

## STATEMENT OF KEVIN P. CHAVOUS

BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

November 4, 2015

### *The Value of Education Choices for Low-Income Families:*

### **Reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program**

Thank you Chairman Johnson, Senator Carper, and Members of the Committee, for this opportunity to testify on a subject which is near and dear to my heart; specifically, the value of providing a full range of education choices for low income families. In particular, I am pleased to talk about my long history with the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, known as the OSP program.

As many of you know, I served on the D.C. Council for 12 years. Over half of that time I chaired the Council's Education Committee. From that perspective I developed a keen awareness of the plight of many low income students in our Nation's Capital. During my tenure on the Council, it became increasingly evident to me that many of the public schools serving our most underserved students were failing our children. These students needed options other than their traditional neighborhood public schools. Here in the District, despite having high per pupil expenditures as compared to other states, our students were dropping out or performing abysmally on national assessment tests. I first sought to promote school choice by advocating for charter schools. This is a movement that has thrived in the District demonstrating the high demand for school choice amongst D.C. parents. Yet there was still a compelling need for enhanced options for low income students in the City; hence my collaboration with then Mayor Tony Williams to push for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

I want to take this opportunity right away to point out, contrary to claims of critics, this program had strong support in the District. It was not forced upon us. And furthermore, contrary to claims of critics, it has not taken one dollar from public schools in D.C. To the contrary, it has brought hundreds of millions of new dollars to the District of Columbia for traditional public schools and for D.C. charter schools. From the onset, this was a 3-sector strategy to improve educational outcomes for all students in the District. As created, the program authorized equal funding for D.C.'s traditional public schools, D.C.'s charter schools, and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. The intent was to provide funding to improve

our public and charter schools, but to provide immediate options for kids stuck in schools that were failing them.

Members of the Committee, let me be clear: I fully support public schools in America. Most children in our country will be educated in our nation's public schools. As a country, we must provide sufficient funding and support to make our public schools the best in the world. I commend Kaya Henderson, and her predecessor Michelle Rhee, for their commitment to public school reform and improvement. But the fact is, it can take years to turn around a failing school. And for a child stuck in a failing school, a few years can mean a lifetime of lost opportunity. Our nation can't afford to let these kids ride it out. An adult can ride out a bad situation for a few years. A child with a growing mind can't. That mind might never reach its potential if left undernourished and under-stimulated in a critical period of life. A few lost years can be the difference between a life of drugs and crime and a life of opportunity.

Equal educational opportunity should be a civil right for all students in America. A quality education is the on-ramp to economic independence. It is the gateway to keeping at risk students away from drugs and out of prison. Regrettably, equal educational opportunity is not the norm today. Affluent families can get access to the best educational options. But too often, low income students have very limited, and often inadequate choices. The D.C. scholarship program provides expanded choice to those students most in need. And it has been a clear success. The graduation rate for students using a scholarship is 91%. That is 21% higher than the graduation rate for those students who applied for a scholarship, but were not offered one. It is a staggering statistic when compared to the citywide average graduation rate for the District of Columbia in 2015 of 64%. It should be noted, this is a citywide average. If you look at the graduation rates for many of the schools in the neighborhoods that the OSP program targets, the graduation disparity is greater.

A number of studies have reported on the relationship between high school graduation and crime. A 2013 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education, for example, cited several studies with varying estimates but the same general conclusion; completing high school reduces the likelihood of a young person turning to crime. For example, the Alliance report cited studies with the following findings:

- Dropouts are three and a half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested.
- Dropouts are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison.
- Sixteen- to twenty-four-year-old high school dropouts are sixty-three times more likely to be institutionalized than those with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Consider this statistic from the Alliance report: "...the Alliance estimates that the nation's annual crime savings would be approximately \$18.5 billion if the high school male graduation rate increased by only 5 percentage points." Or this one from the same report: "A 10 percent increase in the male high school graduation rate would reduce murder and assault arrest rates by about 20 percent, motor vehicle theft by 13 percent, and arson by 8 percent."

While improvements have been made in D.C. public schools, it is clear that more needs to be done. The District of Columbia has historically had amongst the highest per pupil expenditures in the country, while our kids of scored amongst the lowest on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments. The 2015 NAEP scores -- otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card -- are out. The District has made progress, but is still underperforming. For example, the proficiency scores for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math for D.C. are 19%. Only 2 states in the country rank below the District. Yet we come in third across the nation in per pupil expenditure at nearly \$18,000 per child. Only Alaska and New York spend more per pupil. The District has made progress, but not enough for many kids in underperforming schools. And in terms of cost to the taxpayer, at \$8,381 for K-8, and \$12,572 for high school, the OSP is a bargain compared to per pupil costs for public school students.

Given these facts and statistics, it is puzzling to me how anyone can oppose this program: here is a program that brings new funds to all education sectors in the District -- over \$600 million to date; it has produced a 91% graduation rate, and has given thousands of poor kids a first class educational opportunity that otherwise would not have been available to them. What's not to like?

Mr. Chairman, and Ranking Member, you have also asked me to address the concerns raised by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and others, and the goals of Serving our Children. Serving Our Children now officially has one month under its belt as Administrator of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. We only moved into our new office space and got our computers hooked up 2 days ago. We have a long to-do list. Of course one of our most important goals is to address concerns raised by GAO and others with respect to program and school oversight and data management. We intend to review all current policies and make significant technological, policy and programmatic improvements. Included in our goals:

1. We have received a significant private grant, much of which will go towards implementing major technology upgrades. We are currently talking to companies and receiving proposals. A major technology upgrade will allow for a more accurate, efficient and effective data intake and management systems. Not only will this allow for better management and oversight of our processes and programs, but it will free up staff time, no small amount of which is currently spent in labor intensive manual inputting and reviewing of data.

2. We intend to develop policies and procedures to ensure the financial viability and sustainability of the participating schools.
3. We intend to enforce the policy of ensuring that any unaccredited schools are fully accredited within 5 years. Otherwise these schools will not be able to participate in the program.
4. We intend to develop internal procedures to ensure that our administrative expenses are accurately tracked, and that our personnel policies ensure high performance.
5. We want to increase program participation and awareness.
6. We hope to significantly expand our marketing and community outreach efforts to ensure that the targeted communities of low income D.C. families are aware of the program, and have the support they need to apply if interested.
7. We hope to develop Academic Support and Tutoring services to ensure that OSP scholarship recipients have the support they need to succeed in a strong academic environment. The SOAR Act specifically designates funds for these purposes, but they have been underutilized.

In sum, a quality education is the foundation for achieving the American Dream. Promoting equal educational opportunity not only benefits disadvantaged children, but benefits all Americans. Equal educational opportunity is the key to tackling the rampant socio-economic problems that plague our inner cities. To the extent we can provide opportunities for at risk youth, our entire Nation benefits from reduced crime, a far more productive workforce and a more prosperous economy. In the past I have referred to Martin Luther King's message during the civil rights movement of the Fierce Urgency of Now. People shouldn't have to wait for their civil rights. A quality education should be a civil right, especially in a wealthy country like ours. A child can't wait 3-5 years for the education reforms de jour. We may lose a child in that time.

For these reasons, we at Serving Our Children are dedicated to the concept that all children can achieve and excel if given the opportunity and the right environment. We hope to do our part to help ensure that all kids, regardless of geography or socioeconomic status, have an opportunity for a quality education and a chance to thrive and achieve their full potential.

Again, thank you for this opportunity.