



Statement of Anthony A. Williams
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before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Hearing on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

May 13, 2009

Good Morning Chairman Lieberman and members of the Committee. I greatly appreciate your leadership on numerous issues of great importance to the District of Columbia, especially on voting rights. Although the journey is far from over, District residents are closer to achieving the full fruits of American democracy thanks to this committee. In that vein, I am pleased to be here to speak about the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program – which has expanded educational options for low-income students in D.C. It remains an important element of school reform in DC and a lifeline to hope for thousands of families in the District of Columbia.

I would not be where I am today, and would not have been Mayor of the District had it not been for loving parents that made sure I had the very best education possible. I'm sure that the case for members of the Committee as well. Opportunity Scholarships have improved the education of thousands of children from low-income families, one of whom may be a future mayor of our city or perhaps even a congressperson, or, God willing, a senator.

As many of you know, I was present at the creation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. Some people claim that it was forced on the city by a Republican White House. This is not accurate and I'd like to set the record straight. This program was shaped and championed by D.C. leaders, including myself, Kevin P. Chavous, who was a member of the D.C. City Council and Chair of the Education Committee, and then President of the D.C. Board of Education, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and numerous local parents, educators, and community leaders. We worked closely with the previous administration to develop what many refer to as a "three sector program" with unprecedented investments for all our children. The three sector program approach provides funds to the D.C. public schools, public charter schools, and D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program. We worked hard to craft a program that uplifted all schools and did not pit funding for one sector against funding for another. Not one dime was diverted from DCPS for this program. In fact, this program provides more money to the D.C. public schools to help fund needed improvements and Councilman Chavous and I worked hard to freeze the DCPS budget so that it kept the funding allocated to students who might have left DCPS using Opportunity Scholarships. My goal was for these new funds to improve all educational options in D.C. and let parents choose the best school for their child, with the hope that one day families in the District could have wonderful choices across the spectrum of schools.

As one would expect on any issue that generates strong opinions on a national level, there was not unanimity on whether the District should have vouchers for private school education. In fact, there were some who would have turned down support for public and public charter schools based solely on an ideological opposition to vouchers. I listened to these sentiments, but I also listened closely to the scores of low income parents who implored me to put children first. It became clear to me that there was no reason to deny these parents the opportunity to make the best choices for their children -- the same choices that more affluent people make every day. Indeed, there are still some who don't think that low-income parents should – or are even capable of making these choices. I profoundly disagreed and vowed that we offer the opportunity and see, indeed, whether parents would take advantage of the options. And they did . . . in a very big way.

Five years later I am so pleased that the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has been a huge success. Over 2,600 students have used a scholarship to attend the D.C. school of their choice, and there is a high demand in the community with more than 8,000 children applying.

It was really important to me, and other original supporters, including Senator Dianne Feinstein, that the original bill contained an evaluation component. This program is unique because it was evaluated from its inception. We wanted to see how well the children who received a scholarship do on many factors (including test scores) and we wanted to track these children over time. The studies have found that children and families who received a scholarship have shown great results:

- Children have higher test scores.
- There is overwhelming parental satisfaction.
- Parents are more involved in their child's education.
- Students attend schools that are more integrated and have smaller class sizes.
- Children have an improved attitude toward learning, increased self-esteem and enthusiasm towards school.

The evaluation has shown that the children are making progress. Based on the data I'm perplexed that people say that the program doesn't work. We should continue the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program so that these children can continue to achieve and so other children have the same opportunity.

The scholarships are providing hope to D.C. residents that are most in need - families with an average income of \$24,300 and students who apply with standardized math and reading test scores in the bottom third. The parents in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program were able to pick the best school for their child, something that more affluent families take for granted, and these children are now thriving.

Administering a program of this nature has not been easy. It is the first federally funded scholarship program for elementary and secondary level education. Moreover, verifying the income of families, many of whom are beneficiaries of public assistance, has added another layer of complexity. We are pleased that the General Accounting Office has reviewed the management of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. In November 2007 the GAO issued a report highlighting a number of areas where administrative and management practices could be improved. The program administrator, the Washington Scholarship Fund, has addressed these deficiencies and the program is improved. For example, WSF's Scholarship Invoicing Reports have been significantly improved to include, not just check amounts and itemized charges, but also let families know what fees are covered in each payment, the total billed for the for the school year, and how much money is left over for them to use. This gives families and schools the full information they need about their scholarship.

Having served as a mayor whose programs were subject to dozens of GAO reports, the findings on the DC OSP were certainly within the margins of reasonable improvements and overall, it demonstrated that the program has been administered successfully in the face of numerous complexities, challenges, and political oppositions.

I fully support the language that was included in the FY 09 Appropriations bill that for next school year all schools must have a valid Certificate of Occupancy and that the teachers of the students in the core-subject matters must hold a bachelor's degree. It's my understanding that this was the case in all but a few situations, and I appreciate the work that GAO does in helping all government programs improve.

The school choice environment is thriving in Washington D.C. There is the robust public charter school movement that is now educating over one-third of our students, there is high demand for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, and there are improvements in the D.C. Public Schools. Mayor Adrian Fenty and Chancellor Michelle Rhee have been given unprecedented authority over the D.C. public schools, and acted boldly and aggressively to use this authority to improve the lives of children in the District. I applaud them for their bold reform efforts and admire their tenacity and obvious sense of urgency. Both of them are articulate supporters of school choice and recognize that every child benefits when parents have more than one option for a quality education choice.

I am Chairman of D.C. Children First, a nonprofit coalition of families, educators, business, and community leaders who have come together to support school reforms that will improve education for all children in the District, including providing more choices for low-income parents and providing quality educational opportunities for all. Other board members include former Council members Kevin P. Chavous and Sandra Allen; Maudine Cooper, President & CEO of the Greater Washington Urban League; Donald Hense, Founder, CEO, & Chairman of the Friendship Public Charter Schools; local philanthropist Joe Robert and numerous others.

I strongly urge the Committee to pass a reauthorization bill for the OSP. It is not enough to fund only the current children while not accepting new applications. That decision would split up families, could force the closure of some schools, and seems to be made based on political compromise rather than on the facts. It will be difficult to administer this program on a scale smaller than the current size. Participating schools will face higher per capital compliance burdens as the number of students dwindle. Moreover, it sends a mixed message to parents regarding the program's future and the certainty that their children can continue their educational path uninterrupted.

Quite frankly, I am befuddled by the proposal to have the program die by attrition. As a lifelong Democrat who has served 8 years as mayor of a predominantly African-American population beset by challenges to the basic family unit - most importantly, a decades long system of inferior education, I cannot understand why anyone could eliminate a program that has uplifted the lives, fulfilled the dreams, and given hope to thousands of low-income families.

I am not here to advocate for national policies or to speak beyond the needs of the city I served as mayor. I am here to say that given the “unique”, sometimes I think the best word is “peculiar”, relationship between the federal government and its capital city, the three sector program, including the DC OSP, is an appropriate and well deserved federal investment. I implore you not to curtail this linkage or otherwise thwart efforts that demonstrably improve education of young people in the District.

Last week, I spoke at a rally in support of school choice in D.C. Over 2,000 parents, children and members of the community came together in Freedom Plaza – a few blocks from where we are today. Every one with the common belief that all children deserve a quality education wherever it happens – in a public, public charter, or private school (including through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program). These families presented a petition with over 7,400 signatures – all D.C. residents who not only support the program, but want it reauthorized and strengthened. What is a better measure of success than the desire of parents?

Let me leave you with just one example of many I could cite of children’s lives changed by receiving a scholarship. A young woman Sanya, a senior at Archbishop Carroll High School said “it just shows the difference from 7th and 8th grade to where I am now, where my friends strive to succeed and they influence me to want to succeed along with them. So I’m really grateful for this opportunity”. I’m told that at her previous school she was taken out of the gifted and talented program, but she now takes honors and AP classes, has a 3.95 GPA, is Vice President of her class, captain of her soccer team, a member of the lacrosse team, and president of the International club. She lives with her mother, who works part-time and never graduated from college. Sanya received almost a full scholarship to attend St. John’s University.

I understand that advocates from across the country are weighing in again on this issue. I speak before you today, to ask that you put aside politics in favor of doing what is best for the children. Please reauthorize this program that I fought so hard to bring to Washington D.C. and allow the city’s neediest residents, not just those currently in the program, the foundation they need to succeed in life - a good education. It is only fair to allow low-income parents the same choices that we all have, to select the best educational environment for their child. The long term prospects for our city depend on educating our children.