

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“The Value of Education Choices for Low-Income Families: Reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program”

November 4, 2015

As prepared for delivery:

Good morning and welcome.

I want to open by thanking all the parents, students and teachers in the audience this morning. This hearing is about reauthorizing a program that affects the lives of thousands of students in the District of Columbia, and I am appreciative of everyone who took the time to attend this hearing.

This is now the second hearing I have chaired in this committee to discuss the issue of school choice. This summer, I held a hearing about the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program in my home state of Wisconsin. The Milwaukee program is the oldest and largest school choice program in the country, and its popularity among Milwaukee families continues to grow each year. One of the main purposes of that hearing was to take the success that we've seen in Wisconsin and apply it here in the nation's capital.

At the hearing in Milwaukee, witnesses discussed the benefits of being able to choose a school through Milwaukee Parental Choice Program — access to safer learning environments, higher graduation rates, and greater parent and student satisfaction with chosen schools. The Milwaukee program exists today thanks to bipartisan efforts in the late 1980s, and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program was created in the same bipartisan manner in 2004. We will have the chance to hear more about this from one of those leaders in the district, the former chairman of the Education Committee in the D.C. Council., Mr. Kevin Chavous.

I also want to acknowledge those early champions of Washington's program, such as former Mayor Anthony Williams, former D.C. school board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz, former Department of Education Secretary Rod Paige, Congressman Tom Davis and Congressman Dan Lipinski. As the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program faced elimination from 2009 through 2011, the strong bipartisan leadership of Senators Joseph Lieberman, Susan Collins and Dianne Feinstein helped the program continue on for D.C. families.

Most importantly, we probably would not even be discussing this program's reauthorization if it were not for former Speaker John Boehner, who always made it one of his highest priorities to protect this important and innovative program.

Since this is the committee with jurisdiction to oversee federal programs for the District of Columbia, the reauthorization of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program carries the debate about school choice to this committee. I have the same questions for this hearing as I did at our committee's hearing about the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program: Why do hundreds of D.C. families apply for this program each year? How are students' educations different in the

program than if they stayed at their neighborhood schools? Is the program having any positive effects on D.C. families?

Today, we will hear about the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program from several different perspectives: members of Congress from both political parties, a former D.C. Council member and now the head of the program's administration, a president of a private school that participates in the program, a student who is soon to graduate from a private school she attended through the program, and a parent who decided the program was the best available option for his daughters. I thank you all for being here today, and I look forward to your testimony.