

Opening Statement
Congressman Elijah E. Cummings
“The DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Keeping the Door Open”

March 1, 2011

Thank you Chairman Gowdy and Ranking Member Davis.

Improving public education, whether in an urban, suburban, or rural setting, is a truly arduous task. It takes time, money, vision, support, and accountability. But most importantly, it takes the unfettered belief of communities and dedicated educational professionals that all children can learn and are deserving of a high-quality education.

Coming from the great city of Baltimore, I also understand first-hand the complexities of transforming struggling inner city schools. About three years ago, I became deeply involved in turning around one of my own neighborhood schools. I discovered that the school lacked adequate classroom space and educational amenities. After sustained action by the City of Baltimore, the Public School System, neighborhood activists, and myself, the school has made a near complete “180”, moving into a real school building and improving student academic performance.

I have also seen firsthand the astounding heights to which our public schools can soar. I serve as a board member of KIPP Baltimore – a public charter school – whose 8th grade students boast the third highest scores in Maryland on math, and the highest scores among Baltimore schools for both reading and math on the Maryland School Assessment. I was impressed by KIPP’s ability to deliver quality education in an urban public school setting, and I continue to be amazed by the school’s commitment to achievement.

As an advocate for quality education for all, and as a father, I recognize that all parents want what is best for their children, and that a combination of preparation and opportunity is critically important to enable kids to reach their God-given potential -- especially low-income, inner-city kids.

The District’s elected leaders, school officials, community advocates, parents, and residents understand this. And over the past several years, I have observed their commitment to improving the quality of education in this city. There have been some transformational gains in the District’s public education system. Since 2003, scores for District public school students in fourth grade have increased significantly, by as much as 15 points. According to the National Assessment of Education Progress, the District’s improvement is the second-greatest in the nation when compared to other large urban areas. The District is also the only major city to see double-digit growth in both its reading and math scores for secondary students over the last three years.

The District’s recent educational reforms have ushered in learning innovations, revamped curriculums, and focused on specialized projects, such as Payne Elementary’s Catalyst World Culture and Linguistic program and Banneker High School’s Advancement Placement and International Baccalaureate Diploma program.

The District has also enhanced alternative public educational options that could potentially be expanded with additional support. Like the city of Baltimore, the District is home to a multitude of thriving public charter schools, like Achievement Preparatory Academy, a middle school in the heart of southeast that has consistently made adequate yearly progress in both reading and math. The high school graduation rate for District public charter schools is eight percent higher than the U.S. national average.

To that end, I look forward to this morning’s hearing as a constructive discussion about whether the District’s opportunity scholarship program, which awards scholarships to approximately one thousand students to attend private and religiously affiliated schools, is the optimal route for improving the academic performance and achieving the greatest possible impact.

I thank our witnesses for being here and congratulate our student witnesses for their notable accomplishments.

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