

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.