Committee on Catholic Education
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December 18, 2013

The Honorable Harold Rogers, Chairman
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nita Lowey, Ranking Member
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Ander Crenshaw
Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable José Serrano
Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee
House Appropriations Committee
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representatives:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I am writing to urge your support for the full authorized funding of $60 million in each of the fiscal years included in the Bipartisan Budget Act of FY 2014 for the federal three-sector initiative for school improvement in Washington, D.C., divided equally between the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, D.C. public charter schools, and D.C. public schools.

The highly successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) was reauthorized through the SOAR Act in April of 2011. The program has been an educational lifeline for nearly 6,000 children from very low-income District of Columbia families since it began in the 2004-2005 school year. The average income for participating families is less than $21,000 per year and nearly all of the participating children would otherwise be zoned for a school in need of improvement. More than 13,000 families have applied to participate in the OSP since inception and the program also enjoys a 92 percent parental satisfaction rating among participating families and overwhelming support in District communities. Also worth noting is the fact that 85 percent of participating children are African-American and 13 percent are Hispanic.

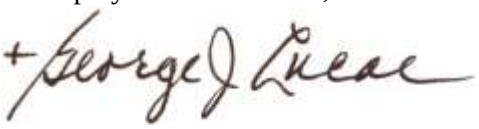
More importantly, the OSP is an example of what works in education. The last U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (IES) study in 2010 showed 91 percent of children who used their opportunity scholarships graduated from high school - 21 percent higher than those who sought but did not receive a scholarship. The IES studies also showed reading gains among participating children. More recent data compiled by the program administrator, the D.C. Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation, showed an average OSP high school graduation rate of 93 percent and a college enrollment rate of 90 percent for those graduates from 2010-2012.

Catholic schools in the District of Columbia, as in many other urban areas, have a long history of providing an education which prepares students to graduate from high school, attend college in large numbers, and become productive citizens. These schools welcome and educate non-Catholic as well as Catholic students, including many considered "at risk." The parents of such students should not be denied the option of choosing the type of school which best meets the needs of their children, whether that is a neighborhood public school, a public charter school, a religious school, or private school without a religious affiliation.

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the recent Government Accountability Office report that followed a 15-month analysis of the OSP. The report pointed to implementation issues that we believe must be addressed. However, we at the Conference believe that these implementation issues can be addressed. This report should not detract from the glowing success of the program itself and the positive and profound impact it has made in the lives of so many of our young children.

Educational options are critically important for families in Washington, D.C. No child should be denied a quality education simply because of their zip code or family income. We urge you and your colleagues to continue the $60 million annual appropriation, divided equally between the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, D.C. public charter schools, and D.C. public schools.

With prayerful best wishes,



Most Reverend George J. Lucas
Archbishop of Omaha
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education