

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 24, 2012

Senator Richard Durbin
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
133 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Senator Jerry Moran
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
133 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Durbin and Ranking Member Moran:

As you determine the Financial Services and General Government appropriation for FY 2013, we ask you to keep in mind the needs of the schoolchildren of the District of Columbia, and to appropriate funds pursuant to the requirements of the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act of 2011. Specifically, we urge that the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program receive one-third of the total Federal Funding for School Improvement in the District of Columbia, in the 2013 Financial Services Appropriations bill that will be marked up in your subcommittee in the coming weeks as specified in statute under the SOAR Act.

As you know, the SOAR Act of 2011 authorizes the appropriation of \$60 million a year for 2012 and for four succeeding fiscal years, divided in equal thirds between the D.C. Public Schools, the public charter schools of the District and the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. This law passed with bipartisan support and won the signature of President Obama. It was a welcome moment of agreement.

The President's budget for FY 2013, however, zeroes out the third of the budget allocated to the Opportunity Scholarships. The President proposes to still spend the full \$60 million, but would, in contravention of the statutory requirement, spend \$36.6 million, or 62 percent, on the D.C. Public Schools, and \$23.4 million for D.C. public charter schools. We believe this budget request does great harm and shows disregard for what Congress enacted.

It was the plain intent of Congress to fund the Opportunity Scholarships on an ongoing basis. The President's budget specifically states that no additional students will be allowed into the program and that funds are available only for existing students and to replace those who leave. It is a de facto plan to terminate the program.

This program has demonstrated proven results, and should be funded on that simple basis. A recent federally commissioned study found that 91 percent of students using the scholarships graduated from high school. By contrast, graduation rates in the D.C. Public Schools have hovered around 55 percent. Researchers found that students using the scholarships were 21 percent more likely to graduate than those who applied but did not receive a scholarship – 28 percent more likely in the particular case of girls. Since 2004, more than 10,000 families have sought the Opportunity Scholarships, and no wonder: More than 92 percent of participating students would otherwise find themselves in schools in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

This is not a matter of private schools pulling away the best students. Participating families have an average income of less than \$24,000 a year, and are awarded a scholarship by lottery when there are more applicants than spaces. These are Washington D.C.'s poorest children. As was illustrated in the documentary "Waiting for Superman" many families face desperation as they try to get their children a better education. This program has proven results and should be funded. It gives a fair shot at a better future for children who don't have many other options.

When appropriating funds, we request that the Committee follow the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act of 2011 and divide the federal payment for D.C. school improvement equally among all three sectors.

We also want to ensure you saw the editorial that appeared in the *Washington Post* yesterday concerning this issue, and have enclosed it for your information.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government
Management, the Federal Workforce,
and the District of Columbia
Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs



Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman
Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs



Susan M. Collins
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland
Security and Governmental Affairs



Lamar Alexander
Committee on Appropriations