

Statement of Gary Jones
“The Value of Education Choices for Low-Income Families: Reauthorizing the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program”
November 4, 2015

Good morning Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Carper, Members of the Committee, staff and guests. My name is Gary Jones and I am a native of Washington, DC. I was educated in the District of Columbia and earned an Associates Degree in Business Administration. My wife, Stacy and I have been married for 21 years and have 5 children and one grandchild. We are active members of our religious community and volunteers in our neighborhood.

My children have had the opportunity to attend DC schools in all three sectors: public, charter and private schools through the years with varying degrees of success. By far, we saw the greatest level of achievement for our children when we had them in private schools. Charters did not work for my children, while DCPS was mediocre at best.

My three older children were OSP recipients under the old Washington Scholarship Fund, an administrator that gave siblings a preference for entry. This allowed my son, Joshua and daughters, Aaliyah and Yasmine, to attend the same school. Joshua received a full scholarship and his sisters' partial scholarships. This was a huge benefit to my older children and to our family for which my wife and I are truly grateful.

However, due to this Department of Education's misinterpretation of the law, my daughter Sabirah is in the program through high school, but my youngest daughter because she is already enrolled in a private school is considered ineligible. I have to tell you the financial burden is wearing on our family. I am currently making ends meet by working two jobs in order to keep my daughters together in the same school. They're in an educational community that I trust will keep them safe, educate them at a level that more than prepares them for college and will give them a better future than their parents. Isn't that the American dream?

Having parental choice in education is what will give my children their best chance at the American Dream.

I am stunned at the attitude of my representative, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton and her opposition to this incredible program. Delegate Norton, like President Obama, only supports allowing the current children to finish while opposing the admitting of new students. Seriously? What makes the children in the program now more deserving than the children who desperately want the same opportunity? Parents in parts of DC need good choices now and we can't wait for schools to improve or waiting lists to drop.

Ms. Norton talked about accountability. More than 90 percent of OSP kids graduate and go on to college. That's accountability. Some of the best private schools in DC participate in the OSP, including Sidwell Friends, Archbishop Carroll, Georgetown Day, Gonzaga, and St. Thomas More. Those individuals who are more fortunate can afford to send their children

to schools on that list. The public schools in this city have failed tens of thousands of children over the years, and while there has been improvement, they are nowhere near where they need to be. What should we do, continue to wait?

Sadly, eight members of the DC City Council signed a letter saying they oppose the program. I don't remember any of these Councilmembers, including my own, ask me or the other 1,600 families that take advantage of this fantastic program our opinion. Do any of these council members have any idea how much this initiative generates in additional funds for all of the Districts' children whether they are in DC's public schools, charter schools, or the OSP program? Do these council members really want to turn their backs on millions of dollars. Where is the logic in that line of thinking?

The DC OSP is an amazing program and for those of us fortunate enough to have a child in the program, we're grateful. Thank you. It makes a difference. We the families that have seen this program make a difference in our children's lives want the program to be reauthorized, we the families want the law to be followed so siblings get preference, and we the families want to make sure that other families desperate for a better educational environment for their children get this opportunity. We the families are desperate for an ongoing choice will continue to fight for those who have not had this life changing opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the reauthorization of the Opportunity Scholarship Program.