

TESTIMONY OF VIRGINIA WALDEN FORD
BEFORE THE US SENATE HOMELAND SECURITY
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about the transformational D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Not long ago, as I listened to my now 27 year old son, talk about his life, our family's life....for a brief moment, I saw the thirteen year old boy who by the time he entered his freshman year of high school was several grade levels behind and getting in trouble...in class and out. He felt like no one cared if he learned, and he didn't feel safe. He was struggling to fit in.

As a single mother of three, I felt powerless to help him. I remembered, in that moment, how out of the blue, or through a miracle, we suddenly had an opportunity, through a private scholarship from a concerned neighbor, to choose a school that was in my son's best interest. It was a school that would keep him safe, nurture his talents, and prepare him for life.

When I quickly came back to the present, I saw in my son, a strong young man who has and will continue to make me proud. That scholarship made the difference.

In receiving the scholarship for my son, I remember asking, "why me? Why not other families, too?"

And so I embarked on a remarkable personal journey that allowed me to meet so many parents—thousands of them over the years—who only wanted what I wanted: a better chance for their children.

I met parents who live in every corner of our city. It didn't matter what ward they called home; they were crying out for options. They were willing to fight peaceably to improve the educational futures of their children. They didn't ask for much—just that their political leaders would allow them to access the amazing private schools right in their own neighborhoods instead of forcing their children to attend neighborhood public schools that weren't improving, weren't safe, and weren't healthy environments.

Together we came and talked with many of you. We told you how our children could not wait for "five more years" for our public schools to fix themselves. We told you that our children needed *immediate* options. We told you that even though many of us struggled to make ends meet, it didn't mean our hopes for our children weren't just as high as the hopes you have for yours. And you listened. The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program became law.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program provided that immediate option—that ray of hope—to 3,300 children. These are children who are very poor. These are kids that, in many places,

would have been “written off,” consigned to lives of mediocrity or worse. Thanks to you, they weren’t.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program gave them the opportunity to go to schools that made them scholars. It made them important in the eyes of the world. It gave them the inspiration to succeed. It’s been—like the scholarship I received for my son—a miracle.

Chairman Lieberman, Senator Collins, and Members of the Committee, I know very well that this program isn’t just about peace of mind. It’s about the improvement and expansion of the young minds we’ve been called to serve. And when you stack this program up to the other education initiatives that have been tried in our city over the past two decades, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is a resounding academic success.

Even the most rigorous studies have demonstrated that children are making noticeable improvements in reading—a cornerstone subject—each year. This is an amazing result given where these children started.

An even more dramatic measure of success is graduation rates. This program has a 91 percent graduation rate for participants who used their scholarships, which is 21 points higher than those who were not offered a scholarship. This means that children in this program have a 21 percent better shot at success in college and in life than children who do not use Opportunity Scholarships. This isn’t an experiment—this is an extraordinary success.

And so it’s no wonder that parental satisfaction in the program exceeds 90 percent, a number that is also unprecedented. This is a *publicly funded education program* that parents love! Parents like Patricia William and Joe Kelley, who are here today. Patricia and Joe feel safe knowing their children are going to a school where they’re treated well, where they’re encouraged to be creative, and where they’re pushed to excel.

Students have new hope. They’re learning. Graduation rates are up. Parents are happy. That’s the story of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

Now, some people will say we can’t restore and extend this program—because not enough low-income children would receive scholarships. That is about the worst argument I’ve ever heard.

I am reminded of the example of Harriet Tubman—the African-American abolitionist and famous “conductor” of the Underground Railroad. While she worked to abolish slavery, Tubman made 19 trips into the south and transported 300 slaves into freedom.

Harriet Tubman knew that she couldn’t personally rescue all of the slaves in America. But she knew that she could save some, and what an amazing difference it made in each of their lives. She certainly didn’t just give up. And I’d ask everyone in this room today: would you go back into history and tell Harriet Tubman that her efforts, her struggle, her worth—should be scrapped, ended, cancelled, or eliminated. The course of history has shown us that it WAS worth it to the cause of equality in our nation. And that fight continues today.

The sad part, though, is that the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program is, for now, closed down to new parents and families, even the siblings of current participants, who desperately want to access it. I cannot tell you the number of calls I've gotten from parents who are distraught that the government is shuttering this program. It's devastating. It's tragic. And it deprives so many children of the opportunity to see their greatest dreams come true.

The parents who call...they all ask me one thing: WHY? Why can one of their children be allowed to attend a great school, while their younger child is forced into a failing one? Why did the program end this year, just when they were about to apply?

I do not have an answer to these parents. I am here because I hope, I pray, that you do. Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins, Members of the Committee, you have the power to answer these parents. You will not only answer their questions, you will answer their prayers. You will empower their families. You will change their children's lives. This program is just that powerful. And you can restore it.

Mary McLeod Bethune said: "We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends".

Let us move forward today and do just that with a full reauthorization of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. Thank you.

Virginia Walden Ford