



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph Lieberman

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

Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

February 16, 2011

As Prepared for Delivery

Good morning and welcome to our hearing on the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program (OSP) and the 3-sector approach to improving educational opportunity for disadvantaged children in our Nation’s capitol. Today we will hear from the newly-elected Mayor of the District of Columbia, Vincent Gray, as well as the new Chairman of the D.C. City Council, Kwame Brown. Congratulations to you both on your new responsibilities, and thank you for taking the time to be here today. I look forward to working with you on issues affecting the District of Columbia.

We will also hear from former Councilman Kevin Chavous, who years ago, as a D.C. City Councilman chairing the Education Committee, teamed up with then-Mayor Tony Williams to make the D.C. OSP a reality. We will also hear from the principal investigator on the congressionally-mandated evaluation of the program, Dr. Patrick Wolf, and from parent representative, Virginia Walden Ford.

In 2003, Congress, working closely with City officials, created the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program because of the problems plaguing the D.C. public school system. At the time, D.C. public school students ranked last on national test comparisons in reading and math. The D.C. Opportunity scholarship program was part of a three-sector approach that invests in and reforms the traditional public schools and charter schools over the long term, but provides immediate choices for some students to attend private schools.

Improving the D.C. school system so that every child has the chance at a good education was not going to happen overnight – as OSP student Ronald Holassie told us two years ago – and we are still not there. While we work on improving all of the D.C. schools, many students are going to get lost in schools that are failing them. That is why Congress created the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

I support the education reform efforts begun under the previous D.C. Administration, and I am very pleased that both Mayor Gray and Chairman Brown have a strong commitment to education and intend to continue many of those reforms. As a long time supporter of charter schools, I am gratified that D.C. has an excellent and thriving charter school program. But that isn’t enough. Despite the fact that progress has been made as a result of reform efforts, D.C. public school students still come out last on the so-called Nation’s Report Card – the National Assessment of Educational Progress test – in both reading and math.

So while some progress has been made, the same reasoning that convinced Congress to create the OSP in 2003 still holds – we must give children a choice to get a good education when their schools are failing them. The Opportunity Scholarship Program is working. Rigorous evaluations have shown that the OSP program is helping disadvantaged students now. There is no down side.

Critics of these school choice programs claim that they take away money from public schools. This has never been the case with the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The three-sector initiative has resulted in new funds going to the District on top of the City’s regular education allocations.

A GAO report published this past November looked at the funds going to the District of Columbia for school improvement under the three sector approach. It reports that between 2004 and 2009, Congress

appropriated about \$190 million directly to the DC public school system to improve D.C. public and charter schools. In 2010, Congress appropriated an additional \$62.2 million for D.C. public and charter schools under this initiative – more than D.C. public schools received from Title I, the major federal education program delivering grants to states. So this 3-sector initiative has been a significant source of funds for D.C. public and charter schools.

In addition to the overwhelming enthusiasm of students and parents in the program, several surveys reveal widespread public support for the program. In fact, a new poll that I believe is being released today indicates that 74 percent of D.C. respondents believe the OSP program should continue. Well over a majority of those polled clearly approve of the D.C. OSP and of the use of vouchers.

We know that each year in the District of Columbia, parents of thousands of students look for alternatives to their local public schools, and cannot get access to those alternatives either because they failed to secure a spot in a charter school, or they failed to secure a spot in another public school under the District's out-of-boundary process. We know parents want more choices than they have. Those who can afford to send their children to private schools do so. They do so as good parents who care deeply about their children's future. This is a program that gives that same choice and opportunity to lower income parents who want the best for their children too. For me, this is an issue of fundamental fairness.

In America it should not be a privilege for our children to get a first rate education. It should be a right. Yet without a quality education, there is no equal opportunity. Low income children in the District should be given choices now, because they cannot wait for their schools to turn around. Without programs like OSP, the American dream may be lost to them forever.

Senator Collins?