

**TESTIMONY OF KEVIN P. CHAVOUS**

**BEFORE THE US SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

**FEBRUARY 16, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today.

Fifty six years ago, the United States Supreme Court declared that segregation in our schools was unconstitutional. They said it was wrong. They said it was un-American.

Brown versus the Board of Education sparked the flame of true and honest civil rights in our nation. But it was only the beginning of a struggle we as a nation deal with each and every day.

The fight for equality in our schools continues anew today in this very hearing room.

Today, we're fighting for a different kind of equality—an America where all children, no matter their income, can attend the very best schools. Quite frankly, we're fighting not to let our children into schools—but to let them out- of bad schools.

You know, and I know, that we can no longer accept the pattern of mediocrity in our schools, we can no longer accept failure, we can no longer tolerate excuses from central offices. If we are to achieve equality, we must act and act now.

This is why I support school choice. This is why I believe in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. It is not a battle of ideology, it is a continuation of the fight for civil rights in our nation.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program sends a clear message to families, to children, and to our community. If you're poor and you're stuck in a school that is failing, that is unsafe, and that no amount of money can fix right away, we're not going to make an experiment of you—we're going to help you. And we're going to do it, not five years from now, but today. We're going to give you a chance at success. The essence of the program is in its name: opportunity.

You can call the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program a scholarship program. You can call it a voucher program. I call it a lifeline.

But so does Tiffany Dunston. Tiffany was an OSP student who ended up being the valedictorian at Archbishop Carroll High School here in the District. Tiffany now attends Syracuse University. Tiffany candidly says she wouldn't have made it but for the OSP. Her biggest hope is that more children are given the same opportunity she was given.

The DC OSP has provided scholarships allowing the lowest-income D.C. children to attend better schools—private schools that are mere blocks away from the public schools that long ago

stopped serving their needs. The program is open to everyone. There is no discrimination, no academic test for entrance, no cherry-picking.

It's not easy for the children in the program to make the transition from public school to private school. Many struggle. But in that struggle, they're learning. They're being challenged. They're being nurtured.

And the results are stunning. Graduation rates are 91 percent for those who used their scholarships. Improved reading scores for students. Parental satisfaction is overwhelming. The US Department of Education said that the program was one of the most effective programs they've ever studied. By any measure, by any test, by any rational standard, this hearing should be about how we can expand this program not just in Washington, D.C. but into other parts of our nation. Instead, by a cruel twist of political fate, we're here trying to save the very program that should be a model for our nation.

For whatever reason—be it petty allegiances or scores to settle—the creative and aggressive opponents of this program are weaving a false narrative about how the program was started and how it's worked.

They say it was forced on the District of Columbia. They say it was imposed on us by Republicans. They say those of us in Washington, D.C. didn't want this voucher program.

That's an interesting story, but it's simply not true. I know. I was there.

I served on the D.C. City Council for 12 years. I was the chairman of the education committee. I'm a lifelong Democrat. And in the past, I did oppose education programs that were proposed for the District of Columbia by Congressional Republicans. I thought they were draconian. I thought they were unnecessary.

But the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was not forced on us. Quite the opposite. I'd like to think that the parents of this city forced the program on Congress.

Hundreds—probably thousands—of parents fought for this program. They came to Capitol Hill each day for years to demand this program. They were tireless, dedicated, fearless, and determined in their efforts to give their children better lives. To say that this program was imposed on the District of Columbia is to rewrite history, and, in one broad brush white-out the hard work of these parents. Quite frankly, it's offensive.

For my part, I personally worked with Mayor Anthony Williams, Education Secretary Rod Paige, School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and the President of the United States to help make this program a reality. It was a collaboration. We insisted on a three sector approach—funding for the scholarship program, for charter schools, and for public schools. We worked very, very hard to develop a program that fit the unique educational needs of the District – where not one dime was diverted from public schools.

I say this not to codify my role in the process, but to tell you the truth: this was no imposition—this program was a collaborative solution. We knew there may be a political cost—and for some of us there was—but we all knew that there is never a price that's too high to pay for doing the right thing for children.

If you doubt that this program has support and has succeeded—look at the application numbers. They don't lie. Nearly 9,000 parents applied for their children to participate in the program even when there were only 3,300 slots over the five year life of the program. Nearly 8,000 residents signed a petition to supporting reauthorization of this program.

And look at what District residents say now. Just last week, a scientific public opinion survey showed that three quarters of District residents want this program restored, reauthorized, and expanded. The people of the District of Columbia know that this program works.

People who oppose this program will do anything to prevent its reauthorization. The truth is no barrier. They'll cast aspersions on the families, tell tall tales about the schools, question the motives of supporters, rewrite history with righteous indignation.

But for me, none of this matters. Because I carry with me the memory of the family that came into my office one day, many years ago. A mother and a father, coming to see a councilman, in tears. They told me their son would die if he didn't have the chance to go to a better school. It was just that serious for them. They had no money. They were losing hope. They told me to fight for their son. Not to talk: to fight.

And there was no way that day—or any day forward—that I could tell that family, or any other, to wait until our public schools fixed themselves.

The truth is: public schools here are getting better. They're improving. And I support our public schools and our teachers. But as long as there are still families like the one that visited my office—families where a future for their children is not something to be planned but something they hope just comes to be—we have no choice but to provide ALL OPTIONS to our children. Immediate options so that no child is forced to suffer or falter or fail.

To borrow a line from Malcolm X, we must educate our children by any means necessary. Public schools. Charter schools. Virtual schools. Magnet Schools. Homeschooling. And yes, Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins, and Members – Opportunity Scholarships through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

We need nothing short of a revolution in education. I urge you to be on the right side of that history. The side of opportunity, the side of hope, the side of families and their dreams for their children. At the end of the day, it's not about protecting the system, it's about equal opportunity for the kids. I urge this committee to reauthorize this program and renew the hope for a better future for our District and our nation.

Thank you.

*Kevin P. Chavous*