

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
May 13, 2009

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Today's hearing on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program allows the Committee to consider the merits of a program that has provided additional educational options for some of our nation's most at-risk children.

Sadly, D.C.'s public schools continue to underperform despite an expenditure per pupil rate that is the third-highest in the nation. Experts have carefully studied the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and concluded that the educational success of the program's participants in reading has outpaced those in D.C. public schools.

The personal success stories that we will hear today of Tiffany Dunston, a freshman at Syracuse University and the last year's valedictorian of Archbishop Carroll High School, and Ronald Holassie, a sophomore at Archbishop Carroll High School and D.C. Deputy Youth Mayor for legislative affairs, are testament to this program's achievements. LaTasha Bennett, whose son is a second grader at Naylor Road School, but whose daughter apparently will be denied the opportunity to follow in her brother's footsteps, will help us understand the real world implications of discontinuing the program.

More than five years ago, leaders in the District of Columbia, working with Congress, designed a "three-sector" strategy that provided new funding for public schools, public charter schools, and educational options for needy children. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program provides federally funded scholarships that

have enabled low-income students from the public school system to attend a private school of their choice. For many of these students, this was their first and only opportunity to access a private education that previously was available only to the children of wealthier families.

The program's popularity is illustrated by the long line of parents waiting to enroll their children. Since its inception, more than 7,000 students have applied for scholarships.

Of the \$74 million for D.C. public schools in the President's fiscal year 2010 budget, \$42 million is to improve the District's public schools, \$20 million is to support D.C. public charter schools, and \$12 million is for Opportunity Scholarships. Unfortunately, the \$12 million provided for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program would only allow currently enrolled students to remain

in the program. No new students would be permitted, despite the fact that the \$7,500 per student cost for scholarship children compares favorably to the \$15,511 per student cost for public schools.

The stories we've heard from parents and students participating in the program, as well as the testimony we will hear from our panel today, parallels what we've learned from recent independent studies conducted by the University of Arkansas and the Institute of Education Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education.

In December 2009, University of Arkansas researchers released the findings of a new evaluation entitled "*Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program.*" The study showed that parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their children's experience in the program.

In March 2009, the Department of Education released its evaluation of the program's impact after three years. This report showed that students offered scholarships experienced improvements in reading that were equal to more than three months of additional schooling, while parents were increasingly satisfied with the quality and safety of their children's schools. Similar progress has not yet been realized in math, however.

Nevertheless, if Congress were to discontinue funding for D.C. opportunity scholarships, it is estimated that 86 percent of the students would be reassigned to schools that do not meet "adequate yearly progress" goals in reading and math. We should not allow that to happen.

Despite invitations to testify before the Committee, Mayor Adrian Fenty and the National Education

Association declined the opportunity attend this hearing and express their thoughts on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. It is unfortunate that they have chosen not to participate since we would have welcomed their views.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses who know first-hand what a positive difference the Opportunity Scholarship Program has made in their lives.

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