

Testimony of Kwame R. Brown, Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia

Submitted for the Public Hearing on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship
Program

Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Collins, and other members of this distinguished committee, I am Kwame R. Brown, Chairman of the Council of the District of Columbia. It is my pleasure to speak before you today on the “Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act of 2011” or “SOAR.” I am happy to participate in any forum among lawmakers who are genuinely committed to improving educational opportunities for the young people and families of my hometown.

As was the case under my distinguished predecessor, our new Mayor, Vincent Gray, I have kept education in the Council’s Committee of the Whole, which I chair, because I believe there is no single thing more important for the future of our city than ensuring that every child has access to a high quality education. In fact, virtually every major issue before the Council will be impossible or more difficult to address if we don’t push ahead with education reform.

I would like to take this occasion to thank Senator Lieberman and Senator Collins for your longstanding support for the District, especially your advocacy for voting rights. Your sense of fairness and willingness to advocate for us will not be forgotten.

Your bill is a step in the right direction, as it authorizes \$60 million to create better educational outcomes for our young people. It carries on the “three-sector” approach by benefitting students in the District of Columbia Public Schools, public charter schools, and nonpublic schools. By formally authorizing the funding streams for DCPS and charter schools, it grants them more permanency and protection in these tight financial times. The

bill also makes some needed improvements in the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) with additional quality filters for participating schools and refinements in the amounts and types of support available through the program.

Education Reform in the District of Columbia

In the past five years, our city has implemented some of the most transformational education initiatives that our city has ever seen, including mayoral control which streamlines decision-making and rigorous standards for all grades and in all subjects. We have led the nation in providing universal pre-k for our youngest learners and in approving a landmark teachers' contract which includes student performance as an important measure of teacher success. Our innovative work on behalf of our students has attracted significant attention and support, including a Race to the Top award from the U.S. Department of Education.

Although our students are scoring below the national average on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) the District of Columbia has seen some of the highest growth in the nation in both reading and math on this test over the past few years. With increasing quality in DC Public Schools and a vibrant charter school community, our parents have more quality choices now than they ever have before. We are on an upward path toward success; yet, we still have a long way to go before every child has access to a high quality education.

Parental Choice and Student Opportunity

Most of the discussion on this bill focuses on the nonpublic sector – the OSP. Indeed, one can merely mention the words “school voucher” to ignite debate among people deeply committed to children in my city. While I recognize and respect the concerns of both sides, the issue for me in this debate comes down to one question: Can the OSP increase the number of quality educational options for low-income families in the District? I believe that the answer is yes.

The data suggests that students participating in the program are benefitting from the experience – academically and otherwise. I've heard directly from families that they feel

empowered and uplifted by expanded school choice, more confident about their children's future, and that they have learned to be more engaged parents and better educational advocates for their children.

I will admit that I was initially uncomfortable with the idea of vouchers in the District because I felt that they were being presented primarily as a way for students and families to leave DCPS. While I support quality choices for families, I could never support the use of vouchers as an excuse to avoid improving our public schools. We *must* invest in our public schools, and we are doing just that, as demonstrated by the promising reforms underway in DCPS and our robust charter school community. Because this bill authorizes funds for all three sectors – DCPS, public charter schools, and scholarships to families for nonpublic schools – it can be part of our efforts to improve educational choices for all families.

While some families have used the OSP to access nonpublic schools, we have also seen the enrollment of DCPS stabilize and move upwards for the first time in decades, as well as continuously increasing enrollment in public charter schools. This indicates greater confidence in our public schools. We have truly become a city of choice, as demonstrated by the fact that in the 2009-2010 school year, almost 60 percent of our students attended schools beyond their neighborhood boundaries, including nearly 40 percent in public charter schools.¹ This bill will continue to allow families to access nonpublic schools, but it will also improve the quality of those nonpublic options, and support improvements in the DCPS and public charter schools which the majority of our students are attending.

As a parent myself, I know that the most fundamental instinct of parents is to seek what is best for their children. I cannot look a working mother in the eye and tell her that she deserves less choice, not more. Our low-income families deserve as much choice as possible, including diverse offerings in DCPS, a full menu of charter schools, and opportunities to attend nonpublic schools.

¹ Friends of Choice in Urban Schools

Promising Aspects of SOAR

Previous efforts to reauthorize the Opportunity Scholarship Program exposed some problems in how the program was administered. Some of the stories that I have heard are troubling, but your bill does much to address these problems through tougher requirements for participating schools.

We must ensure that the nonpublic options for our families are of the highest possible quality. Requiring program administrators to complete site inspections and verify that schools have valid certificates of occupancy and accreditation is an important step toward this goal. The annual evaluation required by the bill, which examines academic achievement of students – including test performance and graduation rates – will ensure that our students are benefitting from the OSP.

I also support the mandate that teachers have bachelor's degrees in core subjects and the mandate for compelling schools to prove their financial and academic viability. These components of the bill will help us avoid situations where schools can only be sustained by funding through the OSP.

We must also ensure that the transfer to nonpublic schools is as smooth as possible for the families participating in the program. You are to be commended for authorizing up to two percent of funds for the OSP for parental outreach and coaching and an additional one percent for supplemental tutoring for student participants.

I further support the nondiscrimination clause in the bill that forbids participating schools from discriminating by race, color, national origin, religion, or sex with an exception for single sex schools and school activities. Obviously, I would expect schools to abide by local statutes regarding equal opportunity, as well.

Issues to Consider

I support raising the scholarship cap to \$12,000 for grades 9-12 (along with an inflation adjustor), as it offers a critical incentive for high schools to create additional slots. But I am concerned about whether this will meet the demand of potential OSP participants for

middle and high school. I plan to ask advocates of the OSP for an analysis of supply and demand for the program on a grade-by-grade level, and I urge you to consider this analysis as you move forward with this bill.

My other concern is that the families who benefit from the OSP are placed in a position of uncertainty regarding their children's education each year, as they watch leaders debate whether to continue this program and how to fund it. I have been deeply moved by the plight of families who are trying to make the best educational decisions for their children, yet fear that at any moment the OSP will end, and they could be forced to find alternative schools for their children.

The five-year authorization contained in your bill is a step toward addressing this uncertainty. Nevertheless, I realize that federal funding is, of course, an annual process that comes with no guarantees. I urge those who will appropriate the funding for the OSP – assuming passage of this bill – to make a commitment to fund it for the full five years. This will enable families to plan accordingly and will allow your Committee to carefully review evaluation data and otherwise review whether the OSP continues to meet its objectives of improving educational outcomes for low-income families in my city.

I urge you to work directly with officials from DCPS and the charter school community to ensure that this bill allows them to identify the greatest needs for funding, and supports what they believe are the most compelling areas of school reform. The Congress should defer to them on what is funded through this bill.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you again for your sincere commitment to identifying resources to help our city in the area of education reform. Regrettably, your efforts are somewhat undercut by attempts of some of your colleagues to slash funding for other DC priorities. For example, it is illogical to cut Metro funding, since large numbers of our students, including those using vouchers, rely on public transportation to get to and from school. Our students need reliable mass transit. Please work with us to ensure that education funding, either directly or indirectly, doesn't come out of other programs.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

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