



**STATEMENT OF GREGORY M. CORK, PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
THE WASHINGTON SCHOLARSHIP FUND**

**BEFORE THE SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
FINANCIAL SERVICES AND GENERAL GOVERNMENT**

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

UNITED STATES SENATE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Good morning, Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Collins, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Gregory M. Cork, and I am President and Chief Executive Officer of the Washington Scholarship Fund (“WSF”), the non-profit organization that administers the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (the “D.C. OSP” or the “OSP”).

It is my honor and privilege to appear before you today to discuss the profoundly positive impact of the D.C. OSP on the lives of the low-income D.C. students and families served through this landmark program. I am particularly grateful for this opportunity to sit alongside others from the D.C. education community who share a commitment to providing District children with genuine educational access, and to addressing whatever challenges stand in the way of affording D.C. children the best possible education.

The D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003 (the “Choice Act”), the D.C. OSP’s authorizing legislation, was enacted in January 2004 as part of a \$40 million “three-sector” education reform package that allocated equal funding to traditional D.C. public schools, to D.C. public charter schools, and to the D.C. OSP. The Choice Act – designed “to assist low-income parents to exercise choice among enhanced public opportunities and private educational environments” – targets D.C.’s lowest-income families (those at or below 185% of poverty), with a specific priority on students attending D.C. “schools in need of improvement” (“SINI” schools). A critical element of the Choice Act is the law’s mandate for a rigorous federal evaluation, which measures the OSP’s impact in terms both quantitative (*i.e.*, students’ academic progress) and qualitative (*i.e.*, participating families’ satisfaction with the program).

The results of the federal evaluation, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s (“DOE”) Institute of Education Sciences (“IES”), have established that students participating in the D.C. OSP are making real and significant academic gains. The IES and other independent studies also report that parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the schools they have chosen for their children and with the scholarship program itself, and that they see marked improvements in their children’s attitudes towards school, approaches to homework, and general learning habits. These same studies further report that OSP

parents are learning to evaluate schools not just on criteria related to safety, but also on the content of the schools' academic programs – that is, OSP parents are meaningfully participating in their children's educations, and they are making good choices on behalf of their children. Indeed, according to these reports, parents view the D.C. OSP as a way to lift the next generation of their families out of poverty.

Overall, in its implementation of the D.C. OSP since 2004, WSF has met each of the three priorities set forth in the Choice Act: Through the OSP, WSF has prioritized and served students coming from schools identified as in need of improvement; targeted resources toward the lowest-income D.C. families; and provided students and families with the widest range of educational options.

II. ELIGIBILITY FOR AND FUNDING OF THE D.C. OSP

Under the Choice Act, scholarships of up to \$7,500 per year are awarded by lottery to eligible students for tuition, transportation, and other academic-related fees to attend non-public schools in the District. To be initially eligible for OSP scholarships, parents or guardians must be D.C. residents and they must be at or below 185% of the federal poverty level (about \$40,793 for a family of four in 2009). Families renewing their scholarships must be at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (\$44,100 for a family of four in 2009) for their second and subsequent years of OSP participation.

The Choice Act allocates annually about \$12.1 million directly to scholarships. Financial support for WSF to operate the program is capped at 3% of the funding authorized under the federal statute (or about \$362,000 for the OSP's administration in 2008-2009).

III. D.C. OSP STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

Nearly 20% of eligible District students applied for OSP scholarships in the program's first four years of operation. Key data on OSP students, families, and schools for the past school year (2008-2009) include:

- The average income for participating families was \$24,312.
- The average family size of scholarship users was a single mother with two children.
- Of the 1,716 students participating during the 2008-2009 school year, 1,050 lived in D.C.'s most economically-challenged Wards (5, 7, and 8).
- If not for the OSP, 86% of scholarship students would be attending D.C.'s lowest performing schools (Schools In Need of Improvement, Corrective Action or Restructuring, as designated under No Child Left Behind).
- The average K-12 scholarship award was \$7,000 – just below the \$7,500 cap.
- The average tuition for OSP students at participating schools was \$6,000 for grades K-8 and \$9,668 for high school.

IV. INDEPENDENT REPORTS CONFIRM THAT THE D.C. OSP IS WORKING FOR LOW-INCOME D.C. STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

A. The U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences' Evaluation of the D.C. OSP: Impacts after Three Years (April 2009)

This much-anticipated report released by the U.S. Department of Education – the latest in the continuing series of IES evaluation reports – builds on previous positive findings and confirms what parents in the D.C. OSP have known for years: D.C. OSP students are performing at higher academic levels than their peers who are not in the program, and are better off by virtually every important measure in their chosen schools.

The DOE report offers the most unambiguous academic proof yet that the D.C. OSP is working for low-income D.C. students and families. Overall, scholarship students are performing at statistically higher levels in reading – over three months ahead of their peers who did not receive scholarships. In addition, the report shows that some scholarship students are as many as two years ahead in reading compared to their peers without scholarships.

The report also finds that using a scholarship significantly increases parents' satisfaction with their children's schools in every measurable area. About 75% of scholarship parents give their children's schools an 'A' or 'B' grade, and view their chosen schools as safer and more orderly.

The DOE reports to date reflect that the D.C. OSP, as intended, is serving the District's most economically and educationally disadvantaged students and families – and shows that the choices afforded by the OSP are not only improving students' academic performance, but redefining their futures.

B. The School Choice Demonstration Project's Fourth and Final Report on the D.C. OSP (January 2009)

The latest report on the D.C. OSP by the School Choice Demonstration Project (formerly within Georgetown University's School of Public Policy and now operated through the University of Arkansas) shows that families are extremely satisfied with the program and the schools they have chosen, and with being given opportunities – in most cases for the first time ever – to choose schools they judge to be the best fit for their children.

The latest report is the fourth and final publication compiled by the School Choice Demonstration Project, which uses focus groups of low-income scholarship families to learn about their experiences in the program. According to the report, scholarship parents have moved “from the margins to the center of their child's academic development,” and are finding improved safety in their chosen schools, stricter discipline, smaller classes, values-based environments, enhanced curriculum, and effective support services such as tutoring and mentoring. “I was looking for a different environment for [my child],” explains one parent involved in the report. “My thing was he will follow Sally and Sally [is] not into her work, [in private school] he will follow John who gets better grades and that's exactly what's happening now.”

The report states that “[p]erhaps the single most consistent response voiced in the focus groups was the high levels of satisfaction reported by each subgroup and cohort. Even in situations where parents complained or expressed disappointment with some aspect of their experience . . . they still gave the program high marks.”

According to the School Choice Demonstration Project report, D.C. OSP parents cite many factors that contribute to their satisfaction with the program, including noticeable improvements in their children's attitudes about learning, better dispositions toward school, and more productive homework and learning habits. Says one parent in the report, “[My child] is doing good in school, and she says ‘Mommy I want to continue . . . and when I finish I want to go to a university.’ She's very interested in college. She starts to do her homework, and she's doing it on the computer . . . she's learning, learning, learning!”

For the parents in the School Choice Demonstration Project study, participation in the D.C. OSP is providing benefits to families that “transcend their children's education.” According to the report, “[f]or most parents, [the D.C. OSP] is an opportunity to lift the next generation of their family out of poverty.”

V. WSF'S ADMINISTRATION OF THE D.C. OSP

A. Meeting the Choice Act's Priorities

As noted, in its implementation of the D.C. OSP since 2004, WSF has met each of the three priorities set forth in the Choice Act:

(1) The D.C. OSP has prioritized students coming from schools identified as in need of improvement (“SINI” schools)

- If not for the D.C. OSP, 86% of scholarship students would be attending D.C.'s lowest-performing schools (Schools In Need of Improvement, Corrective Action or Restructuring, as designated under No Child Left Behind).

(2) The D.C. OSP has served the needs of the lowest-income D.C. families

- As indicated, all families must be at or below 185% of the federal poverty level (\$40,793 for a family of four in 2009) to be initially eligible for the D.C. OSP, and must be at or below 200% of the poverty level (\$44,100 for a family of four in 2009) for their second and subsequent years of OSP participation.
- The average income of participating families in 2008-2009 was \$24,312 – far below the eligibility requirement.

(3) WSF has provided students and families with the widest range of educational options

- In the course of WSF's administration of the D.C. OSP, 78 of the 86 non-public schools in the District (80%) participated in the program.

B. Fiscal Management and Internal Controls

WSF received clean A-133 audits for each of the first four years of the D.C. OSP's implementation – 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008. WSF anticipates a clean A-133 audit for the program's fifth year, 2009.

Further, WSF has implemented the financial processes, procedures, and controls necessary to maintain compliance with all federal and generally-accepted accounting standards, rules, and regulations, and with apposite recommendations made by government agencies. WSF also has fortified its financial infrastructure and IT security protocols – e.g., by installing upgraded financial software, updating written financial policies and procedures, and augmenting accounting staff.

VI. DISTRICT FAMILIES, LAWMAKERS, AND OTHER RESIDENTS WANT THE D.C. OSP TO CONTINUE

- Nearly 20% of eligible District students applied for OSP scholarships in the program's first four years of operation, reflecting high demand for the program from D.C.'s low-income families.
- In 2009, District Mayor Adrian Fenty once again asked Congress for continued funding of the three-sector education reform initiative that includes the D.C. OSP.
- In June 2009, seven D.C. City Council Members asked Secretary Duncan and Mayor Fenty to continue the D.C. OSP.
- President Obama has expressed his support for continuing the D.C. OSP in service to the low-income District students who already have benefited from participation in the program.
- A July 2009 poll of D.C. residents found that 74% have a favorable view of the D.C. OSP, and that 79% of parents with school-age children oppose ending it.

VII. WHAT FAMILIES AND STUDENTS SAY ABOUT THE D.C. OSP

"This program works. I believe every parent should have the opportunity to send their child where they feel they should go. I want to make sure my children can get the best educations offered, making sure they can get the best out of life."

Malcolm Jordan, OSP Parent

"My kids' educations mean the world to me. You saw what happened with Obama, right? I'm looking for the next President right here, right Donae? Right Dayonte? This should have been here when I was in school; I would have been so much more today. In fact, I'm thinking about going back to school myself."

Anquanette Williamson, OSP Parent

"Today, I wouldn't know where he'd be, but looking at today, I'm proud and I'm glad at where he's at right now. The scholarship program has helped us tremendously."

Radcliffe Fairclough, OSP Parent

"The scholarship has made me feel more secure in my child's education. Her going to a good school will open doors for her in the future This would not have been possible without the scholarship."

Linda Bernard, OSP Parent

"He has become inspired, gained self-esteem, and he's proud of his school. He is very smart and [the teachers at Sacred Heart] recognize his learning style. Not all children learn the same way. It's important that the environment they are learning in is best for their needs."

Patricia William, OSP Parent

"It has affected me in a good way, and without the scholarship, I wouldn't be here at St. John's. This experience keeps me humble because without it, I don't have to see my mom struggle to give me a good education. I'm getting one, and this has helped me for the better."

Zachary Tanner, OSP Student

"If I didn't have the scholarship, it would be hard on [my father]. The scholarship gives me a chance to go to a good school with a good education. I appreciate the scholarship."

Guillermo Aburto, Jr., OSP Student

"How are they going to take the scholarship away from me and my friends? They didn't ask us. I don't understand, because the scholarship has helped me."

DeCarlos Young, OSP Student

"I like the teachers. They actually care about the students and they are there to help.
I like how diverse and challenging it is."

Fullumusu Bangura, OSP Student

"My private school offers an atmosphere where students strive to succeed because of their surroundings. I strive to make killer grades every quarter and turn in all of my work because it is expected of me and because I have support from my friends and classmates to do so."

Sanya Arias, OSP Alumna (2009), St. Johns University (2013)

VIII. CONCLUSION

Mr. Chairman, again, it is an honor and a privilege to address the Subcommittee regarding WSF's work in service to D.C. OSP students and families, who have benefited tremendously from the educational opportunities afforded them by this groundbreaking program. I look forward to continuing this discussion with the Subcommittee, and would be pleased to take any questions you have at this time.