

Statement of Ranking Member Tom Carper
“The Value of Education Choices for Low-Income Families: Reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program”

Wednesday, November 4, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing to examine the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. I look forward to learning more from our witnesses today about how this program works - or, in some cases, how it does not – and the questions we need to ask here on this committee and the Senate before deciding whether to reauthorize it.

Few issues are more important to me or to the future of our country than the quality of our schools and their ability – with the support of parents – to raise student achievement and better equip young people to compete successfully with the rest of the world.

If we're serious about winning that competition, we need to start by out-educating other countries. That means a major focus on early childhood education. It also means having in place rigorous academic standards across the board, so that our students truly are getting the highest quality education. It also means having great leaders at every school. And finally, it means investing in high-quality teachers, especially at schools with high-needs students.

In pursuing these goals, we must ensure that our states and school districts also focus on providing resources and support to disadvantaged children and to our lowest performing schools. I think all of us would probably agree that we have a special obligation to make sure that all students – no matter their zip code, their race, or their economic status – have access to an education that prepares them to achieve success in the classroom and go on to meaningful careers.

As a federal official and a former Governor of Delaware, I've thought about and sought solutions to these challenges for a number of years now. During my time as Governor, my colleagues and I decided that fostering competition among schools was a key part of our efforts to improve outcomes for Delaware students. And we decided that the best way to do that was through public school choice and charter schools rather than private school vouchers.

Local officials in the District of Columbia have made a similar decision to inject competition and choice into their public school system. Since 2004, DC Public Charter School enrollment has risen from 18 percent of total enrollment to 44 percent. But today our focus is not on the DC public schools, but on the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, the federally-funded program created in 2004 to give low-income DC students financial assistance to attend private schools.

I think it's important to note that this program is not without controversy. As we'll hear in a moment from our colleague Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, it does not have universal support here in the District. In addition, the Department of Education, GAO, and others have highlighted a number of management and other challenges that have plagued the program.

Imagine for a moment a federal program that failed to meet its goals, that was mismanaged for a decade, and that left itself open to waste and abuse. My colleagues on both sides of the aisle would be highly dubious of continuing that program. The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program has actually been accused of all these things.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the program produced ‘no conclusive evidence that [it] affected student achievement.’ According to GAO, the program lacks the ‘financial systems, controls, policies, and procedures’ to manage federal funds. And according to the Washington Post, the program has sent taxpayer dollars to unaccredited and questionable schools, including a ‘Nation of Islam school’ and ‘a school built around the philosophy of a Bulgarian psychotherapist.’

All of this said, we’ll hear testimony today that the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program has had a positive impact. And Chairman Johnson and I met with a number of students and teachers at Archbishop Carroll last week who are convinced that the aid we provide through the program has been of great assistance to students who without it would not have had access to the kind of education we owe them.

What we’re tasked with doing today is finding what has worked in this program and what hasn’t. The evidence we have before us tells me that things are far from perfect.

My hope is we won’t turn a blind eye to either the good or the bad, and instead work together to find the best course of action for the DC students this committee has a special obligation to look out for.

I would be remiss if I didn’t point out in closing that the reason why we have that special obligation – the reason why we’re able to have this hearing and consider this legislation – is the political status of the District of Columbia.

I take very seriously this committee’s responsibility for the District, and in working on these issues have tried to be very deferential to the experience and wisdom of those like Congresswoman Norton who are actually elected here and press us every day to treat DC residents fairly. I believe that she plans to make that case again today.

My colleagues are probably aware of the fact that I’ve introduced legislation again this Congress that would give residents of the District of Columbia the option of statehood and sending representatives to take two seats in the Senate, just like Delawareans and Wisconsinites can.

I don’t expect that that bill will be enacted anytime soon, but I plan to continue building a case for it and making the case for using the ‘Golden Rule’ when it comes to this and other issues affecting DC.

My thanks again, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.