

**Comments on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program
Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
Dirksen Center Office Building, SD-342**

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Thank you for having me here today to speak about this important issue. School choice, I believe, is as fundamentally American as apple pie, and DC's experimental Opportunity Scholarship Program is a significant means of providing District families with a whole new awareness regarding the best options for their children's academic growth. Indeed, this initiative has prompted scores of historically underserved people to think even more carefully, thoughtfully and critically about the education of their sons and daughters.

How America cultivates its human capacity will undoubtedly shape our national economic viability. As McKinsey and Company has so aptly noted in its recent research efforts, the racial, economic and regional gaps in education across our country "impose on the United States the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession." ¹ That is a powerful observation.

¹ "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools," McKinsey and Company, Social Sector Office, April, 2009. http://www.mckinsey.com/client-service/socialsector/achievement_gap_report.pdf

Hence, I believe that we—and each of you in particular—must do all that can be done to sustain Opportunity Scholarships for the young people of the District.

I think we would all agree that choice and competition are fundamental threads in our country's fabric. We have, I believe, a strong national conviction regarding alternatives. Isn't it far more American to select from options and opportunity ranges—in the marketplace, in health care, in vocation, in religion, in location of our homes, in election of our public officials—and in a host of other key value decisions—than to select from heavily restricted options or a single, forced choice.

For me, involvement with OSP has brought my own early public school experience vividly back to life. As a young man who grew up in a largely immigrant community in Lynn, Massachusetts, I hold clear recollections of family and neighbors deeply concerned about the community's schools and the opportunities they did or did not present for their children. Hence, throughout my career as an academic administrator, I have maintained the strong conviction that every child should have the option to attend a school of appropriate academic fit regardless of place of residence. In my time, public, parochial, independent, vocational and boarding schools were all options. Choice was often the product of particular personal or family beliefs, but academic rigor and preparation for vocational and college study were also

top-tier considerations. It is good to see these mindsets returning to the forefront in DC, and to know that families are once again engaging in a reflective discussion about their children's school placement. I think there is little question that society benefits immensely when opportunities are offered to all, not simply to some.

Let me offer a personal observation from my own career journey. My first full-time teaching assignment was in public education in Greensboro, North Carolina just after the "sit-ins" at the now historical Woolworth lunch counter. As a teacher and ninth grade guidance counselor, a very important part of my work was with a dozen or so young Black Americans who were the first of their race to enter Walter Hines Page High School. They were "given choice," but that "opportunity" required unparalleled courage and conviction—and led them through great personal pain and sacrifice—simply to "enjoy" equal access. That experience immediately inspired in me a strong determination to do all that I could to see that every young American, regardless of background, received a fair chance at the best education possible. It is still my hope that this goal will one day be fully met, and not as a matter of random occurrence but rather through carefully reasoned public policy.

School integration by race has made a true difference, and I believe that greater school mixture by economic standing must continue. We must not allow one racial

or socio-economic tier of our society to flourish while others languish. The one and the many are and must continue to be inextricably intertwined if we are to achieve the full potential so powerfully present in our ever-maturing democracy. For justice's sake, we cannot have the connected rife with choice while the disenfranchised remain captured by circumstance!

Over the past fifty years, I have personally experienced the maturation of our society's growing commitment to racial equality. Serving as one of the founders of the North Carolina School of the Arts (working with Governor Sanford), as a consultant to the development of the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (working with Governor Hunt), as Director of Admissions, Provost and Acting President at Guilford College, as Head of Abington Friends School, and now as Head of School at Sidwell Friends, I have thankfully had numerous opportunities to advocate for social justice. In each case, one of my professional priorities was increasing student access, not only in terms of race, but also in relation to economic background. It made no sense to me, as the son of a Scottish immigrant who attended school only through the third grade, not to do all in my power to make certain that every child could gain access to the school of his or her choice. My father's words always echoed in my ears: "Boy, I crossed the great pond [the Atlantic] to give you learning opportunities that I could never enjoy. Don't ever make excuses. Achieve! Be all that you can be!" That was his dream for me, and for

nearly fifty years that has been my dream, as an educator, for every American child.

I am very proud of the fact that today Sidwell Friends School enrolls a truly diverse community of students. Currently, we serve two students who have qualified for OSP grants and three who are Signature Scholarship recipients—both programs being administered by the Washington Scholarship Fund. Each of these young people has prospered, having worked determinedly to take full advantage of the School's varied and rigorous curricular and co-curricular programs. Sidwell Friends is honored to be their school of choice. Clearly, all of these youngsters—and many more enrolled at other independent and non-public schools across the District—reached for a challenging education.

When the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program was originally announced there were many members of the independent school community who were quite qualified in their endorsement of it. Sidwell Friends School, however, felt that young boys and girls should not be trapped in a school ineffective for them and their needs and abilities simply by quirk of birthplace, race, income or current home address. Therefore, I am happy to say that SFS was the first such institution to step forward to participate in the OSP, and without any measure of reservation. We believed that a new set of applicants from modest economic circumstances would be motivated to consider independent and other educational options because they would now have the

support—fiscal and otherwise—to do so. As a result, Sidwell Friends School would be able to educate and benefit additional deserving children. And, while we felt we would proffer great service to them, there was no doubt in our minds that they, in turn, would significantly enrich our school community by bringing an invaluable perspective into our classrooms.

As Neil Rudenstine, former President of Harvard University, once so aptly observed, what an academic value it is to have “every face present and every voice heard” in the classrooms of our nation. There is no way, he knew, of achieving the academic excellence we all seek without that crucial variety. Yes, access is morally appropriate, but diversity is absolutely fundamental to learning at the highest level. I think of my own teaching of high school economics. What kind of classroom could one have, and what sort of discourse could one prompt—in a discussion, for example, of national housing policy—if nearly everyone present is either from the comfort of affluence or the challenge of poverty. Good exploration of any concept requires multiple voices and varied perspectives, and not narrowly synonymous thought. For authentic excellence in education, we desperately need to ensure that there is a true mixture of diversity and complexity in all of our academic dialogues.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program is the beginning of the opening up of the genuine possibility for all American students to know and experience one

another. What could be better for the goal of ending the polarity of “red and blue” in America, which I know you desire, than the creation of a nation of citizens who respect and understand the perspectives held by people of differing backgrounds and viewpoints. Our collective essence as Americans has always been the source of our truest strength. Please don’t allow this important step toward pluralism that OSP represents to recede. Keep the windows you have opened open, and unlock even more! Go forward and not backward: enlarge our national vision, do not narrow it!

Horace Mann, who was an early and distinguished national leader of public education in America, called upon us “to be ashamed to die until we have won some victory for humanity.” I strongly implore you to make certain that the positive steps already taken with OSP do not slip quietly away by virtue of inaction. Ensuring the opening of our educational system so that all are served and served well cannot be left to a matter of chance; rather, it must be brought to a condition of certainty. Continuance of the Opportunity Scholarship Program is one powerful step in that direction!

Thank you.