

“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.