

**THE OPPORTUNITY TO SOAR: 15 YEARS OF  
SCHOOL CHOICE IN D.C.**

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**FIELD HEARING**

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON  
HOMELAND SECURITY AND  
GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
ONE HUNDRED SIXTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

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## THE OPPORTUNITY TO SOAR: 15 YEARS OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN D.C.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2019

U.S. SENATE,  
COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY  
AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS,  
*Washington, DC.*

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 3:30 p.m., at St. Thomas More Catholic School, 4265 4th Street S.E., Washington, DC, Hon. Ron Johnson presiding.

Present: Senator Johnson.

Ms. GONZALES. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome. My name is Rosio Gonzales. I am the President of the Consortium of Catholic Academies, and I want to extend a very warm welcome to Senator Ron Johnson, who is up here, and Senator Tim Scott. I also want to give a warm welcome to our parents, our students, our guests, and our entire St. Thomas More community.

The Consortium is educating over 840 children this year across our four schools, and our families represent the communities where our schools reside in. Our students flourish academically and are accepted to some of the most competitive schools in the district.

The reauthorization of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act makes it possible for our students to dream and to succeed in high school and beyond, so we are just really grateful to be here tonight to bring importance to this reauthorization act.

I also just want to thank our principal, Gerald Smith, our pastor, Father Moore. I am sure they are here. I also thank the Senators and the leadership that has helped make this event possible, and just a warm welcome to all of you as well. Thank you.

[Applause.]

### OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN JOHNSON

Chairman JOHNSON. This hearing will come to order. I want to thank Mrs. Gonzales for her opening remarks. I also want to express my gratitude to the staff and the principal of St. Thomas More Catholic Academy, Father Moore.

That is very appropriate. Not a coincidence, probably.

But I mainly want to thank the audience for attending.

I also, as a little special shout-out to Catholic education. I am Missouri Synod Lutheran, and I ask that my opening comment be entered into the record.<sup>1</sup> I will not bore you with reading that. But

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Senator Johnson appears in the Appendix on page 25.

just my own personal experience in Catholic education, we sent out all of our children through the Catholic school system in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. And my second-oldest daughter, for kind of social reasons, decided to leave the Catholic school system, I think in 10th or 11th grade, to go to Oshkosh North Public School.

And the assistant president at the time was a wonderful man who really brought total quality management to education through Fox Valley Technical College, and was really serving with gratis, I mean not being paid as the president of the Catholic school system in Oshkosh, making sure it could survive.

And so he called me in, as part of that total quality management system, as a father whose daughter left the system, just an exit interview. What happened? And one thing led to the next. He asked me to be on the President's Advisory Council. I am an accountant by training. I started looking at the numbers. I started understanding, really, the challenge of keeping a private-sector alternative open, a Catholic school system, one that teaches the value of acknowledgement of a Creator, of morals and of values. I was all in, and did everything I possibly could.

The reason I mention that is in that time period I came to understand how crucial a private-sector system is to education, having that choice available to students and their parents. I came to understand how important it was that families were involved in education. I came to understand the service and sacrifice of every administrator, every principal, every priest, every parent, every teacher involved in that system.

Let us face it. Those of you who are working in the Catholic school system, or in many private systems, you are doing it as an act of service. You are not getting paid what you can be paid in the private sector. You are doing it because you truly believe in the mission of these schools.

So again, I want to thank all of you for attending, but I really want to thank all of you that are involved in this system, throughout D.C., really throughout America, for your active service and sacrifice in making sure that our young people have this opportunity of being educated in a system that understands that there is a Creator, that there is a higher calling, a higher purpose in life, and how that is so important in terms of shaping young people's lives and preparing them for the future.

So again, with that, I want to really thank my Senate colleague, Senator Tim Scott, who has been just an unwavering supporter of school choice and for these systems, and with that I will ask you to testify.

**TESTIMONY OF THE HONORABLE TIM SCOTT,<sup>1</sup> A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA**

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, and thank you, Mr. Chairman. Certainly thank you and to your Ranking Member Peters who is absent today. Thank you both for your leadership on such an important topic and thank you for your commitment to the country.

Let me say first, to the St. Thomas More Academy students, being blessed with a healthy, positive, powerful quality education

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Senator Scott appears in the Appendix on page 28.

is critical in the life that we are going to live. The fact of the matter is if you think about the difference between those who have and those who have not, so often one of the pillars is family formation. I came from a single-parent household and I will tell you, sometimes it is very difficult to overcome some challenges that you face growing up.

But one of the things that helps you get there is a quality education, which is the second pillar of what helps our country and our students succeed at the highest level possible. I have sat in some of your seats before and I will say, without any question, that the future is incredibly bright.

And as I had a chance to look through the success of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), there is no doubt that if you look at just simply 2016, when 98 percent of the students enrolled at a D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program graduated, and 86 percent of those students went on to a 2-year or a 4-year educational opportunity. Those numbers are significant, especially when you think about the fact that so many kids in the area graduate outside of the program around 50 percent of the time, which is just measurable progress in exceptional time.

So I am excited about the lives that you will lead. I am excited about your leadership. I have a tremendous faith and confidence that the best is yet to come for our country, because you all are enrolled in a program that will make sure that you are equipped for the challenges that you face, both spiritual challenges as well as physical, financial, emotional, and educational challenges.

When I think about the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and the impact that it has had here, I think about the fact that there are so many parents who already have school choice. It is called a good income. If you have a good income you have the privilege of school choice. You can choose the neighborhood you want to live in, or you can choose the private school to send your kids to.

The folks who do not have school choice, the folks who are not empowered by school choice are those folks like my mother, who worked for a little bit above minimum wage as a nurse's aide, who simply did not have the choice, the resources, the flexibility, the margin for her children to participate in quality education.

And so from my perspective, as a sitting United States Senator, if I have an opportunity to fight for our young folks who are trapped in situations where the school options are limited, I want to be the guy at the front of that parade. I want to be the person championing those kids who have high potential but too often are overlooked because they simply do not have the resources to get there.

And that is one reason why I am so thankful that the parents of the kids who go to this school are blessed with that option. The students at this school are blessed with high-quality education. I think to myself that if we could have the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship model all across the country, can you imagine what an amazing day it would be, that every single ZIP code in America would have quality choice in education? That would be fantastic.

You see, I am convinced that Americans, and especially our students, we do not lack talent. We do not lack potential. We too often lack access to the right choices. And we have heard it 100 times,

or maybe we have heard it 1,000 times, that when the parents have a choice, the kids have a chance. I am completely convinced that the best and brightest days are ahead of us.

The mission to educate kids in a high-quality school is neither a Republican or Democrat issue. I am thankful that a Democrat from California, Senator Feinstein, is the lead sponsor on the Opportunity Scholarship Program, and has been for most of the last 15 years. This is an issue that we do not paint on the right or to the left. We paint this as a truly American issue, and I am thankful for her leadership. I am glad that last month she reintroduced legislation to move it forward, and I am thankful that you have a Chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee (HSGAC), who champions this cause and who understands and appreciates the importance of having quality education in every single ZIP code, which will make America stronger and more competitive in a global market, that without it we will not be able to compete.

And so my hope is that we can move this bipartisan legislation to the finish line to ensure families can continue to benefit from the Opportunity Scholarship Program for years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, thanks, Senator Scott. Do you have a couple of minutes just to kind of have a little bit of a dialogue here?

Senator SCOTT. Certainly.

Chairman JOHNSON. Because I think it is extremely important that you point out the fact that we have bipartisan support.

Senator SCOTT. Yes.

Chairman JOHNSON. And there has always been opposition to school choice. I personally do not understand it. Obviously, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, we had Polly Williams and some real champions of this, and we have a very robust school choice program for people that do not have the means—

Senator SCOTT. Absolutely.

Chairman JOHNSON [continuing]. To give their students, and parents the freedom to choose what is appropriate for them.

But Senator Feinstein has been a champion. Senator Cory Booker, I believe, is going—

Senator SCOTT. Very much so.

Chairman JOHNSON. So I have watched “Waiting for Superman.” By the way, if you have not watched that, in the audience, or anybody possibly looking at this on video, watch the documentary, “Waiting for Superman.” It is actually hard to watch, but you start understanding how important this is to families and students, in terms of how they view their ability to have a good future.

Because you have been involved in this issue for quite some time. Can you explain the opposition to it, because I really have a hard time understanding it.

Senator SCOTT. I cannot adequately explain the opposition to school choice. I can only say that at times it appears to me that the opposition is either based on ignorance, which is just not being educated on the actual facts on the ground, or the focus is not on the students and their achievement. Any time you have a system that is designed not for students but as an educational system you

probably should take a step back and take a second look to figure out where the focus actually is.

I will say that when you look at the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship, specifically what you find is that three out of four parents are really excited about the success of the program. So, differently, the people who are most concerned about the education of the child is the parent, and the parent has the highest level of satisfaction in the education apparatus in this area. Those students whose parents have the highest satisfaction rates are in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program.

When you compare the outcomes of the students when they leave high school, one of the things that you realize very quickly is it is hard to oppose knowing that just 2 years ago, or last year, 98 percent of the kids graduated from Opportunity Scholarship programs, where only 50 to 58 percent—I forgot the specific number; it was in the 50s—graduated from those schools not enrolled in a D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which baffles the mind why anyone would be in opposition to improving the graduation rates, improving those folks who go on to college, improving what their incomes are like.

So for me, as a kid who was raised in poverty, and one who, unlike Ron John, I am not sure you guys understand this but Ron John, or Chairman Johnson, graduated cum laude. I graduated “thank you” laude. [Laughter.]

I just got out. You know what I am saying? Not everybody can be Ron Johnson. I made him possible. I was at the bottom half of the class. And frankly, as a kid who went to four different elementary schools, by the fourth grade—because when you are poor you move around a lot—for those folks to look into my mom’s eyes and say that she does not deserve the same options that a wealthier person has, it is just downright wrong. I cannot understand the opposition.

Chairman JOHNSON. That is the theme of “Waiting for Superman,” where you have these families waiting to get the Golden Ticket, waiting to win that lottery, because those that won felt that their children had a future.

Senator SCOTT. Absolutely.

Chairman JOHNSON. Those that lost were devastated because they thought, “My child does not have a future.” So again, I do not understand the opposition.

The cost of educating a child in D.C., the operational cost, not with Catholics, is about \$19,000 per student.

Senator SCOTT. Yes.

Chairman JOHNSON. There are about 1,645 students that will take advantage of the Opportunity Scholarship Program. Again, those are 1,645 people the district does not have to educate. They are saving more than \$30 million, and they are getting \$20 million in return as part of the SOAR, because it is \$60 million divided by 3.

Senator SCOTT. Yes.

Chairman JOHNSON. So this program makes all kinds of sense, but the main reason is so that there is not one parent that has to go to their child and say, we cannot send you to a school who, first of all, values parental input. I mean, it is just so key. I mean, I

know it is true in Oshkosh Catholic school system so I am sure it here with St. Thomas More Academy as well. Parents are welcomed. They are encouraged to participate in their child's education, which is so important for the outcome, and I am sure that was the case with you growing up as well.

Senator SCOTT. Absolutely. The numbers that I find to be the most important numbers that are stunning is that when a child becomes disengaged along the way from an educational perspective, as I flunked out of high school as a freshman and had to go to summer school and catch up with my class and then graduate on time, and thank God for a small football scholarship that probably got me in as much as my SAT scores, and was able to go on and then finish on time in college as well.

For the kid who gets disillusioned like so many of my friends, who drop out because they just were not having a quality experience, their income as a high school dropout is around \$19,000.

So if you graduate from high school, though, your income goes from \$19,000 to \$29,000, a 50 percent increase. If you go on to graduate from college it goes to \$58,000. If you get an advanced degree you get closer to a six-figure income.

So the fact of the matter, the numbers that matter to me most is not what we save as a government. It does not matter to me. If we are spending the money properly for education we cannot spend enough to do it right, and frankly, you can actually, according to the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Model, you can spend less money and get a better return for the students so that their incomes grow, and if their incomes grow revenues to the government grows, revenues to community grows, revenue to the church—if you believe in Malachi 3:10, that grows as well.

Everything is better off if you focus on the number for the kids who graduate versus the ones who do not and the ones who go on to get a 4-year education, versus the ones who do not, versus the ones who go on to get a graduate degree versus the ones who do not. So the most powerful numbers that will equip these young students for the better future are the numbers that are most important.

And the last number I will tell you—and it is where I am from, in South Carolina, Charleston County—60 percent of African American males do not graduate from high school. So just take that number and play it out over a lifetime. What does that mean from educational achievement, income achievement, family formation, poverty rates, governmental assistance?

We can solve so many problems if we remember that education is about a student. It is not about a teacher first. It is about a student first. We want to have the best teachers, the best administration, but all those other parts are only to make sure that the primary responsibility and objective of making sure that the student is best prepared and best served.

Everything else does not matter until we realize that the focus is the student, and then we hire the best teachers, and we get the best administrators, and we get the best program. But the focus, the MVP of the league, is someone who shows up for class and does well, because the system is built for that child.

Chairman JOHNSON. You can see the passion that Senator Scott has for this issue, which is why he is such a fabulous advocate.

Now my staff will be kicking me in the knees, and probably yours too. I do not know what your time schedule is. If you have time I would love to have, if anybody has any questions for Senator Scott before he does have to leave. Do you have time?

Senator SCOTT. I will take a question or two if you have them. But if I do not like your questions I just will not answer them, so it is great. [Laughter.]

Just joking, kind of.

Chairman JOHNSON. We do not want to put too much pressure on you.

Senator SCOTT. Any questions for me of the students over here?

Chairman JOHNSON. Right over here.

Does she want to go to the microphone?

Senator SCOTT. I will repeat the question.

Chairman JOHNSON. OK.

Mr. ADDISON. How you doing?

Chairman JOHNSON. Just tell us your name and then give us your question.

Mr. ALLEN. Hi, Senators.

Senator SCOTT. Hi, sir.

Mr. ALLEN. My name is Rob Allen.

Senator SCOTT. Rob?

Mr. ALLEN. Rob Allen. My question is, what would it take to spread this program throughout the United States, and what would be like the ramifications if it did pass in both the Senate and the House?

Senator SCOTT. Yes, sir. Thankfully we are at a Catholic school so we all believe in prayer. That is probably a good place to start prayer, Rob.

The second thing I would tell you is that we would have to have an honest conversation about building educational systems for students, and for no other purpose but for students. If we could have that conversation and if we were able to measure the student performance in schools, in programs like the OSP, or Milwaukee where Chairman Johnson is from, the State of Wisconsin, in many ways they burst the school choice programs.

If we were able to see that come to fruition it would take a serious conversation and debate around how we are going to educate the next leaders of this country. If we did that, I think we would have more support, but it is hard to have that conversation in a polarized world called politics. That is why it is so important for parents to engage in the conversation, for students to engage in the conversation, because frankly, if you have the right skill set and you have the tools brought to you, I believe that you will do far better than I ever dreamed of doing in my life, because the world is getting better, not worse, if you see it right. The world is getting worse, not better, if you do not.

I think we have to have that debate. It is one of the reasons why I am engaged in the school choice conversation. I do not care if the definition of school choice or high-quality schools is a public school, a private school, a home school, a virtual school. It does not matter to me at all. What I want are educated kids, because you deserve

the chance to prove your mettle. You deserve the chance to prove to me and to the world that you can compete. And that is what we are seeing, whether at a Success Academy in New York, which are public charter schools, or the Aviation High School in Michigan, or school systems throughout this country that are focusing on the development of a child to be the most successful leader they can be.

Chairman JOHNSON. Anyone else? Right here.

Senator SCOTT. Yes, ma'am.

Ms. WASHINGTON. OK. Hi. My name is Rita Washington. I am from Archbishop Carroll High School. I have two questions. My first question to you was why you think that people would somewhat like disagree with this, even though you were saying that it is beneficial to all of us, like the government and the kids, and yet we all have a good benefit from this. So why do you think people would disagree with this, or have a reason to disagree?

Senator SCOTT. And your second question?

Ms. WASHINGTON. Oh, and my second question is, so you were saying that it would help kids when it comes to like college and things like that, but how would you encourage kids that start to see college as just another thing, it is nothing special. Because a lot of kids like do not have as much interest in college because they see it as like, oh, it is just something I am going to do so I can have a better job. So how would you encourage students to continue through and actually do good at school so they can have the same benefits?

Senator SCOTT. That is a great question, Ms. Washington. Let me start with your second question and then I will go back to your first question.

The second question, how do we convince kids to go into college, is an important aspect, an important part of the journey. I will say two things, and I mean it as I will say it, though it may not sound like I am answering your question directly.

I think continuing your education is imperative to be a healthy citizen. So I call it being a life-long learner. I do not think that college is for every student, however. I think every student should have the choice, because the quality of education that they receive from kindergarten to 12th grade is such a powerful tool so that they choose whether or not they want to go to a 4-year college, a 2-year college, or to an apprenticeship program.

As an example, in my home State of South Carolina, we have folks who are a part of apprenticeship programs and they decided to take the route into industry, but they were able to go through a 12-week program to become a welder, and they ended up with an income of around \$80,000 at 19 or 20 years old. Because there are some professions—there is dignity in all work. So some professions have a backlog of work. So you can start making a lot of money very quickly without having to go to college. So that is one point. So you do not have to go to college to be successful as a person.

For the vast majority of the jobs of our future you are going to have to be a life-long learner, and one of the questions we are asking ourselves, what is the return on college education? Well, the average person, after 4 years in college, graduates with a debt of around \$30,000, because if you grow up in a family like me, my parents cannot help me at all. My mother could not help me at all

so I had a small football scholarship that did not pay for everything else. I had student loans that paid for everything else. I should have just played better football, but I did the best I could with the skills I had. It just was not good enough, right?

So the kids like me that graduate from college today have a \$29,000 or \$30,000 debt, but that \$30,000 debt is what causes them to earn more than a million more dollars over their lifetime. If you give me \$30,000 and 4 years of your life, I give \$1 million back. That is a pretty good exchange, from my perspective.

So what we have to understand is that the lifetime income of someone who finishes 4 years of college is infinitely more than the person who does not. So that is one real good reason to go.

The second reason is that you are probably more familiar with this. How old are you?

Ms. WASHINGTON. Seventeen.

Senator SCOTT. OK. So you are 17 years old. Are you a junior or senior in high school?

Ms. WASHINGTON. Senior.

Senator SCOTT. Good. OK. So have you ever heard—and sometimes I talk real fast, so if I need to slow down so you can understand my next comment you let me know, OK?

Have you ever heard of an iPhone? [Laughter.]

You have? OK. How about the Internet? How about the possibility of vehicles that drive themselves, autonomous vehicles? How about vehicles and/or medical equipment that will diagnose the problems within the system that someone will have to come along and just fix the system, basically through technology?

The vast majority of the disruption that is coming toward our economy in the decade or two will be the automation. So the technology economy, or the gig economy, is going to cause a disruption for folks who are working in high-tech manufacturing jobs, which my State has a lot of those jobs.

So if you want to be in the know for the next wave of opportunities, technology is at the forefront. The place that you get the best shot at a technical education, built around technology—I am sorry, I speak with my hands. I apologize—is at college.

So my nephew, who is—I call him the heir to the Scott throne—it is a very small throne but he gets it all since I do not have any kids, and I helped raise him since he was 8 years old so I take a lot of credit for his success even though I did not do anything for it other than just pay for it.

He went to Georgia Tech, which is a good college for engineering. And he majored in biomedical engineering, graduated and went to work for a Big 8 firm, real good job. He got bored and went back to Duke to get his master's in engineering and management. Tried, well, that one did not work. I do not think he really wants to work, actually. He just wants to stay in school.

So now he is in medical school at Emory. He is a third year, just finishing up, and he is going to be a doctor who helps patients who have probably traumatic brain injuries and other issues. It is where he wants to focus his time. Well, his return on investment, though I was able to help some part of his education, he will have probably under six figures for his loans and he will make probably a lot of money, which means to me more than I am making, which

is not hard to do. But he will make \$200,000, \$300,000, \$400,000, or \$500,000.

But his primary objective is to change lives of people who are severely injured. His dad is a military guy and worked in medicine. So he is going to have the equipment here to help change lives out there. So while the income is better for him, what really drives him is his mission. His mission is to change lives through the use of technology and medicine, bring them together.

So since he knows what his mission is he is able to accomplish that mission through education. So that, to me, is why college is critically important for most students, because of the disruption that is coming in our economy.

To your first question, Ms. Washington, why people disagree, if I were to be objective and not cynical I would say that some people believe that by having a conversation about school choice we are talking about depriving other students in other places from public education. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The truth is this country spends about \$700 billion on an education system that has been dropping, versus our competition worldwide, and we spend as much money per capita or per student as most any other education system, yet our results are getting worse and worse and worse. If I was in a competition, and I am seeing \$700 billion for something that is becoming mediocre, I would want to take a looking and say will competition make it better? I think the answer is yes.

I am a product of a public school. I want to protect as many public schools as possible, as long as they are taking care of the kids, and if they are not, I want someone else to introduce a program that takes care of those kids.

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, Senator Scott, you have been very generous with your time.

Senator SCOTT. Was there one parent that had a question for me back there?

Ms. THOMPSON. Good afternoon, Senator Scott.

Senator SCOTT. Hey, ma'am.

Ms. THOMPSON. I just want to say thank you. I am a product of OSP. I have been with OSP for the last 12 years. I have two sons that are going to prominent high schools, Gonzaga College High School. He is graduating this year.

Senator SCOTT. That is excellent.

[Applause.]

Ms. THOMPSON. I live in Ward 8, and unfortunately we would not have had that opportunity that came from here. There were educators here. And they would not have that opportunity if it was not for OSP.

Senator SCOTT. Amen.

Ms. THOMPSON. So I have two more kids here in which OSP is very important to me. So as a parent, what do we do to ensure and make sure that nothing jeopardizes this program?

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, ma'am, a, for your energy, and you are a far better advocate than I could ever be because you are living the dream. You are watching your kids grow up. I always tell people I am living my momma's American dream. She sacrificed so I could be here and you have done the same thing so that your kids

can achieve beyond many of your friends' wildest imaginations probably. At least I know that was true with my momma.

I would just say that to the extent that you can take the margin in your schedule, no matter if you are 12 hours or 8 hours, and make sure that you galvanize other parents who are part of the success story of OSP, you will be doing every student in the room a great service, by pledging a part of your time to make a difference in the ears of policymakers, in Congress and in D.C.

I will frankly tell you that it was refreshing to hear the number of elected officials in D.C. who were supportive of D.C. Opportunity Scholarships. So there are folks you can rally around, and then there are other folks that you can probably help educate on the importance of it. And you are the shining example that we need to see more of, less of us old dudes and more of you young ladies coming out there and being our champions. I have never referred to myself as old, and I will never do it again, so I apologize.

Chairman JOHNSON. You can refer to me as old. I am an old dude.

Senator SCOTT. So seriously, getting a group of moms like-minded like you are, and talking about the story of your kids and what they are doing with their lives, and how they are changing the community, and what it means for this Nation long-term, it is the most powerful, untold story in America. So please do it.

Ms. THOMPSON. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. Thanks, Senator Scott. We appreciate your passion and your advocacy. In our hearts you will always be magna cum laude, OK?

Senator SCOTT. Thank you, sir.

Chairman JOHNSON. Why do not our next witnesses come on up. And as they are coming up, just let me tell you, we will give the audience an opportunity to ask questions and make comments. I mean, we want to hear from you. We appreciate the three questions we got. They are excellent. We need this dialogue. And like Senator Scott was saying, the most important thing you can do is advocate. Make sure that your elected officials realize how important this is to you and your family. Your voices are going to be incredibly powerful, which is why we are having this hearing here at this school.

I will tell my staff, I am not swearing witnesses in because I do not think that we need to here. It does not have to be that formal.

I really want to welcome to our stage here three extraordinary individuals who have really worked tirelessly for the success of this program. And we will just do it in order here and I will introduce people right before they speak.

So we will start with Marguerite Conley. Ms. Conley is the Chair of the Board of Directors for Georgetown Visitation Preparatory School and has three decades of experience in Catholic education as a teacher and administrator. Ms. Conley served for 8 years as the Executive Director of the Consortium of Catholic Academies, providing management and operational oversight for four inner-city elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Washington.

Prior to leading the Consortium, Ms. Conley was the principal at Enunciation School in Washington, D.C. for 11 years. In 2006, Ms.

Conley received the Washington Post Distinguished Educational Leadership Award. Ms. Conley received both a master's degree in education administration and a bachelor's degree in English from the Catholic University of America.

Ms. Conley, please.

**TESTIMONY OF MARGUERITE CONLEY,<sup>1</sup> FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CONSORTIUM OF CATHOLIC ACADEMIES**

Ms. CONLEY. Thank you. Thank you and good afternoon. Senator Johnson, thank you for your leadership and support on this issue.

Every parent and guardian wants his or her child to have a bright and successful future, often one better than he or she had. For many parents and guardians in DC this means higher-quality educational opportunities outside of their neighborhood schools that allow for exposure to values, cultural experiences, and activities enriching the overall education of their children. This is evident in the competitive lottery for choice public and charter schools in DC.

For 15 years, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has assisted parents and guardians in accessing an additional educational option for their children. Since its inception in 2004, the program has awarded 10,701 scholarships to students in grades K through 12 from low-income families to access private and parochial schools of their choice. The average annual income of families is below \$24,000 and 50 percent receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Ninety-five percent of the students are African American or Hispanic, and 66 percent reside in Wards, 4, 7, and 8.

The private and parochial schools participating in the program provide for the academic, social-emotional and financial needs of OSP students. School leaders have provided additional support for students performing below grade level; worked to expand Title I services; provided teachers with additional professional development; incorporated social-emotional learning strategies in the classroom; enhanced counseling services for both students and parents; and coordinated with local community resources to obtain extra resources to help address needs beyond the classroom.

School administrators have also sought alternative funding to provide tuition assistance to cover the gap between tuition and the OSP scholarship, as well as subsidize the cost of additional school fees, materials, field trips, and school events so that students can participate fully in their school experience.

Recognizing the impact a successful transition to a new school has, school administrators have created programs to assist students and their families with acclimating to a new school culture. These include, but are not limited to, academic summer boot camps, new parent and student orientations, and new parent buddies. Required parental engagement, attendance at meetings, and volunteering also help new parents and guardians become active members of the school community and empowers them to become advocates for their children.

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Ms. Conley appears in the Appendix on page 29.

Parental involvement is essential for student success and for creating a personal investment in the school. Classroom teachers, counselors, support staff and principals work collaboratively with parents and guardians throughout the year forming partnerships that encourage open communication nurturing student success.

Over the last 15 years, the Opportunity Scholarship Program has improved in meeting the needs of the students and their families due to the collaborative efforts of the administrators of the program and school leaders. When the program first started, scholarship award notifications were outside of the private/parochial school application window. Even though some schools accepted OSP students at the last minute—sometimes even when school was even in session—the rush to place students did not always yield the best fit.

Now under the direction of Serving Our Children, the timely notification of scholarship awards and school fairs within the private and parochial school application cycle allow school leaders to properly assess and plan for the needs of incoming students and their families. Better initial placements and less school transfers provide a more sound and consistent academic experience for students. In addition, the ongoing need for supplemental academic supports for students below grade level has led to the tutoring program established by Serving Our Children.

The current administrator also implemented an absolute sibling preference during the awarding process, allowing all eligible children in a family to receive scholarships. This alleviates the strain on parents or guardians of juggling multiple schools or being forced to remain enrolled at their current neighborhood school. Having all children at one school provides a consistent educational experience for the entire family and promotes commitment in and to the school of choice.

The overall success of the program is evident in the 24,351 applications received since 2004, the 94 percent parent satisfaction rate with their child's academic progress and current school, and the 86 percent high school senior acceptance rate to 2-or 4-year colleges or universities. The reauthorization of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program empowers parents to exercise their right to choose the best school for their child, no matter their income and allows children to have a brighter future.

Chairman JOHNSON. Thank you, Ms. Conley.

Our next witness is Yisehak Abraham. Mr. Abraham attended Rock Creek International School and Archbishop Carroll High School through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. Mr. Abraham went on to graduate from Columbia University with a bachelor's degree in economics and now works as a research associate at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, focusing on financial markets. Mr. Abraham.

**TESTIMONY OF YISEHAK ABRAHAM,<sup>1</sup> ALUMNUS, D.C.  
OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM**

Mr. ABRAHAM. Thank you, Senator. Good afternoon Chairman Johnson, Senator Scott, and other guests. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss my experience with the Opportunity Scholarship Program. It is truly an honor to sit before you representing all Opportunity Scholarship recipients and to advocate on their behalf.

The D.C. OSP was created in 2004 with bipartisan support in response to the growing need for access to quality educational options for D.C. families. It is the first Federal Government initiative to provide scholarships for grades K through 12 for low-income children to attend a private school. The program began as part of a city-wide effort to improve all of the district's educational sectors—public, public charter and non-public—in an effort to expand quality educational experiences for district families.

It was subsequently reauthorized twice, and thanks to your leadership and efforts hopefully will be reauthorized again. Why should it be reauthorized? Let us take a look at the impact it has had since inception.

Over 24,351 D.C. children have applied to the OSP since the program was created. Over 10,700 students have been awarded an OSP scholarship. 1,653 OSP students were enrolled in participating schools just last year. Half of OSP students received SNAP and/or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits in the last school year.

\$23,285 was the average annual household income for families using the scholarship in 2018. Sixty-six percent of OSP students enrolled reside in Ward 4, 7, and 8. More than 98 percent of OSP students graduate, and 86 percent of those students enrolled in a college.

So who has this program served? It has served me and thousands like me, students and families who were looking for a choice that was either a better or maybe even the best fit for their educational future, a choice that would not be available to them were it not for the existence of OSP.

OSP has had a tremendous, positive impact on my life. From kindergarten through the fourth grade I attended a D.C. public school. However, by the fourth grade I felt that something was not quite right, that the school I attended was not necessarily the best fit for me.

In the fifth grade, I had the privilege of being awarded a scholarship to attend a private school through the OSP. My family chose to send me to Rock Creek International School located in DuPont Circle. The transition to Rock Creek felt magical, to say the least. The school had laptops for each student to take home, language classes, spectacular teachers who cared just as much about how I learned, as opposed to just what I learned, and more.

I wrote my first extended research essay, which was over 10 pages long, on the ancient Olympic Games. The following summer I even went to Greece through the school. I continued with the OSP and attended Archbishop Carroll High School, an excellent college-

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Mr. Abraham appears in the Appendix on page 31.

preparatory Catholic school in DC. I graduated from Carroll in 2012, and from Columbia University in 2016, with a bachelor in Economics.

Currently I am a Research Associate at the American Enterprise Institute where I focus primarily on financial markets. In the future, I hope to continue to utilize economics to analyze policies that will better benefit the public and our Nation.

OSP allowed me and my family a choice, a choice that would not have been if the OSP program had not existed. Can someone here tell me my choices should have been limited because I came from a different part of DC? Should any child be told that their choices have to be limited if a program that works and can have a tremendous and positive impact on their lives exists?

Senator Johnson, Members of Congress, please reauthorize the OSP program and keep this critical program available for years to come. Thank you.

Chairman JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Abraham.

Our final witness is also our host. Gerald Smith, Jr., is the Principal of St. Thomas More Catholic Academy. Before being named principal, Mr. Smith taught for 5 years here at St. Thomas More and for 2 years at Bishop McNamara High School in Forestville, Maryland.

Mr. Smith received a bachelor's degree in biology from Xavier University of Louisiana and a master's degree in interdisciplinary health sciences from Drexel University. Principal Smith.

**TESTIMONY OF FATHER GERALD SMITH,<sup>1</sup> PRINCIPAL, ST.  
THOMAS MORE CATHOLIC SCHOOL**

Mr. SMITH. Thank you, Senator Johnson.

American educator and social activist, Geoffrey Canada, once asked a simple question—What would it take, in a society where a class of people in America are often forgotten and the game is fixed against them, what would it take to get them out of poverty?

The answer is simple. Education. But simply placing scholars within a classroom is not enough. Providing true and sound partnerships between the community, the parents, and institutions' educators, and most importantly, the scholars in which the school serves, is vital to the success of the developing whole individuals, willing and ready to make the world more just and humane.

School choice is an important component in allowing parents and their scholars to find places that fit the needs of their unique academic profile. More importantly, the chance to choose a school rooted in mission and its religious core provides the opportunity for developing young men and women who are dedicated to growing in virtue.

Catholic schools like St. Thomas More Catholic Academy and others within the Consortium of Catholic Academies, as well as many private and charter institutions give rise to increasing the chances of transforming every aspect of a young man or young woman's life.

The support of reauthorizing the SOAR Act gives hope to a world where brilliant minds are only one component to making the world

<sup>1</sup>The prepared statement of Mr. Smith appears in the Appendix on page 33.

better. The SOAR Act gives the choice to parents to find a school that is ready to lead, teach, and inspire, through the gospels, reflecting love daily. Academic programs supported by the SOAR Act transform men and women with not only brilliant minds, but more importantly, men and women with fully sanctified hearts guided by virtue.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. Thank you, Principal Smith.

So I have a few questions for the witnesses but then after—again, I really want to encourage questions from the audience, and comments. I mean, we kind of want to hear your stories as well, until we run out of time and get the boot.

Let me start with you, Ms. Conley. You have been involved in this program for quite some time and in education. What would you say is the single most important aspect or attribute of the Opportunity Scholarship Program?

Ms. CONLEY. Wow. There are so many.

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, name a few then. I do not want to limit you to just one. I like prioritizing things, but—

Ms. CONLEY. I think, first and foremost, choice. Every one—every parent and guardian has that right and that privilege to educate the child which they see fit. And we also know not every school is for every child. And so a parent should have access, no matter the income, to any school of their choice.

I think the other piece is it is important keeping the family together, which I saw at the very beginning of the program, where funding was families were coming in together, we kept the consistency of their education, and then where we are now, moving back and saying absolutely sibling preference, so that all children are in one school.

Chairman JOHNSON. So let me quick follow up on that aspect of your testimony, because, first of all, I was very pleased to read the fact that—it almost seemed to me, maybe early on—I do not want to use the word “sabotage,” but, I mean, the fact that the awards were occurring at a time when it was almost impossible for the school system to plan, but that has improved. Plus we are keeping students together.

So what happened there? I mean, was there an acknowledgement that there was a real problem and there was real cooperation to improving the program?

Ms. CONLEY. I think the ongoing push was principals working directly with the administrators, throughout the different years, of saying the importance of the timeliness. And some of it came with reauthorization and appropriations, of how do we know, up front, that money will be awarded and the program will be funded?

I think in the years that we were on the fence of will this be reauthorized, people hesitated, things did not move forward. The fact that we know it was reauthorized, we know the money was there, and this administrator making it an absolute preference and realizing we want students to be in the best place initially. We do not want transferring. We do not want this scramble. No parent should be scrambling. They should be sitting down and having the conversation with the school of their choice.

And also what we see it the better initial fit. Students are in where they belong and where they should be. Some people may say it is cherry-picking. It is not. It is knowing up front what are you coming in with? Where are you? Meeting the student and the family where they are and then going forward, not just taking off the top. And I think that was the perception in the very beginning.

Chairman JOHNSON. I think keeping families together is so important. I mean, we were always comforted. We hated to see my daughter go to North because the rest of the kids were going to Lourdes, first of all, just for convenience in terms of transportation but also, siblings look after each other. So again, that was a really positive result that I am glad is happening.

Mr. ABRAHAM, I want to ask you a what-if. Obviously you are an exceptional young man. I think you would have succeeded just about in any environment. But, you know, what if? What if you did not have that opportunity in the fifth grade? Do you think you would have pursued the same career path? I mean, do you think you would have been a little bit more limited? I mean, just, the what-if question.

Mr. ABRAHAM. It is hard to speak on what if. I guess, the best answer I can give you is I know having through the path that I went through, and, having started at the public school that I did, I guess I knew what I would have missed out on. I would have not been on an accelerated track that would have pushed me. I would not have been pushed beyond my bounds in a way that made me see that more was possible, both in my education and in the capacities that I could gain.

Chairman JOHNSON. So you are pretty thoroughly convinced that having this opportunity, this choice to go to a school that suited your abilities better, you end up—the result was better performance and—I mean—

Mr. ABRAHAM. Yes. Actually, in the original draft of my speech I kept saying who are we but the product of all the choices we have made from all the options we were given. And, to me the fact that I had a scholarship and was able to choose any school that I wanted to, it motivated me to take advantage of the schools that I ended up going to, because I knew I had the choice and I knew exactly what I was going to those schools to obtain.

Chairman JOHNSON. OK. I mean, again, that is exactly what the parents in “Waiting for Superman” realized too, is that choice opened up doors that if they did not have those doors would close and they really thought their futures would be limited.

So I want to ask Principal Smith a question here. If you have a question why do not you start lining up in as quiet way as possible so we can kind of move this along as efficiently as possible.

But, Principal Smith, I cannot tell you how many times, working with Lourdes High School in Oshkosh, the Catholic school system there, I used to just be involved and just think to myself, this is a really special place. OK? Just a couple of hours here now, in St. Thomas More Academy, I get the same feeling.

Can you describe that? Can you say, from your standpoint, what makes this system, this school such a special place?

Mr. SMITH. So it is a gamut of things. I think, one, the scholars make this place what it is. It is home. It is home for many of us.

For some of us, we come from broken families. For some of us, we come from circumstances that are out of our control, and this is a place where we can be consistently and honestly ourselves and be loved and educated and get the same love that Christ gives us each and every day.

I had the opportunity to be an educator here, left, learned a lot of amazing things and came back, and I get to work with some of the best educators within the Consortium, and the best principals as well, led by someone really great, with a mission, and we are all mission oriented with this ultimate goal of making sure that our scholars have what it takes to be successful in life.

Chairman JOHNSON. So would you call it a pretty nurturing environment?

Mr. SMITH. Oh, it is very loving. This is a family. And it is very funny because we never leave. We come right back. When we graduate from 12th grade we come back. We graduate from college, we come back. We had some kids that become educators here at the school. So it is an amazing place that just goes full circle in developing virtue.

Chairman JOHNSON. I am going to ask you a combination of the questions I asked Ms. Conley and Mr. Abraham. What aspect of this program is the most important? And you see students all the time. Kind of the what-if question of those students as well.

Mr. SMITH. I think, as Ms. Conley talked about it, it is choice. The what-if, I mean, there are endless possibilities of what could happen to our scholars if they did not have the opportunity to choose a school that fit their academic profile, if they could not choose a place that would love them unconditionally for who they were, and guide them to become wholesome young men and women. This is a place where they get the science, they get the math, they get the reading. They get all those things that they could get in a public school. But here, within, with the SOAR Act and with the OSP scholarship, they get their hearts formed. They become saints, and that is what our ultimate goal is as human beings. We go to college but ultimately we go to heaven.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. Well again, thank you for your involvement.

Now I will ask for questions or comments from the audience. Anybody? I am a U.S. Senator. I can talk for a long time, but you really do not want to listen to me.

Mr. CAMPBELL. Hello.

Chairman JOHNSON. State your name.

Mr. CAMPBELL. My name is Keron Campbell. I am a senior at Archbishop Carroll High School. I do not have a question. I have a comment.

Coming from a public school all throughout K through 8, where I was dealing with a lot of kids and the classroom sizes were sometimes humongous—like when I first came to Carroll—I came to Carroll my 10th grade, so I did not go to Carroll all 4 years. I came from a very large high school in P.G. County which is called Charles Herbert Flowers High School. It had 2,300 kids. The average class size was 40 kids, and that was not me. Sometimes my teachers did not even know my name. That is how big the school was.

And so coming to Carroll and really getting that intimate setting with my teachers and getting the opportunity—and I do not think I would have gotten the opportunity without OSP, to be honest with you. I think I would have been at another public school with a large setting of kids and I would have never, like, got that attention I really needed at the time.

And so at Carroll I feel that every day, I would not have gotten that if I had not had OSP. That loving setting and a Catholic school setting where you can foster kids and be better and really grow them as a person. And I think I never would have gotten that if it was not for OSP.

So that is all I have to say. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. I appreciate that.

By the way, let me point out a few numbers here. As said earlier, the average cost, operational cost of educating somebody in the district is \$19,000. If you tack in the capital costs, the maintenance and building cost, it is about \$29,000.

The cost of the scholarships is somewhere between \$8,000 and I think \$12,000. Is it \$13,000? So if you really do the math on that, \$30 million is what the district saves, and they are getting \$20 million out of the deal, so it is pretty good.

But the reason I am pointing that out is tuition—and I do not know what tuition is here. I know in the Catholic school system in Oshkosh it was a lot cheaper than that per-student cost, and yet the class size was smaller. So you have to scratch your head. What is the public system doing but what a good deal these voucher system schools really are. So got to make that a counting point.

Any other questions or comments?

Ms. WILSON. I have a comment. I want to say thank you, because I was at OSP too. When I went to a public school I was very down in reading until I got an OSP scholarship, and now my reading got actually better. So thank you.

Chairman JOHNSON. So what is your name and what school do you go to?

Ms. WILSON. Yenaya, and I attend St. Thomas More.

Chairman JOHNSON. And you are in what grade?

Ms. WILSON. Sixth.

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, you are a very articulate little sixth-grader, so thank you for those comments.

Ms. WILSON. Thank you.

[Applause.]

Mr. MASSEY. Good evening, Senator.

Chairman JOHNSON. What is your name and your school?

Mr. MASSEY. My name is Micah Massey. I am in eighth grade and I go to St. Thomas More Catholic Academy.

I would like to add on to Mr. Smith's speech. From a student standpoint about this is a home, he is correct. This is a home where you can express yourself in the right way, be your true and authentic self. That is what Mr. Smith always tells me. This is a loving and caring school. We accept anyone. And that is what I would like to say.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, thank you.

So again, why would anybody be opposed? Why would anybody deny somebody an opportunity to experience something like this? Sir.

Mr. CARTER. How you doing, Senator Johnson. My name is Derrick Carter and I have actually two sons that are in the OSP program. One attends this school and I have one that is graduating from Archbishop Carroll this year.

First and foremost, I would like to say thank you to Mr. Smith, because not only is he the principal of this school but he is like a father figure when things are not going right here. So me, as a parent, had it not been for this program, I do not know what I would have done, because as a parent I always want to have a choice of where I can send my kids to get their education from.

So me, as a parent, I am real thankful that this program is around. I have advocated for it because I have been on Capitol Hill at these congressional meetings, so I am one of those parents that you might see on Capitol Hill one day, because I do support this program. That is how much passion I have about this program.

So we just want to say, as parents, that we are going to work and make sure that we keep this program around, so that—and these are his words—our scholars can continue to have success in life, whatever they decide to do.

Thank you.

[Applause.]

Chairman JOHNSON. Well, thank you, Mr. Carter. Thanks for those comments. And again, thank you for expressing your appreciation to the principal, and by extension, everybody who works in this very special place. I mean, it is a an act of service and sacrifice, so thank you for expressing that.

Next. Your name and your school.

Ms. ADAMS. Hi. My name is Mackenzie Adams and I attend St. Thomas More Catholic Academy. And my question today is what do you think the world would be like, well, Washington, DC would be like without this program?

Chairman JOHNSON. Anybody want to answer that?

Mr. SMITH. I think we would have a world where—I think if the scholars did not have the opportunity to be partners in their education we would have robots. We would have a world that feels like this is the one way that we go, these are the one things that we do. Here, with this scholarship, you have the opportunity for your world to be broadened, for doors to be opened, for you to see things that you never could imagine. I think this is what this scholarship provides you, insight to things that are bigger than Washington, DC, bigger than your neighborhood, bigger than your back yard.

So if you never had that opportunity you would be very close-minded, I think. Your eyes would be closed to all of the wonders that the world has to offer.

Chairman JOHNSON. But let me chime in, and if you are thinking of your own response, what made this Nation great is the vision of our Founding Fathers to protect the God-given rights—and again, God-given rights—of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The reason we are able to pursue happiness is because we are free people, and as a result of free people we have the opportunity to aspire, to dream, to hope. And without an Opportunity Scholar-

ship Program the families who are taking advantage of this, they have some of that hope, some of that freedom, some of that aspiration taken away from them.

I keep pointing out no government agency would have created this. This was created by the mind of a true visionary and genius. I mean, you can go through and all products and services that create this private sector. Those are done through the minds—first of all, the God-given minds—but the creativity and the aspirations of individuals. And without these types of scholarship programs there would just be 1,645 students that do not have quite as much hope. They may not aspire. They may not go on to graduate, whatever, cum laude, or a graduate program, and they may never invent this for the benefit of all of us.

So again, you can never tell, but it is individuals, operating with that freedom and hope and ability to aspire and create and innovate, that we would lose without programs like this.

Mr. ABRAHAM. I mean, just to add on, I really liked, what Senator Scott said while he was up here. When parents have a choice, students have a chance. I think both parents and students benefit equally. I know that my parents were happy to see me just being thrilled to go to the new school that we all of a sudden had a choice to be able to go to.

To say like what a world without OSP looks like is a world where maybe parents are sending their kids to a school where every day they are like I know it is not necessarily the best fit for them but I hope that the best will happen. In the case with OSP, you can see in the parents' expressions that they know that their child is at the right place.

Chairman JOHNSON. Any other questions or comments?

Ms. MACLEAY. Thank you for your time today. My name is Ashley MacLeay. I am here with Independent Women's Forum, and I am the at-large representative to the D.C. State Board of Education.

Thank you for your comments, and we have heard lots of benefits today from Senator Scott as well as yourself. Do you have any comments or response to those naysayers, those in Congress or the D.C. Council or the Washington Teachers Union (WTU), who may not support this program under the guise of accountability?

Chairman JOHNSON. Principal Smith, I have a response as well, but go ahead.

Mr. SMITH. You can go first.

Chairman JOHNSON. With freedom comes responsibility, and so it is really the responsibility of each parent to make the evaluation. Is this a school that is going to suit my children's needs? I mean, is it accredited? Is the principal a loving, caring human being? Are the teachers? Are the administrators?

So you can either put your faith in government to make that choice for you—again, one of the questions I ask crowds all the time is, show of hands—how many people think the Federal Government is efficient and effective? Nobody raises their hand. They just laugh, OK. How many think it is pretty broken and dysfunctional? OK. So let us not have the Federal Government make that choice, or even the local district government. Why not let parents make that choice. I think they care about their children more than

anybody else does. So I am happy to put that decision factor, that evaluation of is this an accredited school to my standards, I would rather give that choice to the parent than I would to any form of government, quite honestly.

Principal Smith, do you want to chime in on that as well?

Mr. SMITH. I am a product of public schools. My educators were great. They were fantastic. They pushed me beyond measure. But I do not remember my parents being as involved. They could not be. There were things that we did within the public school sector, as public science students that my parents were not truly invested.

The parents that I see coming here every single day have a say. They come in and they fight for the education that each one of their scholars deserves. I think that a naysayer that says that this program is not needed is disregarding every parent and the role that they play in the education as a first teacher, as a first educator for the scholars that we teach. I think that we have to give the opportunity for our parents to make that choice to be the number one educator, to give them what they need. Because when they graduate from St. Thomas More and they graduate from any of these Catholic schools or any of these private schools that the SOAR Act supports, their parents will always be their educator, and we need them to be a part of it.

Ms. MACLEAY. Thank you very much.

Chairman JOHNSON. Thank you.

Ms. HARRIS. All right. My name is Dia Harris and I am from Archbishop Carroll High School. My question is, if somebody did not know what the OSP program, like how would you explain that to them?

Chairman JOHNSON. Yisehak, you actually participated. Why do not you answer the question?

Mr. ABRAHAM. Sure. Go Carroll. Go Lions.

So your question is how would I describe what OSP is to somebody who has never heard of it. It is like a Golden Ticket, if I had to exaggerate.

Again, if you are going to a school where you know, it is not the right fit for you, and, the only reason why you cannot go to another school is because of circumstance, because of the area of the city you live in, or, how much money your parents have it is almost a huge equalizer. It grants people opportunities and, gives you a fair shot at success.

Ms. HARRIS. Thank you.

Chairman JOHNSON. You mentioned the word opportunity. We are all created equal. We do try and guarantee equal opportunity. You cannot guarantee equal outcomes but equal opportunity. So I like that answer. It is the Golden Ticket, is opportunity that helps ensure that.

Get up on your tippy-toes.

Mr. BONDS. I am Calique Bonds and I am in the sixth grade at St. Thomas More Catholic Academy, and this is for Principal Gerald Smith. I want to say thank you for leading us St. Thomas More scholars. And I want to ask a question. What led you to your career right now?

Mr. SMITH. I am getting grilled today.

It is a very funny story. I was brought here by God, and as cliché as that may sound. I graduated from Drexel University College of Medicine. I came here and taught at a summer program and was only going to teach for the summer. I was given the opportunity to teach, fell in love with teaching, and was inspired by the minds of each and every one of the scholars that sit here and those that are going on my first. The second class that I ever taught is graduating this year. And I remember the conversations that we had of the success that lied right beyond these doors, for each and every one of them. I get to see them. Hopefully I will get invitations to see them walk across the graduation stage and become a part of society, to change it, to make it more just, to make it more humane.

So what has led me here? God led me here. I did not listen a lot, but when I started to listen, here we are. I have the opportunity to now be a face and an advocate for a scholarship that is going to give you guys the opportunity to change your lives to.

Chairman JOHNSON. So Mr. Smith, real quick in preparation for this hearing I read a piece that Principal Smith wrote, and I was struck by the humility of one of the opening lines in there, when you talked about you were—I do not know the exact word but scared when you got this opportunity. Just talk a little bit about the—kind of the enormity of the responsibility when you first were given the opportunity to become principal of this school, what your reaction was to it.

Mr. SMITH. So I called my teachers educators because Senator Scott talked about it. We are life-long learners and educators are life-long learners. And I love to educate. I am at my best self when I am in the classroom, on a board, educating my scholars.

And I got the call from Father Moore to say, “We want to make you principal.” And it sounds great in the first moment, but then I hung up and I was like, oh, principal. So it was scary in the sense of what does that look like? How do you become the head educator? How do you become the head role model? How do you become the model of Jesus Christ in everything that you do? And that was the challenge.

And so for me it was only scary at the beginning because after that it became a lot of prayer, a lot of discernment, a lot of opportunities to have conversations with Christ, to really focus on what the ultimate goal of Catholic education was. What is the ultimate goal for scholars that have chosen to be here, that could go anywhere for free, but will work beyond measure through this scholarship, through the opportunity, to become great?

So I had to get rid of the fear and become very humble and understand my role as a leader within this part.

Chairman JOHNSON. I hope you do not mind me asking that question but I think it is very important for your scholars that are sitting here to understand that the head guy, your principal, experienced that level of fear with a new challenge. That is not unusual. That is going to happen throughout your life. Life is not easy, and I think being led by someone with that kind of humility—and, quite honestly, that level of fear, understanding that the gravity of the responsibility he is taking on being your principal is, I think, pretty interesting, if nothing else. But again, thank you for your service.

Mr. SMITH. Thank you.

Chairman JOHNSON. Any other questions or comments? Ma'am, do you have a question or comment or are you leaving? OK.

Mr. SMITH. No, she is coming up.

Chairman JOHNSON. Are you coming up? OK, good. I was not sure.

Ms. STEWART. Good afternoon, everyone. I am an old parent to OSP. When I first heard about OSP my son was graduating from elementary school, and I had gone through the process only to be hurt because the program had went away. Congress had took the money away. And so I was left scrambling, trying to find a junior high school as well as a high school for my son.

Needless to say, I did well. He is 23 years old, living in California. He is a Marine. But his senior year I received a letter saying that the money had come back and the OSP program had started up again. And now I have this 3-year-old daughter who could partake in the scholarship. And so once again I went through the process, and Katlynn was granted the OSP scholarship money. And so now I was left with trying to find a school, which St. Thomas More was our selection.

And since then she has blossomed. Katlynn has advanced from second grade to fourth grade. She loves her school. She loves her principal. She loves her teachers. I love the staff. It just works for us. So thank you to the program and certainly thank you to St. Thomas More family.

Chairman JOHNSON. Thank you for your comment.

[Applause.]

That comment does remind me. There was somebody in the audience that was going to ask a question. Can I prompt that person? Maybe she has already left. Because I would rather not make the point myself.

Well, she must have gone.

The point that was raised was why only reauthorize this for just 5 years. Why not do it permanently? I would love to do that. I have already asked my staff have we already drafted the bill? I mean, we have, with a 5-year authorization. But when you see the strong bipartisan support, when you see the support from the D.C. City Council, this may be an opportunity.

I would encourage all of you, so that we do not have that issue of funding potentially going away. Opposition may be raising its ugly head again. There is no reason, from my standpoint, not to reauthorize this thing permanently, and I would love to do that, but we are going to need your help and we are going to need your voices to make that advocacy.

Oh, they just called votes which means I have to leave.

But again, I want to thank everybody—our host, our witnesses, the audience participants, again, the school administrators, Father Moore, Mr. Smith, all of you that are involved in this very special place. Thank you very much. God bless you.

And with that the hearing is adjourned.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 4:56 p.m., the Committee was adjourned.]

## A P P E N D I X

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**“The Opportunity to SOAR: 15 Years of School Choice in D.C.”  
Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson  
February 26, 2019**

*As prepared for delivery:*

Good afternoon. I want to start by thanking the faculty and staff of St. Thomas More Catholic Academy, and the school’s principal, Gerald Smith, Jr., for graciously hosting us today. I also want to thank all the schools that provided tours and information to my staff in preparation for this hearing. Most importantly, I want to thank all of you in the audience today—parents, teachers, and students. The fact that you took the time to be here today speaks volumes about the importance of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and its positive impact on the lives of District students and their families.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program started as a grassroots effort with D.C. families as its foundation: parents like Virginia Walden Ford and countless others, who simply wanted more options for their children’s education. These families turned to the United States Congress to provide a comprehensive education system in the District that could meet the needs of all families. Their dedicated efforts led to the creation of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program 15 years ago, and the SOAR Act 8 years ago.

Since the program’s creation in 2004, over 10,000 students in the District have received a scholarship to attend a private school of their choice. The program has persevered through years of funding battles and political opposition due to the continued activism of local leaders like former Councilman Kevin Chavous and former Mayor Anthony Williams. Additionally, school choice proponents from outside the District, individuals like Howard Fuller Gerard Robinson from the Black Alliance for Educational Options, have recognized the necessity of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and have effectively helped advocate for its continuation.

Unfortunately, there is opposition to school choice. Many believe these scholarships take funding away from public schools, but nothing could be further from the truth. The SOAR Reauthorization Act of 2019 authorizes \$60 million of additional annual federal funding for the District, equally divided between public schools, charter schools, and the Opportunity Scholarship Program. In the 2018-19 school year, 1,615 students used OSP to attend a school outside the public system. The scholarships cost \$8,887 for K-8 students, and \$13,287 for high school students, and the federal government will provide \$20 million to cover the full cost of scholarships. With a \$19,117 average cost per student, the district should save over \$30 million. Even if the District had to fund OSP, it should still save \$10 million per year, while providing students and their parents the freedom to choose a school that meets their individual needs.

I enthusiastically co-sponsored legislation in 2015 with my colleague here today, Senator Tim Scott, and Senators Dianne Feinstein and Cory Booker, to reauthorize the SOAR Act which included the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program through 2019. I am happy to lead the effort to reauthorize the SOAR Act for another 5 years. I would love to pass legislation to make the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program permanent, but unfortunately that is not the political world we live in...yet. Hopefully, the voices of District families, like all of you here today, will help make the permanent reauthorization of this program possible someday.

I look forward to hearing today from Senator Tim Scott, and from two other witnesses, Marguerite Conley, former executive director of the Consortium of Catholic Academies, Yisehak Abraham, a young man who attended school through the program, and St. Thomas More Catholic Academy Principal, Gerald Smith. I would also like to hear from members of the audience and will welcome your questions and comments.

**Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs**  
**The Opportunity to SOAR: 15 Years of School Choice in D.C.**

Senator James Lankford (OK)  
Statement for the Record  
February 26, 2019

Thank you Chairman Johnson for your leadership on this issue and your support for school choice. All children, regardless of income or socioeconomic status, should have access to quality education.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) is a key part of a three-pronged approach to improve education in the District of Columbia. While we could look at the program itself, it is important to view this as one part in the overhaul for the D.C. education system. Under the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act, equal funds must be appropriated for public schools, public charter schools and opportunity scholarships. OSP scholarships allow low-income families the opportunity to send their children to a participating D.C private school of their choice. This gives families the ability to choose the best fit for their child whether it be public, public charter or private school, a decision often taken for granted by those more affluent.

For school year 2018-2019, OSP received 3,294 applications and only 1,645 students were awarded a scholarship. Each year more students apply and only a few new spots open. In school year 2018-2019 there were 1,333 new applicants and only 316 new students were given scholarships. Currently, 91% of student's awarded scholarships are African-American or Hispanic, 43% of the students receive SNAP and/or TANF benefits and the average annual income for participating families is under \$24,000 per year. The highest demand for students is greatest where public schools are not high performing and families can't afford private school or are unable to move where the public schools are better.

Last year as chair of Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee on Appropriations, we increased the DC opportunity scholarship fund by \$17.5 million for Fiscal Year 2019. Support and allocation for these opportunity scholarship vouchers is paired with extra funding for both the city's public charters and traditional schools, which both also received an increase to \$17.5 million in extra federal funding. We increased this funding to provide each child the opportunity to succeed in the classroom that fits their needs.

Along with increased funding we also directed that more of the funding to go toward actual scholarships. In fiscal year 2018, \$2 million was allocated to the Department of Education (DoE) to perform a *study* to evaluate the value of OSP. In Fiscal Year 2019, the Appropriations Committee reduced the funding for more studies and instead allocated more money for student scholarships.

As someone who personally benefited from school choice, I know firsthand how important this opportunity is for families as they seek to make the best educational decisions for their children. I am proud to support the Committee today in this effort and to have worked to further this issue in the appropriations process.

**Senator Tim Scott – Opportunity to SOAR - Testimony**

To Chairman Johnson and the rest of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak here today about this important program and about expanding educational options so that our young people can access the opportunities they deserve.

I also want to thank you and the rest of the Committee for choosing to hold this hearing here at a school, where we can see firsthand the impact that programs like the Opportunity Scholarship are having on students and parents. St. Thomas More Academy is exactly the kind of model we need to be holding up as we discuss these issues. Unfortunately, on Capitol Hill, these discussions sometimes take a turn away from the families--the parents and students--actually affected by these policies.

The reality is, if you have a high-paying job, you already have school choice—it's called a good income. With a high income, you can choose your neighborhood, or choose to send your child to a private school.

The problem is, many parents don't have that luxury. These parents want their kids to achieve as much as any other parent. But they lack the income to support the best options for their kids.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program ensures that your zip code doesn't determine your child's educational future. It provides families with options.

This mission—which is to educate kids in a high-quality school—is neither Republican nor Democratic. It's both. I thank Senator Feinstein, who joined us in introducing the SOAR Reauthorization Act last month—in an effort to continue helping high-potential kids to realize their dreams.

My hope is that we can move this bipartisan bill across the finish line, and to ensure that families can continue to benefit from the Opportunity Scholarship Program for years to come.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Statement of K. Marguerite Conley  
HSGAC Hearing – February 26, 2019**

Every parent and guardian wants his or her child to have a bright and successful future - often one better than he or she had. For many parents and guardians in DC this means higher quality educational opportunities outside of their neighborhood schools that allow for exposure to values, cultural experiences, and activities enriching the overall education of their children. This is evident in the competitive lottery for choice public and charter schools in DC.

For fifteen years, the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program has assisted parents/guardians in accessing an additional educational option for their children. Since its inception in 2004, the program has awarded 10,701 scholarships to students in grades K through 12 from low-income families to access private and parochial schools of their choice. The average annual income of families is below \$24,000 and 50% receive SNAP and/or TANF benefits. 95% of the students are African- American or Hispanic and 66% reside in Wards, 4, 7, and 8.

The private and parochial schools participating in the program provide for the academic, social/emotional and financial needs of OSP students. School leaders have provided additional support for students performing below grade level; worked to expand Title I services; provided teachers with additional professional development; incorporated social emotional learning strategies in the classroom; enhanced counseling services for both students and parents; and coordinated with the local community to obtain resources to help address needs beyond the classroom. School administrators have also sought alternative funding to provide tuition assistance to cover the gap between tuition and the OSP scholarship as well as subsidize the cost of additional school fees, materials, field trips, and school events so that students can participate fully in their school experience.

Recognizing the impact a successful transition to a new school has, school administrators have created programs to assist students and their families with acclimating to a new school culture. These include, but are not limited to, academic summer boot camps, new parent and student orientations, and new parent buddies. Required parental engagement, attendance at meetings, and volunteering also help new parents/guardians become active members of the school community and empowers them to become advocates for their children. Parental involvement is essential for student success and for creating a personal investment in the school. Classroom teachers, counselors, support staff and principals work collaboratively with parents/guardians throughout the year forming partnerships that encourage open communication nurturing student success.

Over the last fifteen years the Opportunity Scholarship Program has improved in meeting the needs of the students and their families due the collaborative efforts of the administrators of the program and school leaders. When the program first started, scholarship award notifications were outside of the private/parochial school application window. Even though some schools accepted OSP students at the last minute – sometimes even when school was already in session - the rush to place students did not always yield the best fit. Now under the direction of Serving Our Children, the timely notification of scholarship awards and school fairs within the private and parochial school application cycle allow school leaders to properly assess and plan for the needs of incoming students and their families. Better initial school placements and less school transfers

provide a more sound and consistent academic experience for students. In addition, the ongoing need for supplemental academic supports for students below grade level has led to the tutoring program established by Serving Our Children.

The current administrator also implemented an absolute sibling preference during the awarding process allowing all eligible children in a family to receive scholarships. This alleviates the strain on parents/guardians of juggling multiple schools or being forced to remain enrolled at their current neighborhood school. Having all children at one school provides a consistent educational experience for the entire family and promotes commitment in and to the school of choice.

The overall success of the program is evident in the 24,351 applications received since 2004; the 94% parent satisfaction rate with their child's academic progress and current school; and the 86% high school senior acceptance rate to 2 or 4 year colleges or universities. The reauthorization of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program empowers parents to exercise their right to choose the best school for their child no matter their income and allows children to have a brighter future.

Testimony of Yisachak Abraham  
HSGAC Hearing - February 26, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Johnson, Senator Scott and other guests. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss my experience with the Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). It is truly an honor and awesome responsibility to sit before you representing all past, present and future Opportunity Scholarship recipients and to advocate on their behalf.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) was created in 2004 with bi-partisan support in response to the growing need for access to quality educational options for D.C. families. It is the first federal government initiative to provide scholarships for grades K-12 for low-income children to attend a private school. The program began as part of a city-wide effort to improve all of the District's educational sectors – public, public charter and non-public – in an effort to expand quality educational experiences for District families.

It was subsequently reauthorized twice and thanks to your leadership and efforts hopefully will be reauthorized again. Why should it be reauthorized? Let's take a look at the impact it's had since inception.

Over 24,351 D.C. children have applied to the OSP since the program was created.

- Over 10,701 students have been awarded an OSP scholarship
- 1,653 OSP students enrolled in participating schools last school year
- 50% of OSP students received SNAP and/or TANF benefits last school year
- \$23,285 was the average annual household income for families using the scholarship in 2018.
- 66% of OSP students enrolled reside in Ward 4, 7, and 8
- More than 98% of OSP students graduate, and 86% of those students enrolled in a college.

So, who is this program serving or who has it served? Me and thousands like me. Students and families who were looking for a choice that was a better or the best fit for their educational future. A choice that would not be available to them were it not for the existence of the OSP.

OSP has had a tremendous, positive impact on my life. From kindergarten through the fourth grade, I attended a D.C. public school. However, by the fourth grade, I felt that something was not right; that the school I attended was not necessarily the **best** fit for me.

In the fifth grade, I had the privilege of being awarded a scholarship to attend a private school through the OSP. My family chose to send me to Rock Creek International School located in DuPont Circle. The transition to Rock Creek felt magical, to say the least. The school had laptops for each student to take home, language classes, spectacular teachers who cared just as much about **how** I learned, as opposed to just **what** I learned, and more.

I wrote my first extended research essay, which was over ten pages long on the ancient Olympic Games. The following summer I even went to Greece through the school. I continued with the OSP and attended Archbishop Carroll High School, a college-preparatory Catholic school. I graduated from Carroll in 2012 and from Columbia University in 2016 with a B.A. in Economics.

Currently I am a Research Associate at the American Enterprise Institute where I focus primarily on financial markets. In the future, I hope to continue to utilize economics to analyze policies to benefit the public.

The OSP program allowed me and my family a choice. A choice, a future, if you will that would not have been if the OSP program had not existed. Can someone here tell me my choices should have been limited because I came from a different part of DC? Should any child be told that their choices have to be limited if we have a program that works and can have a tremendous and positive impact on their lives?

Senator Johnson, all members of Congress, please reauthorize the OSP program and keep this critical program available for years to come. Thank you.



ST. THOMAS MORE  
CATHOLIC ACADEMY

**STM Congressional Hearing Opening Statement – Gerald Smith**

Geoffery Canada once asked a simple question, What would it Take? In a society where a class of people in America are often forgotten and the game is fixed against them, what would it take to get them out of poverty? The answer is simple: education. But simply placing scholars within a classroom is not enough. Providing true and sound partnerships between the community, the parents, an institution's educators and most importantly the scholars in which school's serve is vital to the success of developing whole individuals willing and ready to make the world more just and humane. School Choice is an important component in allowing parents and their scholars to find places that fit the needs of their unique academic profile. More importantly, the chance to choose a school rooted in mission and its religious core provides the opportunity for developing young men and women who are dedicated to growing in virtue. Catholic Schools like St. Thomas More Catholic Academy and others within the Consortium of Catholic Academics as well as many private institutions gives rise to increasing chances of transforming every aspect of a young man or young woman's life. The support of the SOAR grant gives hope to a world where brilliant minds are only one component to making the world better. The SOAR grant gives the choice to parents to find schools ready to lead, teach, and inspire, through the gospel reflecting love daily. Programs supported by the SOAR grant transforms men and women with not only brilliant minds, but more importantly men and women with full sanctified hearts guided by virtue.