

Senator Dianne Feinstein
D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Reauthorization
Homeland Security & Government Affairs Committee
November 4, 2015

Good morning. Thank you Chairman Johnson and Ranking Member Carper for giving me the opportunity to testify.

I'd also like to thank Senators Scott and Booker for their support of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Reauthorization Act.

I think we all understand that children learn in varied and different ways.

Programs like the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship provide youngsters with more individualized experiences that are tailored to meet their needs and how they best learn.

D.C. Opportunity Scholarship

I've supported this program since its creation in 2003, when Mayor Anthony Williams came to me, as a member of the Appropriations Committee, and asked that I vote in favor of it.

He believed—as I do—that students in failing schools should have the opportunity to attend a private or parochial school.

He also believed—as I do—that students who are behind in underperforming schools can succeed in high-quality schools.

Since then, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program has helped **6,000 students** attend private schools and improve their chances for a productive future.

This scholarship provides low-income students with up to \$8,381 to attend elementary and middle school and up to \$12,572 to attend high school—so it is consequential.

Students must meet only two requirements to apply for a scholarship: their families must be low-income and have lived in the District for at least five years.

And we know that low-income students are much more likely to attend failing schools.

The scholarships can be used for tuition, uniforms, books, and public transportation.

Program highlights

Clearly there is a need for change.

Nearly 20 percent of all DC students are on waiting lists for better public schools or charter schools. This

scholarship program offers one more alternative. It helps fill the gap between the demand for opportunity and supply of high-quality schools.

While test scores have improved locally, those gains have been uneven. Certain underperforming schools haven't improved. *(24 public schools of 109 total)*

But among students lucky enough to participate in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, **graduation rates are nearly 30 points higher than in D.C. public schools.**

And **80 percent** of the program's graduates continue their education at two- or four-year colleges or vocational schools.

Improving the program

Today, 12 of 47 schools participating in the program are not accredited. I strongly believe all schools that accept scholarship recipients should be accredited.

My staff has visited 36 of 47 schools in the program. They spoke with parents and administrators about how the program could be improved, and reported on what they saw.

The accreditation requirement is included in both the Senate and House versions of this reauthorization bill.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, this is a small program, but it is important and will serve as a model for others when all schools are accredited.

We have an opportunity to continue to make a difference for children who would otherwise slip through the cracks.

We can do better, and reauthorizing this program is one step toward that goal.

I look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, and with Ranking Member Carper to see how we might continue to provide excellent education opportunities for low-income families in Washington. Thank you.