



**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR**

**Testimony of Mayor Vincent C. Gray**

**“The Value of Education Choices:  
Saving the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program”**

**Before the  
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs  
on  
Wednesday, February 16, 2011**

**Introduction**

Good morning Senator Lieberman, ranking member Senator Collins, and members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. I am Vincent C. Gray, Mayor of the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to share my views on public education and educational choice.

How we educate our children is one of the most defining and politically leveraged issues facing the United States today. Education is, and has been, a vehicle of personal enrichment, individual fulfillment, and professional success for many Americans. And for this nation, it is the key to our continued global competitiveness in an ever changing marketplace. I share the Committee’s interest in the successful education of the children of the District of Columbia, and experience it more profoundly because of my role as Mayor and chief executive. Just so you know, I am a native Washingtonian and a K-12 product of the D.C. Public Schools. And I attended undergraduate and graduate school at George Washington University.

Today, this committee will receive testimony from several people on whether the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program should be reauthorized.

## **Personal Commitment to Public Education**

Let me begin by expressing my views on education and how the District of Columbia's parents and children can best be served. Anyone who knows me knows that I am an unwavering advocate for children. And I have been for many years. Simply put, I am a strong and long-time advocate for quality education for children in our city.

When I was elected Chair of the Council of the District of Columbia (Council), one of the many questions that faced me was how I intended to organize the Council's committee structure. I made a decision that the Committee of the Whole, of which I served as Chair, would have oversight responsibility for education. It was my intention to elevate the issue of education to one where all council members would participate in the direction, decision-making, and oversight of public education. After almost four years of serving as Chair, and holding numerous hearings, my opinions on education are clear.

First, I believe we must continue smart education reform, and make it sustainable. Within the past four years, the District of Columbia Public Schools has engaged in important and substantive reforms. These reforms have resulted in increased interest in and enrollment for the D.C. Public Schools, and must be continued to ensure a high quality education for District children.

Second, I believe we must look at education as a lifelong endeavor. Education begins long before kindergarten and continues long after high school. It is this core belief that led me to aggressively pursue the availability and expansion of Pre-K education programs; to champion the creation of the District of Columbia Community College; and to provide increased funding for the University of the District of Columbia.

Before becoming a Council member in 2005, I served as the Executive Director of Covenant House Washington, a Catholic-based organization that works with homeless, runaway and at-risk youth. I saw many young people who themselves were already parents. One of the programs I established was an early childhood intervention program for children of these youth. And in the

same spirit, as Council Chairman, I championed legislation embracing a commitment to universal Pre-Kindergarten services in our traditional public schools and charter schools.

Third, I believe we must work with our students, parents, public school employees and community as a part of the solution, not scapegoat them for our problems. I am committed to a collaborative approach to education reform. The very people who must buy in if schools are to be thriving communities -- parents, teachers, community leaders, and school administrators -- must be part of the discussion and active participants in decision-making.

Finally, I believe we must restore accountability and sound management to our schools. Until we are on the road to economic recovery solidly, everyone will say “we all must learn to do more with less.” While this is true, we must learn how to leverage and manage those resources more efficiently. I am committed to the accountability and sound fiscal management of our education system. These are the four educational pillars of my administration and they serve as guideposts for my cabinet.

### **Sustainability of Funding for Opportunity Scholarship**

Almost two years ago, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, Arne Duncan announced that no additional D.C. school children would be introduced into the voucher program because of the uncertainty of funding over the long-term. At that time, more than 1900 children were enrolled in the program and the decision of whether they would be allowed to continue their education in this way was completely outside of their parents’ control.

Even though I have not been a supporter of vouchers as an educational option, I supported the three sector approach when it appeared that the Opportunity Scholarship Program was at its end. Why? Because, as someone who deeply cares about children, I didn’t want to see these children abruptly removed from their private school placements. Thus, what I supported was a program in which all the children enrolled would be able to continue until they graduated from the 12<sup>th</sup> grade but that there would be no *new* enrollment. My emphasis was, and continues to be, on building a solid public education system consisting of traditional public schools and charters.

## **True Educational Choice in the District of Columbia**

Decisions about educational options in the District of Columbia ought to be made at the state and local level just as those choices are made across this nation. And we do have choice. In addition to our traditional public education within the D.C. Public School System, we have what may be the most robust charter school movement in the nation.

Prior to 1996, District parents had just one choice in public education for their children -- the District of Columbia Public Schools. This changed in 1996 when charter schools officially became a part of the District's educational landscape with the passage of the DC School Reform Act (ACT). The Act established the D.C. Public Charter School Board and authorized the D.C. Board of Education to charter schools.

During the first year of the charter school movement, there were one hundred and sixty students enrolled in public charter schools. Today, the Public Charter School Board oversees fifty-two schools, ninety-three campuses and more than twenty-eight thousand students. Public charter schools serve approximately thirty-nine percent of all public school students in Washington, D.C.

The public charter school movement has experienced explosive growth over the past fifteen years. In fact, two years ago the city, at the request of the Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, approved seven of its schools to become charter schools. And today, they are operating in that capacity funded through the uniform per student funding formula, and regulated and monitored by the D.C. Public Charter School Board. Charter schools continue to be the vehicle that allows the majority of District parents to exercise their freedom of choice in public education. And since each charter school is autonomous, we have one of the most diverse array of public education options in the country.

The reality of parents choosing charter schools as their preferred method of choice was evidenced at the Annual Recruitment Expo (Expo) sponsored by the D.C. Public Charter School Board, D.C. Association of Chartered Public Schools, and Friends of Choice in Urban Schools.

This year's Expo, held at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center, experienced record setting participation when more than two thousand people came to meet with charter school leaders and learn more about specific schools. I attended the event and encouraged charter school administrators to expand their movement further into Pre-K and to add Special Education so additional District children could be served.

The success of the District's public charter schools cannot be questioned. The high school graduation rate for D.C. public charter schools is eight percent higher than the U.S. national average. Moreover, economically disadvantaged students in D.C. middle and high school public charter schools are nearly twice as likely to rank proficient in reading and math as their peers in traditional public schools.

For many years our public schools in the District had a dismal performance. But public education is improving, in substantial part because of the constructive environment created by the existence of traditional and charter public schools. Soon to be released data will confirm that, for the first time in decades, enrollment in public education in our city is growing. This is the path we must continue to pursue.

Education is the great liberator. It was for me many years ago and it has been for so many others. I am committed to building a solid, predictable, high performing birth-24 public education system. And we are making significant progress, especially with the choices available through our charter movement.

In closing:

- The District currently offers choice to its parents and children through an improving traditional public education program and robust charter movement that serves more than 28,000 students or 39% of those enrolled in public education.
- As data will show, public education enrollment is increasing in the District for the first time in decades.
- I, and others in the District, have supported children and youth currently enrolled in the Opportunity Scholarship Program being able to continue through graduation if they wish.

- Given the options that exist; the improving quality of education in the city; existing commitments that all children currently in the Opportunity Scholarship Program will be able to continue until graduation; and recognizing the principle that education decisions should be left to the state and local governments, there is a compelling argument to invest energy and otherwise-directed funds in creating an enduring public education system that serves all our children.

Thank you Chairman Lieberman for the opportunity to testify on the District's educational choices.