

May 13, 2009
Latasha Bennett
Washington, D.C.

United States Senate
Committee On
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Washington, DC 20510-6250

Re: "The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program".

Dear Senate Committee:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, and fellow citizens. Thank you for inviting me to discuss how the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has provided a better opportunity for my child. My name is Latasha Bennett; I am a 37 year old single mother of 2 very intelligent children. My son Nico Thomas is 8 years old and is in the 2nd grade at Naylor Rd. Private School. He is able to attend through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and he is excelling.

My annual income is approximately \$12,200. Therefore I fit the criteria for the low-income guidelines for the program. I am currently unemployed due to a disability that prevents me from working for long periods of time. I worked from the age of 14 up until I became disabled initially in 2000, I then waited several years thinking that I would be able to return to work in 2006, unfortunately that employment venture did not last long. I was supervising id records for the police department. I love working and performing office and Supervisor duties, and I can't wait to go back to work as soon as I'm able.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program has been a true blessing for me as well as Nico. He loves his school, his teacher, his friends, and the staff. Nico is part of the reading and debate club and now wants to be a doctor. His class consists of only 12 students therefore it is more hands on and the children are given more attention. They learn 2xs better than the large class he would experience at the DC public school assigned to my neighborhood Birney Elementary School. It would devastate my child if he were to have to leave Naylor Rd due to the fact that the OSP is on the chopping block and I can't afford to send him there on my own.

I already lost a nephew to the D.C. schools. You may remember the story Feb.2, 2004 of James Richardson 17 year old, student at Ballou a star football player, who was shot inside the school. That was my nephew. His assigned neighborhood school was unsafe and had low expectations for the students. I wonder if he would be sitting here today as a success story, if a scholarship had been available for him to attend a private school. The scholarship provides my child an opportunity to be in a quality educational environment and I know he will be a productive citizen in the future. I will not lose my babies when they are so bright and willing to learn.

My daughter Nia Thomas is 4 years old. I receive a DHS voucher from the District of Columbia, which I also qualify for because of my income so that she can attend pre-school. I fought and advocated for her to be able to attend Naylor Road's Pre-K program at the Annex with the DHS voucher. Naylor Rd. School applied to participate in the program in July but they weren't approved until December. She started at the school the very next day. This was the best thing that has ever happened for Nia – she can write her name, she knows all her letters – she is so smart. I'm grateful that D.C. has the voucher for Pre-K so that she can learn and be ready for Kindergarten.

I applied for Nia to get a D.C. Opportunity Scholarship so that she could attend Naylor Rd. for the 09-10 school year. I was initially told that she was eligible for a scholarship, I was so elated. Then along came a retraction letter, and I was devastated and angry. I want Nia to have the same opportunity to excel as well as her older brother. Nia is so looking forward to going to Naylor Rd. with her brother that she continues to ask me "Mom when do I go to school with my brother?" I use to answer her and tell her very soon, now I don't know what to tell her. My children really need this program to continue, without it I truly don't have a clue as to where I will send them to school. My assigned neighborhood school is not an acceptable place, and options are so limited at this late date.

I would like to ask Mr. Secretary Arne Duncan how is it that my child should not be given the same opportunity as his children to get the best education possible. If Congress gave enough money, why is she being denied the opportunity to attend a great school, the same school as her brother? I have not told her that she is not going to Naylor rd. school, because I am pleading to the Committee, Mr. Duncan, to Mayor Fenty and our President OBAMA to get involved. The children are our future. I want to personally thank the 14 Senators that wrote Secretary Duncan asking him to reconsider his decision to end this most needed program. I also thank President OBAMA for extending the program for current students – but it's not enough. What am I to do now with my daughter who is entering Kindergarten and wants to attend the same school as her brother? Why is Nia not as important as the other children – doesn't she deserve the same opportunity to get an excellent education as her brother, a lot of Senators, Mayors and your beautiful daughters have? Please hear my plea about the severity of this matter to me and a lot of parents who are going through the same stress and anxiety of not knowing what is going to happen to our children's hopes and dreams for a better future and education.

I attended the rally last week in Freedom Plaza, and helped deliver a petition with over 7,400 D.C. residents that agree with me – the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program should continue as an option. But that's just the beginning, I'm going to continue to ask everyone to get involved in this very important issue and assure that this program does not end. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program should be extended so that not only my children, but also the children of my friends and relatives, should have the opportunity to get the same type of education as your children are receiving.

Education is the #1 priority in my household and by allotting federal funding towards this program that is a success, shows great improvement on the part of our Government

decision-making. It is evident that this program is working because the statistics show that the students have higher test scores. This program shows that low-income children can excel when given the opportunity. It gives parents such as myself **HOPE** for our future.

My children's future depends on this opportunity. They have bright goals for their future so please allow them to come true by continuing this program. Remember **our children are our future** and without the proper education what type of future will we have? So please recommit to this outstanding program, I thank you and so do Nico and Nia in advance, because we know that all of you know that education is key to their success. We believe you will make the right decision.

Thank You,

Latasha Bennett
Concerned Parent