expenditures.

In the first year of the program, WSF issued tuition checks in three installments. The checks were written to parents and

delivered to schools for parents to endorse. The payments were triggered by schools issuing student report cards, which were used to verify students’ enrollment and attendance.

*“A lot of times we would call and the phone had been disconnected, or the family had moved in with another family, or you had to leave a message with the mother’s sister because she had a phone. The families were doing the best they could in their situations.”*

— Don Johnson  
WSF Family Application Coordinator

The payment of fees presented more complex challenges, both in accounting and interpreting the law, for schools, families and WSF.

For students who attend schools where the tuition is less than the \$7,500 maximum scholarship amount, Congress stipulated that the balance can be applied to school-related fees associated with a child’s academic success as well as transportation expenses. The object was to help very poor families afford auxiliary costs including club fees, uniforms, summer school, musical instrument rentals and books.

The guiding principal was to assure that Opportunity Scholars could participate fully in all school events that related to academic success or enrichment.



Before the start of the 2004-05 school year, WSF published a list for parents and schools of standard allowable fees. WSF also developed a form for schools to use if they wanted to submit a fee not on the list, to be reviewed by WSF staff.

*"The best result we had from the first year was that we were able to help students who really needed it."*

—Jennifer Brown  
WSF Chief Program Officer

Though families are an important part of the checks and balances system, schools initiate the essential requirements for learning. For that reason, WSF required fees to be identified and billed through schools. This process ensures that academic requirements are addressed first, and makes schools responsible for supplying the students with the education they are promising. It also means, for example, that a parent cannot be reimbursed for independently hiring a tutor without a school's approval.

Many of the knottier conflicts between schools and families in the first year arose not from academic or discipline issues, but from disagreements over fees and slow reimbursements to parents from small schools with lean administrative staffs. Some parents had the understandable but not feasible expectation that fee payments

should be absolutely consistent across schools; for example, if they heard about one school reimbursing for field trips, they felt theirs should do the same. WSF needed to explain that these were school-based decisions and might vary depending on each school's curriculum or on other costs being covered by the scholarship.

In an attempt to improve to make all payments transparent, WSF created a check stub that itemized all tuition and fees paid. The hope was that families would review the stubs before endorsing their checks to the schools. After the first round of payments WSF staff realized that did not always occur. WSF shifted its strategy and created detailed payment reports for each student, which were mailed at intervals to families and schools.

To facilitate families' ability to purchase expensive uniforms in year one without fronting their own money for reimbursement, WSF arranged for a supplier of school uniforms to bill the schools directly. That initiative was expanded to most schools in the program for year two.

Because each child incurred a different set of fees, each had to be tracked through an individual payment database, a labor intensive effort for the program administrator. Schools shouldered the task of creating different billing procedures for Opportunity Scholars than for others. At the end of the 2004-

05 school year, WSF was in the process of overhauling its database, bundling and automating fees to simplify the payment process for schools and publishing school "How to Get Paid" manuals. WSF also hosted financial orientation sessions for school personnel.

WSF's financial and program staff conduct school oversight. To participate in the scholarship program, non-public schools must meet requirements not only for reporting to parents on students' progress, but also for spending scholarship funds responsibly. Schools must provide WSF with an independent auditor's report and management letter or other financial data as agreed. They must supply published tuition and fee information to certify that they are charging Opportunity Scholars the tuition customarily charged to other students at the school.

Certain signals prompt WSF to initiate a review of schools' operations. These include sharp increases in tuition or enrollment or the withdrawal of a significant number of Opportunity Scholars from a school within a short time frame.

### WHAT IT COSTS

For all the reasons delineated above, this program is far from a simple conduit for scholarship money to pass from government to parents.





Volunteers have helped WSF with many functions. WSF's twelve-member fulltime staff have worked long hours not only to quickly respond on all matters to schools and families, but also to generate and adapt procedures and materials, input information into databases, to collaborate with the evaluation team and to staff community outreach events. Significant resources and staff time must also be devoted to financial verification, family case management, financial management and careful school oversight.

It was very clear at the end of the first full school year that the cost of administering the program far exceeds the funds appropriated for that purpose by Congress. Congress designated that three percent of the authorizing grant, or \$375,000 a year, could be spent to operate the program. WSF initially estimated the cost would be approximately double that. The actual cost to run the program in year one was nearly \$1.6 million. Private fundraising from foundations made up the difference.

Staff members devote significant time to supporting families and schools, for example by helping struggling students secure neuropsychological evaluations for previously undiagnosed learning or other disorders. It is also resource-consuming to accommodate

families who switch schools mid-year.

Going forward, Chief Program Officer Jennifer Brown said, "We'll be able to put less time into outreach, shifting those resources to increasing family support for those already in the program. These families' own experiences will, in turn, help keep the outreach and knowledge spreading as we shift gears internally."

Though costs for outreach will decrease, the cost of serving the students will not. Many students enter their new schools performing well below grade level. To improve their chances of success, and to prevent students from becoming program drop-outs, many could benefit from increased counseling and academic supports, including tutoring and summer school.

School leaders report that Opportunity Scholarship families are in great need of laptops or personal computers. Some independent schools regularly use electronic mail to communicate news and information to parents, and students who lack internet access for homework can find themselves at a disadvantage. Schools such as Rock Creek International are actively seeking contributions of PCs or laptops or donations to fund purchases for Opportunity Scholars.

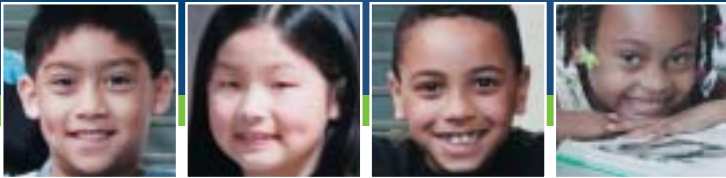
## THE VIEW FROM THE FIRST YEAR

"The best result we had from the first year was that we were able to help students who really needed it," said Chief Program Officer Jennifer Brown. "We heard so many accounts like the one from the mother of a second grader who wasn't reading at all at the start of the year, and who had begun to read in two weeks." Many parents became enthusiastic volunteers at their schools and at WSF community events, even hosting informational meetings in their homes.

*"The scores of the new students must have come up with the rest of us. That's an academic success story."*

— Chris Kelly  
Assumption Elementary Principal

Sally Sachar felt gratified that non-public schools were enthusiastic about the massive OSP outreach campaign, which extended the recruitment reach of many schools. WSF also was able to bring high-performing applicants to the attention of more selective schools. Sachar also was pleased at how the public, charter and scholarship systems strengthened their collaborations through joint initiatives.



Good news also came from the 14-member Center City Consortium of Catholic schools that serve inner city children. The schools enrolled 2,200 students this year, 400 of them freshly arrived through

*“We felt the presence of the students we received improved the quality of education not just for them, but for all students in our school.”*

— Bruce Stewart  
Sidwell Friends School Head

the OSP. “Having that many new students in their system, there was a possibility that they would lose ground on their test scores, but they reported their scores went up,” said WSF’s Alicia Robinson. “The scores of the new students must have come up with the rest of us,” principal Chris Kelly concluded. “That’s an academic success story.”

*“To me, the main benefit of this program is that I can drop off my sons at school with peace of mind. It’s safe, and I know they are working up to their level.”*

— Pamela Battle  
Parent

“We have absolutely benefited from our participation in this program,” said Bruce Stewart of Sidwell Friends School. “We

felt the presence of the students we received improved the quality of education not just for them, but for all students in our school.”

Sachar said it was also wonderful – though not at all surprising – to see “schools really put their arms around these new students.” As one example, Rock Creek International School raised its annual financial aid budget from \$680,000 to \$1,000,050 in a year to pay the difference between the scholarship grant and full tuition for Opportunity Scholars. As a community, the school decided no students would go on the traditional overseas trips unless funds could be raised for all students to go. The school found a business leader with roots in the Middle East who subsidized scholarship students’ participation on a trip to Qatar and Jordan.

At the K-8 school, where half of all classes are taught in English and half are taught in French, Spanish or Arabic, Josh Schmidt said, “We’re proud of the fact that it is almost impossible to walk into a classroom and pick out who are the students who came through the program, and who are not.”

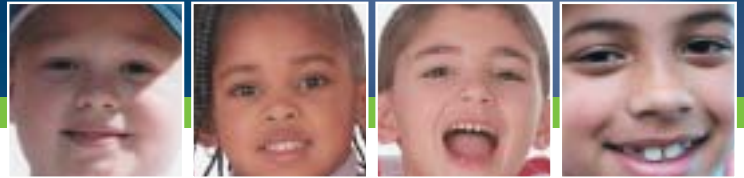
The program has been so successful for the school that Rock Creek announced it would expand gradually into the high school grades, to expand openings for applicants.

Leaders at Rock Creek and at many other schools felt both students and their parents would benefit from more orientation to non-public schools, and that students should have an opportunity to attend summer programs to prepare them for the academic rigors and expectations for homework and behavior they may face.

Some school leaders also felt there should be a regular forum where families could discuss common concerns, perhaps through the program’s Parent Empowerment Group. School leaders also agreed students of all ages could benefit from partnerships with mentors. WSF worked with Capital Partners for Education to pair 20 ninth graders with mentors this year.

“To me, the main benefit of this program is that I can drop off my sons at school with peace of mind,” said parent Pamela Battle. “It’s safe, and I know they are working up to their level. My son was learning things in fourth grade this year that my other son did not get until sixth grade” in his previous school.

For all the operational challenges the first year of the program presented, the positive feedback both from schools and families was tremendously encouraging. Both in initial opinion surveys and in their ongoing conversations with staff members, parents repeatedly expressed gratitude that



their children were enrolled in schools that felt safe, well-run and academically focused. “I can see that the academic skills of my children are climbing, and that they’re learning and paying attention,” Joseph Kelley said. “My kids are not streetwise – they are not about cussing and carrying on – and I’m glad that they don’t have to be in an environment where

that’s happening all around them.”

By the end of the program’s first full school year, WSF staff was already moving to address many of the changes in the program families had requested through the evaluation team survey. The next addition of this chronicle will address many of the improvements put in

place for the 2005-06 school year. ■

*“I can see that the academic skills of my children are climbing, and that they’re learning and paying attention.”*

— Joseph Kelley  
Parent

## IN BRIEF:

# 14 Lessons Learned

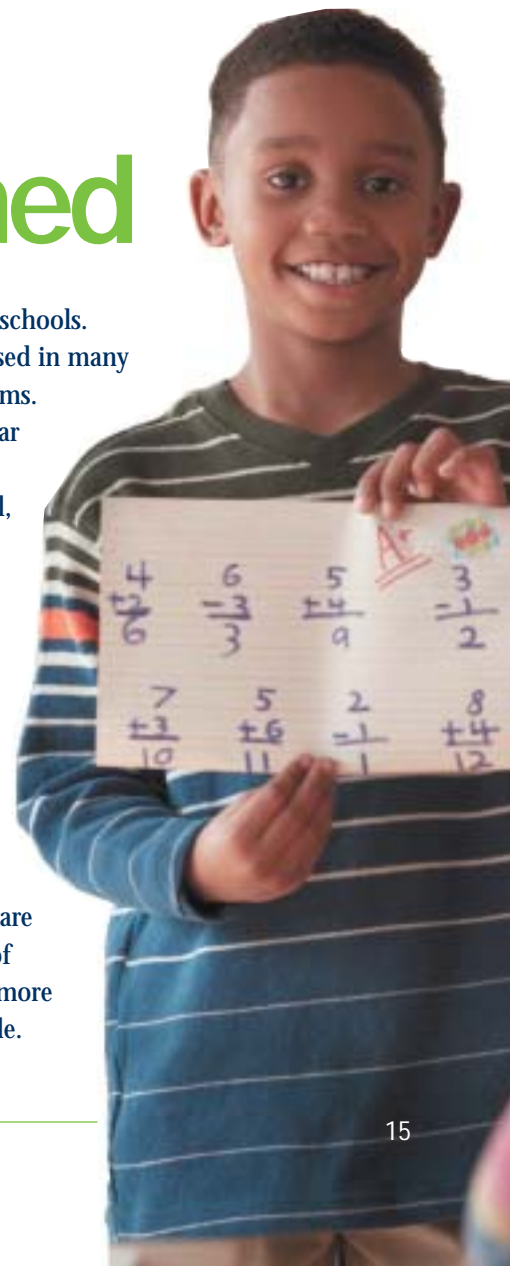
**1 TAKE AN ENTHUSIASTIC AND CAN-DO APPROACH TO LAUNCHING A PROGRAM, BUT KEEP EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FIRST CYCLES OF ENROLLMENT AND ATTENDANCE MODEST.**

Note that it is very challenging to enroll families and schools in a new K-12 educational program. Proactively remind community partners, the media, policy leaders and all constituent groups that the program will start slowly and build.

**2 DO NOT CONFUSE THE NEED FOR A RAMP-UP PERIOD WITH LACK OF DEMAND FROM FAMILIES FOR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS.**

It takes longer than might be expected for word of a new program to reach families, for families to absorb the details of what the program promises, and for families to act on securing scholar-

ships and admittance to schools. Families must be addressed in many ways through many forums. They need to see and hear advertisements, receive written materials by mail, hear about the program in large and small meetings, have opportunities to talk one-on-one to staff, visit school fairs and be invited into schools. Many families want to hear from their peers about experiences and successes in new schools before they are willing to take the step of applying. This will take more than one enrollment cycle.



**3** BE PREPARED FOR THE TRANSITION FAMILIES WILL EXPERIENCE IN GOING FROM PUBLIC TO NON-PUBLIC SCHOOLS; EDUCATE THEM ABOUT THOSE DIFFERENCES AND CREATE FORUMS FOR THEM TO DISCUSS THEIR EXPERIENCES.

Just as families must receive information about applying for the program in more than one format, they need opportunities to learn through many forums what it means to be at a non-public school, how these schools are different and what to anticipate in the transition. Through written

materials and through discussion, parents and guardians need to be briefed on the concept that schools are divergent in missions, philosophy and curriculum. Many families will need to be individually counseled to find schools that suit their needs. Be prepared to help parents as well as the students through culture shock.

**4** FAMILIES MAY RECEIVE MISINFORMATION ABOUT THE PROGRAM THROUGH SECOND-HAND AND OTHER ACCOUNTS – AND ALSO WILL MAKE THEIR OWN ASSUMPTIONS.

Remember, you don't know what you don't know. You must proactively speak to families to discover the misin-

formation and resulting confusion. You must address it directly by including the correct information in advertisements, written materials and meetings.

**5** EMPLOY A VARIETY OF STRATEGIES TO BUILD A NETWORK OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS.

Organize group meetings, and meet one-on-one not only with school leaders, but also with trustees and board members who influence decisions on whether schools will participate. Forge relationships with a few school leaders who will share common questions and concerns. Do not take the first "no" for an answer; many concerns can be put to rest in one-on-one conversations.

**6** START EARLY TO BRAINSTORM AND COLLABORATE WITH SCHOOLS TO BUILD SYSTEMS AND HELP SCHOOLS MEET ALL PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS.

In addition to meeting the academic needs of scholarship students, participating schools take on administrative burdens. Partner with schools to find ways to minimize these burdens and to act as a transparent broker, when necessary, between schools and families. Help schools and families partner to balance control over how enrichment fees are spent.

**7** BE REALISTIC AND UPFRONT ABOUT THE EXPENSE OF LAUNCHING A NEW EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM THAT SERVES VERY LOW-INCOME FAMILIES.

Be aware that you need two major budget components: one for scholarship funds, the other for family and school supports. Initial estimates are likely to be low. Take into account the staff time and other resources necessary to create airtight systems to deal with often transient families, provide school oversight, and recruit families and students.



## 8 SET DEADLINES BUT UNDERSTAND THEY WILL NEED TO BE ADJUSTED.

Everything will take longer than first imagined, especially in the program's first cycles. It's important to set deadlines, both external and internal. However, it's equally important to have flexible timelines that can be adjusted without compromising the program's effectiveness for schools, families and the organization administering the program.

## 9 BE CLEAR WITH SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES THAT THIS IS A NEW PROGRAM AND A WORK IN PROGRESS.

You will try to create the best possible systems for students, families and schools, but you will also make changes and adjustments during the start-up period and after. Prepare to have the stamina to handle criticisms, disappointments, naysayers and challenges. Keep your eye on the ball: the education of participating students. Learn as much as you can about similar programs, and replicate what works, even if you have to modify it in your community.

## 10 DON'T ALLOW STAKEHOLDERS TO BE SURPRISED BY DEVELOPMENTS.

Be proactive in communicating with school leaders, families, legislators at all relevant levels of government, and members of the press. Offer to brief early and often. Be thorough, transparent, candid brokers with the press. Build trust and straightforwardly address inaccuracies in coverage.

## 11 UNDERSTAND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CREATING AN INDEPENDENT EVALUATION TO RUN ALONGSIDE THE PROGRAM.

Determine as early as possible the intersections and inter-relationship between the evaluation



and the program. Be proactive in planning how to meet and balance the goals and needs of both.

## 12 CREATE AND CLOSELY TRACK BENCHMARKS FOR OVERSIGHT OF SCHOOL FUNCTIONS AND FAMILY ELIGIBILITY, BUT GO FARTHER.

Don't get so deep into programmatic process elements that instinct is ignored. Staff members must make many subjective decisions; if something "feels wrong," take a closer look. Respond rapidly to any event that triggers intensified oversight.



## 13 LOOK FOR WAYS TO SIMPLIFY VERIFICATION OF FAMILY ELIGIBILITY.

Consider whether families might offer a proxy for income eligibility, such as verification that a family had received Temporary Assistance to Needy Families for a significant portion of the previous year.

## 14 CULTIVATE PARTNERSHIPS WITH AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT CAN HELP.

Piggyback on the work of others (for example, groups that match students with mentors) but

also build bridges to clearly signal inclusion and broad community connections. Government agencies can help clear away income eligibility roadblocks. Community partners can help prevent "mission drift" by helping with outreach, family supports and other functions. Also, simply by being involved, they send a strong message of support. ■





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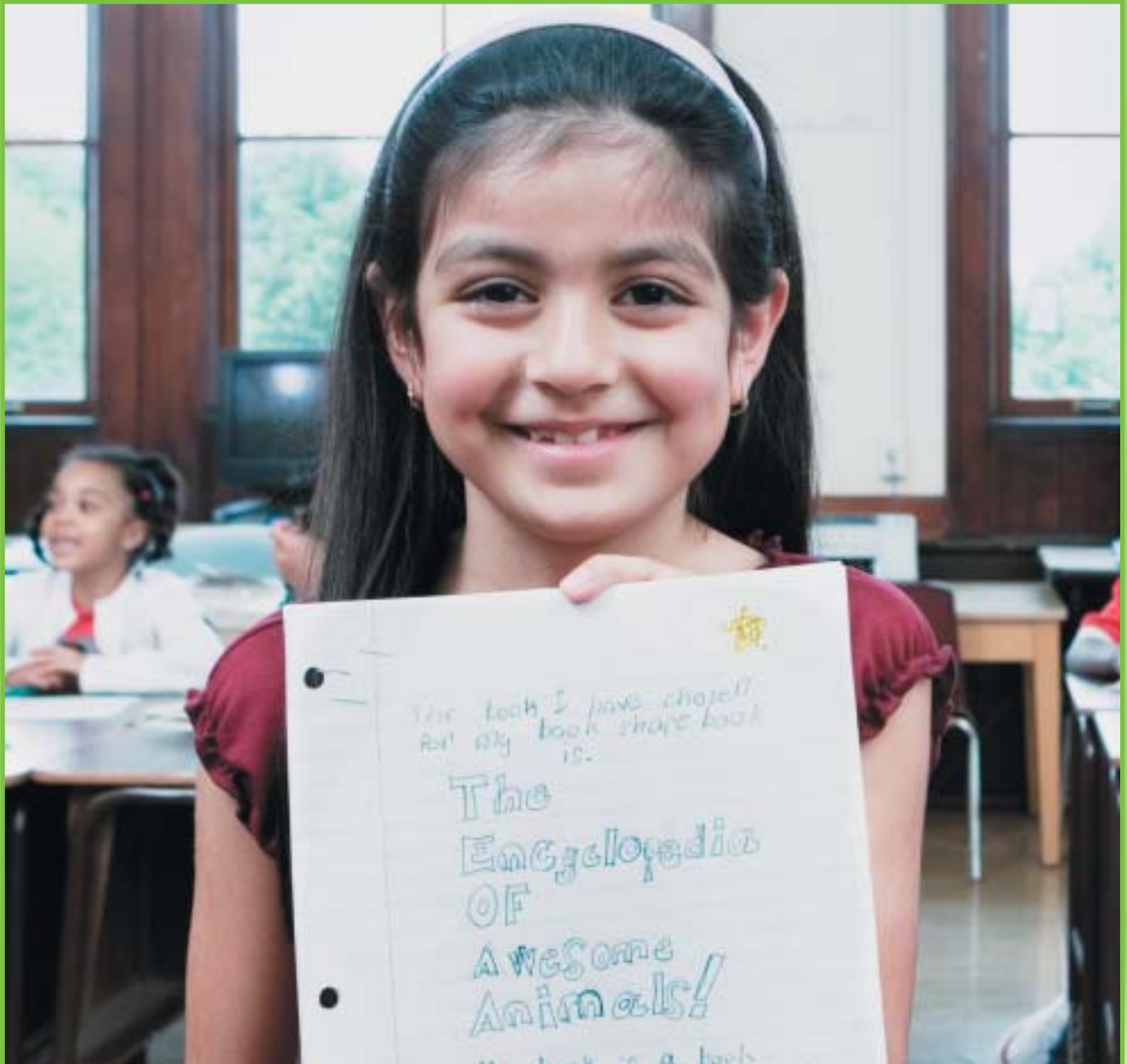
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