

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“The Value of Education Choices: Saving the D.C. Opportunity
Scholarship Program”**

February 16, 2011

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A year has passed since we last discussed how we can best support the efforts of parents and students in the District of Columbia to secure a high quality education. At that time we heard the inspiring personal success stories of participants in the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program. Their testimony helped to highlight the real world implications of the Administration’s unfortunate decision last year to prevent new students from joining the successful scholarship program. And, their words echo today, as we consider the Administration’s newest proposal to kill the program altogether.

While not unexpected, this decision is both disappointing and short-sighted. As the Department of Education’s own Institute of Education Sciences makes clear, students that participated in this program are more likely to graduate from high school than those that did not, a clear indicator of program success.

I am proud to have joined Chairman Lieberman in reintroducing the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act, the SOAR Act of 2011. This legislation would reauthorize the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which has provided additional educational options for some of our nation’s most at-risk children.

This program has clearly filled a need, a fact that is illustrated by the long lines of parents waiting to enroll their children in the program. Since its inception, more than 8,400 students have applied for scholarships.

The need for the program was first brought to light more than six years ago, when leaders in the District of Columbia became frustrated with institutionalized failure within the public school system, and designed a unique "three-sector" strategy providing new funding for public schools, public charter schools, and new scholarships for low-income children.

Working closely with the District, Congress and President Bush’s administration implemented the D.C. School Choice Incentive Act in 2004, giving birth to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The

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program is the first to provide federally funded scholarships to students and has enabled low-income students from the District of Columbia public school system to attend the independent-private or parochial school of their choice. For many of these students, this was their first opportunity to secure a high-quality education.

In 2009, we heard from one of these students, Ronald Holassie, then a sophomore at Archbishop Carroll and Deputy Youth Mayor for Legislative Affairs, who gave compelling testimony about the impact this program has had on his life.

Today, both Ronald and his younger brother, Richard, are vivid examples of this program's success. Even more enlightening was something Ronald said near the end of our hearing, "DC schools didn't get bad over night, and they aren't going to get better overnight either."

The personal success stories we have heard from parents and students participating in the program, as well as the testimony we will hear from our two panels today, emphasize the importance of ensuring that all students in the District are receiving the highest quality education. We must act to reauthorize the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program. If Congress does not reauthorize this program, it is estimated that more than 93 percent of the students would attend a School in Need of Improvement, Corrective Action or Restructuring as designated under No Child Left Behind. We should not allow that to happen.

I thank the Chairman for his leadership and compassion for the District's children.

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