

SOAR Act Re-authorization Testimony  
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On behalf of Opportunity Scholars and the schools that are privileged to educate them, thank you, Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, and all Committee members for this opportunity to testify to the value of the Opportunity Scholarship as an effective, innovative use of government funds.

I look forward to the day when I am fortunate enough to address senators that my neighbors and I will be empowered to elect. Given that our families lack voting representation in the Senate, I appreciate your concern for our students and their educational options.

As the vice principal for academic affairs at Archbishop Carroll High School from 2006, the second year of the Opportunity Scholarship, and as head of school since 2013, I have seen the Opportunity Scholarship's impact first-hand. It is a powerful tool for families and for our city to continue progressing in educational attainment and equality of opportunity.

The most compelling reason to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarship Program is that it works where it really counts. In the rigorous June 2010 study of the program by the Department of Education's National Center for Educational Evaluation, researchers found that students with the Opportunity Scholarship were 21% more likely to graduate from high school than those in the control group who qualified for the scholarship but did not win the lottery for it<sup>1</sup>. On this basis alone—dropout prevention, which is one of the most significant outcomes we all want for students—the OSP is valuable to our city and our nation.

In a follow-up article, the same researchers called the program “one of the most effective urban dropout prevention programs yet witnessed.”<sup>2</sup> Surely it makes

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf, Patrick, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Brian Kisida, Lou Rizzo, Nada Eissa, and Matthew Carr. *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report* (NCEE 2010-4018). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Pages 41-2.

<sup>2</sup> Wolf, Patrick, Babette Gutmann, Michael Puma, Brian Kisida, Nada Eissa, and Lou Rizzo. “School Vouchers and Student Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from

sense to continue a program whose own evaluators deem it so effective. That the OSP produces higher graduation rates with lower per-pupil public spending makes it even more compelling.

Since the OSP began, Archbishop Carroll High School has graduated 221 Opportunity Scholars. Internal data from the DC Children and Youth Investment Trust indicates that high schools with OSP students safely deliver 88% of them on to college—compared to a national rate of 49% for low-income families.<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Carroll's OSP graduates have gone on to colleges such as Dartmouth, Columbia, Georgetown, George Washington, Penn State, Mt. St. Mary's, Morehouse, Spelman, and a host of other institutions. We currently serve 198 Opportunity Scholars. While we often tout loudest those who go on to colleges with national reputations, many of our OSP graduates of whom I am the most proud are those who came to us reading two or three years behind grade level but who still completed a rigorous college prep curriculum; or those like Mark, a student who admitted to me last week that he wasn't really even thinking about college as an option before he came to our school; or the graduates I know who to have endured periods of homelessness or state custody while in high school. The numbers and the anecdotes tell the same story: the Opportunity Scholarship changes lives.

The 2010 evaluation revealed that OSP students scored 4.75 points higher in reading, which was deemed only marginally statistically significant because it fell just short of the 95% certainty standard, and .85 points higher in math, which was deemed not statistically significant.<sup>4</sup> When the researchers controlled for different sizes in the control and treatment groups and for clustering in specific schools, they found statistically significant reading gains equivalent to about one month of additional learning per year.<sup>5</sup>

I can understand why some would hesitate to reauthorize a program that in its first instantiation may not have produced unequivocal achievement gains. Yet I would urge this committee to consider the Department of Education's own words last week when it proposed limits on the amount of testing students receive and the weight we give those tests in evaluation: "no single assessment should ever be the sole factor in making an educational decision about a student, an educator or a

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Washington, D.C." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 32, No. 2. Page 266.

<sup>3</sup> [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_cpa.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cpa.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Wolf, Patrick, et al., "School Vouchers and Student Outcomes," p. 262.

<sup>5</sup> Wolf, Patrick et al., "School Vouchers and Student Outcomes," p. 267.

school”<sup>6</sup>—or a program such as the OSP, I might add in this case. We offer extraordinary gains in dropout prevention, help our students get into college, and give them a clear boost in reading at the 94% confidence level.

The researchers state that “scoring high on tests is less important to a student’s graduation prospects than academic habits and dispositions such as self-discipline, commitment, grit, and determination.”<sup>7</sup> We foster those crucial dispositions. The District’s OSP students are pointing us to a riveting, marvelous paradox that deserves much wider conversation in educational and policy circles than it receives: educational achievement as measured by tests is crucial, but educational attainment, such as graduating high school, depends in part on other factors besides test scores. Here, in the District of Columbia, where lawmakers had the courage to try something new, and in private schools dedicated to excellence and pursuing our own paths to it, we are discovering that our kids are so much more than data points, and capable of so much more than standardized test scores might suggest.

I am looking forward eagerly to the evaluators’ Spring 2016 report on the program, which I hope will show even more gains. Since the OSP began, Archbishop Carroll has, like many schools, made innovations and improvements—and Opportunity Scholars have had longer periods of time in our schools compared with the period covered in the initial research study. Our school has implemented the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, a rigorous approach to college preparation, and we have collaborated with a wide array of public, charter and private schools on what we call the Virtues Project – a way to cultivate students’ responsible independence that is perhaps quite different from an older image of Catholic schools focused only on obedience.

While I can only speak for one school, I can say with confidence that our quest for innovation is yielding results; in the five year periods ending in 2013 and 2014, our school’s SAT scores in all three tests improved at a rate double that of the DC average for all public and private schools at a time when scores nationally were flat. Our school’s college persistence rate, as measured by the National College Clearinghouse, has increased as well; the Carroll Class of 2012, the last year for which data is available, persisted in college at a rate 20% higher than the national average, even though our school is graduating a higher percentage of low-income

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Education Press Release, October 24, 2015.

(<http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-testing-action-plan>)

<sup>7</sup> Wolf, Patrick, et. al. “School Vouchers and Student Outcomes” page 266.

students than the national average. We are just one of many private schools in the District striving each day and each year to do better by all our students.

As with any innovation, adjustments to the OSP could be helpful. The GAO's 2013 inspection and report brought to light several concerns about program oversight—specifically, the lack of timely program information given to parents and shortfalls in oversight of schools that result in so-called “storefront schools” operating without the academic, financial or student safety accountability we must all expect. As a taxpayer and as a school leader who has received applications from students attending a few sub-par schools, I have every interest in accountability measures that preserve our schools' independent approaches without tolerating fiscal or academic irresponsibility.

The DC charter schools faced similar challenges in their first decade of operation. In 2007 oversight of charter schools was consolidated in one body with streamlined accountability tools, and innovation continues to flourish with more accountability. Similarly, the OSP has a new administrator as of this Fall, and I urge committee members to consider that the answer to administrative deficiencies isn't eliminating the program or implementing a host of new regulations, but rather supporting the Department of Education in its choice of a new program administrator and allowing that administrator to prove its effectiveness.

More so than in previous decades, affluent families in Washington are considering D.C. public and charter schools among their options, and I am proud of our city's educational progress in the last decade—progress that makes all sectors of education attractive to a wide variety of families. The most important reason to seek private school choice is not that public schools are bad; it is that choice is good. Wealthy and middle-income families have the means to explore private schools along with public and charter options. It seems fundamentally unfair for low-income families to have fewer choices than wealthy ones. The Opportunity Scholarship is a way to maximize fairness in the choices families in our city have. As the graduation data for the OSP reveal, the mere presence of a full range of choices can improve outcomes for a low-income student.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As Wolf et al. point out in their 2013 analysis, simply being *offered* the OSP increased a student's chance of graduating, even if they chose not to enroll in private school; those *offered* scholarships graduated at a rate 12% higher than those not offered, while those who *used* scholarships graduated at a rate 20% higher.

In a city that is alive with so much innovation, I hope that we recognize the value of empowering as many families as possible with as much educational choice as possible. If we do not trust low-income parents with the same range of choices as upper-income parents have, then perhaps that distrust bares as much scrutiny as this program has received.

A growing body of research, much of it analyzed by Richard Kahlenberg of The Century Foundation, suggests that socioeconomically diverse schools improve achievement and social skills for all students in them. Particularly when the gap between high- and low-income Washingtonians is at its highest since 1979, with no real income gains for the bottom twenty percent of wage earners and a disappearing middle class<sup>9</sup>, we risk real dangers to all children if we allow them to grow up with unchallenged economic segregation. I would ask this committee to consider the inherent good for our city that comes from the economic diversity in schools that the Opportunity Scholarship helps promote.

I see examples of the power of our school's diversity every day, but one moment sticks out in my mind: the day I encountered two students in the cafeteria, their heads together, chatting eagerly about the upcoming I.B. French classes' trip to Paris. One girl had transferred to our school from the International School of Paris when her father was named an ambassador to the United States, and the other one, an Opportunity Scholar, grew up in an apartment in Anacostia. One had lived all over the world; the other had never been on a plane but was rich in experiences of life in Ward 7. They were both learning from each other, in a powerful way. Our nation's greatest aspirations for community amid diversity live themselves out in the hallways of OSP-participating schools like Archbishop Carroll, and the Opportunity Scholarship can ensure that our city experiences not only the educational advantages of economic diversity but the social advantages as well.

Each one of the Catholic high schools in our city has supports for students with learning disabilities, and I am confident that many of the non-Catholic private schools do as well. We can and should do more to accept a wider array of Opportunity Scholars with special needs. One of the significantly mismanaged aspects of the Opportunity Scholarship under the previous administrator has been the SOAR Act's allocation for academic support services, which was not implemented during the last four years. I urge the Senate to maintain the academic

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<sup>9</sup> D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, as quoted by Aaron Wiener, "Gap Between D.C.'s Rich and Poor Hits 35-Year High," *Washington City Paper*, Posted online January 28, 2015.

support provision of the SOAR Act now that we have an administrator and a Department of Education committed to making that element of the program work.

Our school currently raises an average of over \$5,000 per student to provide small class sizes, low counselor-to-student ratios, English Language Learner supports, and academic interventions for students with diagnosed learning disabilities; so like most private schools in the District, we are not entirely dependent on government funding to serve students with learning challenges. Our ability to serve a wider array of students with more significant challenges will be greatly enhanced if academic supports remain part of the SOAR Act and are implemented by the program administrator. It could also help with crucial extra steps needed for students who are starting from farther behind but trying to catch up, such as summer school.

In so many of the socially progressive democracies I admire, including many that outrank the United States on the International PISA testing, public funding of private education exists. While what is right for Finland, Norway, New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Canada certainly is not always right for the U.S., these countries' openness to public funding of private schools may serve as a source of assurance that the OSP is not an anomaly but rather an example of an American strength—borrowing what is best in other cultures and making it our own.

Amid talk of data and programs, it is easy to forget that the core of education is very small: it is the sparks of relationship between a teacher and a student, and among students and their peers. In the end, there is no truly transformational learning where there is not trust; there is more trust where there are strong relationships; and relationships are stronger when people choose to be in them. Education is not like some intellectual carwash, where we just figure out the right series of functions to perform on hordes of identical, passive students until they come out bright and clean. It is a series of leaps that individual students' own minds and hearts must make. The greater the intellectual risks we are asking students to make, the stronger must be their relationships with the people who are asking them to make those leaps. In the final analysis, it is these crucial relationships that are the single most important reason to support a menu of educational choices that includes Opportunity Scholarships.

The students, parents and teachers at Archbishop Carroll are no different than those at any other public, private or charter school in our area. But we choose each other. We form relationships in a way that makes sense to all of us and that happens to be grounded in a faith that only 24% of our students share. Thus our school is able to

ask our most vulnerable students, many of whom will be the first in their families to finish college, to take on demanding homework each night, to try languages and manners and patterns of thought they have never before experienced. Our way of forming relationships may not work for every student, which is precisely why a range of choices—including a diversity of faith-based ones—has a pragmatic value in educational outcomes for a diversity of students.

I have almost four hundred examples of different webs of relationships our OSP students have with teachers and each other, so I will share only one. Dajanae is a bright, determined high school senior who spent plenty of time in our Dean of Students' office her first two years of high school. Like some members of Congress, she was always convinced that she was right and resisted most attempts at constructive criticism. The only child of a single mother, she received the Opportunity Scholarship in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and spent five years trying to convince her mother to let her go back to public school with her friends. She has become a student leader at Carroll—a cheerleader and an active participant in our virtue cultivation efforts. She is taking on academic challenges such as International Baccalaureate-level Chemistry. When I asked her if she felt the Opportunity Scholarship and Archbishop Carroll made a difference for her, she nodded vigorously and then said she came to see that the teachers and staff at Archbishop Carroll offered her something as crucial as academic rigor: forgiveness and patience. “I never would have grown as much if I hadn't come here,” she smiled and told me—and we had a moment when we both marveled at all the times she bristled under the expectations to which my colleagues and I have held her.

Choice matters because relationships matter. Dajanae stuck with private schools because of her relationship with her mother; she made our expectations her own because our faculty spent hours and days building relationships with her. She is but one example of a student for whom the choice of a school community—even when it was not initially her choice—has made all the difference. Too often educational conversations pretend as if relationships have no impact on outcomes. The OSP proves that they do, and thus it has value far beyond the District of Columbia's boundaries.

In a nation where the notion of “e pluribus unum”—out of many, one—is our nation's original motto—it is only fitting that the wide array of private school options in our city be made available to the widest possible array of its citizens, so that out of many options, we can accomplish the goal of high school graduation and college success for more kids.

Thank you for your consideration of our students.