



Committee on Catholic Education

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March 27, 2015

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Mikulski
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Chairman, Subcommittee on Financial
Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Chris Coons
Ranking Member, Subcommittee on
Financial Services and General Government
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senators:

I write you today on behalf of the Committee on Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to urge your support for the full authorized funding of \$60 million in the *Fiscal Year 2016 Financial Services Appropriations Bill* for the three sectors of the school improvement initiative, which includes the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP). We also want to request your support for important reforms to OSP to improve access to and participation in the program and ensure greater accountability and effectiveness of the schools that serve OSP students.

Since its inception, OSP has been an educational lifeline for nearly 6,000 children from low-income families in the District of Columbia. The great success of the program is clearly demonstrated by the strong educational outcomes and parental satisfaction with the program. With a better than 90 percent graduation rate (30 points higher than D.C. public schools) and near 90 percent college enrollment rate, the OSP program has provided a vital opportunity to the 6,000 children who have participated in the program.

The OSP program also gives crucial support to low-income and minority families and children from schools designated for improvement with the average family in the program making less than \$22,000 per year, 97 percent of participating children being African American and Hispanic, and 88 percent of participating children coming from zones with schools designated as in need of improvement.

In order to ensure that eligible children are enrolled and receive scholarship, we continue to urge you to ensure that the program is implemented in accordance with the provisions of current law. In this regard, we urge you to direct the Department of Education to provide clear guidance to the program administrator so that carryover funds can be used to provide new scholarships to *all* eligible applicants. We also believe a minimum of 2 percent of current carryover funds should be

dedicated solely to parent engagement. Why should any child be denied the opportunity to receive a DC-OSP scholarship when they meet the eligibility criteria, and funding is available to do so?

In anticipation of a new program administrator and to improve parental outreach and program accountability, we urge you to direct the Department of Education to provide guidance to the administrator so as to align the new application deadline for the OSP program with the deadline for public charter schools. We also support inclusion of language to expand background checks on employees who have direct and unsupervised interaction with students, and we support requiring accreditation of schools participating in the DC-OSP program. These are measures which have long been implemented by the Catholic schools participating in the program and the expansion of these requirements will help ensure that all schools provide a safe and effective educational setting.

For nearly 150 years, the Catholic Church has unequivocally taught that parents have the right and responsibility to serve as the primary educators of their children. To assist them in this sacred duty, the Church has articulated clearly that children have the universal right to an education, and the state has the fundamental obligation to support parents in fulfilling such a right. In the 1965 *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis)*, the Second Vatican Council reiterated “Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools. Consequently, the public power, which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens, must see to it, in its concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are paid out in such a way that parents are truly free to choose according to their conscience in the schools they want for their children.”

We urge you and your colleagues to support the \$60 million annual appropriation, divided equally among the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, D.C. public charter schools, and D.C. public schools, and support the reforms necessary to improve participation and effectiveness of the OSP program.

With prayerful best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ George J. Lucas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend George J. Lucas
Archbishop of Omaha
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education
cc: Members, Senate Committee on Appropriations