

D.C. Family Finds Voucher Journey Well Worth It

By Jay Mathews

Washington Post Staff Writer

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At 7:30 a.m. on a Wednesday in May, the four children of Nikia Hammond -- Zackia, Asia, Ronald and London -- sat in the small living room of their public housing townhouse in Southeast Washington, straightening their school uniforms and watching TV while their mother put sausage and biscuits in a plastic bag for their breakfast.



"We're running a little behind this morning," Hammond said.

She told Asia, 9, to get her book bag. Ronald, 8, had to be reminded to find his coat. Zackia, 11, checked her homework and London, 5, kept her eyes on the television. Soon all five were out the back door, ignoring the yellow caution tape shreds, empty malt beverage cans and other debris along the sidewalk as they hiked a block and a half to the Anacostia Metro station.

After a one-hour bus trip, including one transfer, they reached the private Nannie Helen Burroughs School in Northeast Washington, which the children began attending in the fall under the D.C. school voucher program. Then their mother took a 45-minute bus trip to her job as a store clerk in Pentagon City.

In the evening, she did the same bus commute in reverse, picked up her children from the school's day-care program at 6 p.m. and escorted them home. The next day, she would rise at 6:15 a.m. to do it all again.

Nine months into the experiment, it is too early to know how the nation's first federally funded voucher program is affecting the academic achievement of the hundreds of D.C. children who won the private school scholarships. But spending time with the Hammonds provides a glimpse of the benefits and the sacrifices that the program entails for one family.

Thanks to their federal vouchers, the four children are getting a free education at a school where annual tuition normally would cost \$4,500 for each of them -- a total of \$18,000, which is more than Hammond's annual income. And Hammond is impressed by the differences between the Baptist-oriented Nannie Burroughs and the public school her children attended the previous year -- smaller classes, more enthusiastic teachers and fewer discipline problems.



But the bus trips are long and crowded, with sometimes raucous high schoolers from three public schools sharing the ride. The travel schedule also has made it impossible for Zackia, a tall, lean and talented runner, to join a track club, as she had in the past. There is also the strain on Hammond, 28, who spends nearly four hours every day on a bus.

Hammond said she is determined to take full advantage of the voucher program, no matter what the difficulties. "I am just focusing on what I am doing it for, to pull myself up and to pull my children up," she said.

Under the program, low-income District children receive grants of up to \$7,500 per student to cover tuition and fees at private or religious schools. The

Hammonds are among 1,029 children who began using the vouchers in the fall, and officials expect to award an additional 1,080 scholarships for the 2005-06 year.

Forty-six voucher students have left their private schools since September, according to officials of the Washington Scholarship Fund, the nonprofit group that is managing the \$12.5 million program. They said some of those families left the area, while others decided the commute to their new school was too far or rejected the idea of repeating a grade, which some of the private schools insisted they do.

The Hammonds were among eight voucher families whose names were supplied by the scholarship fund in the fall after they said they were willing to talk to a reporter about their experiences in the program. Like Hammond, those parents said in recent interviews that their children generally are adjusting well to their new schools and have found good teachers and challenging lessons. The fund has declined to release the names of all the vouchers students, saying that doing so would breach their privacy and violate federal law.

What happens to these children is being watched closely by partisans on each side of a long and bitter national debate. Supporters of the grants say that locally funded vouchers in Cleveland and Milwaukee have raised student achievement and encouraged the public systems to do better. Opponents say that vouchers drain resources from public schools, which still have to educate the struggling children who don't receive the scholarships.

It will be another year before education researchers can conduct a meaningful study of the D.C. program's impact on student test scores. But for the Hammonds, the changes in family routine have been immediate and pronounced.



Hammond enrolled her children at Nannie Burroughs when she was living at her mother's home in Northeast Washington, near the school. Then a four-bedroom townhouse in Southeast Washington became available, presenting her with a difficult choice. She could not stand the thought of forcing the children to spend another year in just one bedroom with her, so she chose the long commute. The 163-student private school was so well-run -- with an average class size of about 16, compared with more than 20 at the public schools in Southeast -- that she felt it would be worth it.

As they rode up Minnesota Avenue on the U2 bus on the recent Wednesday morning, the four children sat quietly, either reading or looking out the window. While waiting at the Minnesota Avenue station to switch buses, Hammond chided Asia for taking longer than her siblings to eat her sausage and biscuit. "They are not going to let you eat that on the bus," she said. The child, with a defiant grin, popped the remaining morsel into her mouth at the last possible moment.

The Hammond children said they rarely have more than a half-hour of homework a night, similar to what they had at their public school, Merritt Educational Center in Northeast. What is different about Nannie Burroughs, they said, is the sense of order and attention to learning.

"It is overcast, but we have sunshine in our building and it will be a good day," said Nannie Burroughs Principal Shirley Hayes as her 9 a.m. announcements came over the loudspeakers in the classrooms of all four Hammond children.

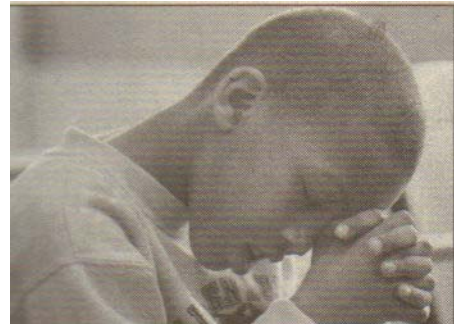


Hayes, who was principal for 23 years at a D.C. public school, Park View Elementary in Northwest, gave the students a short history lesson on William Grant Still, the first African American composer to conduct a major symphony orchestra.

The day's lesson, she said, was "help others." She said, "God wants us to love and care for other people. He especially wants us to love and care for other Christians. In a big family, in a small family, we help each other."

London spent one period with a dozen other kindergartners, enthusiastically learning the Spanish words *colores* (colors) and *estaciones* (seasons).

Ronald's second-grade class had eight students, because seven had gone off to a computer lab. His teacher went from one child to the next, checking reading assignments and having each read aloud so she could check for problems.



On the wall was Ronald's recent two-sentence essay, "Spring is in the Air," printed neatly under his drawing of four short football players and two referees. "In spring my team play against a team named the Black Tigers," the essay said. "I hope to get the medal this year."

Asia's fourth-grade class was the largest, with 19 students taking turns writing the day's spelling words on the blackboard. Hammond said Asia, the most outgoing of her children, often took the longest to complete her homework but was improving.

In Zackia's sixth-grade class of 13 students were frequent reminders that all students had to attend to their tasks. "If I have to advise you to get in your chair and get out your writing journal, it is not going to be pleasant," the teacher, retired D.C. public school educator Geraldine Weatherford, said to a boy who had not followed an earlier instruction.

The sixth-graders went to work immediately, following instructions on the blackboard: "In your writing journal, think of an 'issue' that bothers you. Write about this situation."

Nannie Burroughs has 24 voucher students this year. Like most private schools in the program, it does not provide bus transportation. But Washington Scholarship Fund

officials said Hammond's transportation difficulties are unusual, since most voucher recipients attend schools much nearer their homes.

Hammond said she would like to buy a car so that she could drive her children to school, but she does not think she will be able to afford one for at least another year. This is Zackia's last year at Nannie Burroughs, which goes only through sixth grade. Hammond is visiting private middle schools that are part of the voucher program, hoping to find one closer to their home.

The struggle to get them to school has been worth it, Hammond said, because of Nannie Burrough's disciplined teaching, good standards and small class sizes. "I really think the school has been a good value," she said.

But that has not solved the problem of Zackia missing track practice. The mother of Zackia's father has a car and used to take her, but now the grandmother, who Hammond said is always very helpful, has a job that interferes with the track club schedule. That, coupled with the girl's long commute from school, has kept her out of the club.

The sixth-grader has not gotten over it. She spent very little time thinking of what to say in the essay for Weatherford's class.

She leaned over her paper, writing very neatly with a look of concentration on her face. "The issue that bothers me," she wrote, "is where my grandma said I can't run this year."