

## **Testimony of Kevin P. Chavous**

Before the Subcommittee on Health Care, District Of Columbia,  
Census and the National Archives

March 1, 2011

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. With your indulgence, I would like to use my time this morning to offer some perspective about the importance of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP) not just for District residents, but also for the national fight to ensure that each and every American schoolchild receive a high quality education.

As many of you know, I served on the Council of the District of Columbia for 12 years. For over half of that time, I chaired the Council's education committee. I am proud of the fact that during my chairmanship, I was able to help usher school choice into the District; first by way of charter schools, then through the OSP. As to the creation of the OSP, let me be very clear. Mr. Chairman, this program was not forced upon or foisted on the residents of the District of Columbia. I know. I was there. The three sector initiative was a collaborative undertaking between the city and the federal government. We insisted on the three sector approach, which provided equal funding for DC Public Schools, DC Public Charter Schools and the OSP. We worked very, very hard to develop a program that fit the unique educational needs of the District, where not one dime was

diverted from public schools. Anyone who suggests otherwise is being fundamentally and practically dishonest about the history and origin of the OSP.

Today, the students who testified have spoken directly about the positive impact of the OSP on their lives. For them, and thousands of other District children, the OSP has been a lifeline for them and their families. Without the program, they wouldn't have made it. It is just that simple.

The D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program sends a clear message to families, to children, and to our community. If you're poor and you're stuck in a school that is failing, that is unsafe, and that no amount of money can fix right away, we're not going to make an experiment of you, we're going to help you. And we're going to do it, not five years from now, but today. We're going to give you a chance at success. The essence of the program is in its name: opportunity.

The DC OSP has provided scholarships allowing the lowest-income D.C. children to attend better schools, private schools that are mere blocks away from the public schools that long ago stopped serving their needs. The program is open to everyone. There is no discrimination, no cherry-picking.

And the results are stunning. Graduation rates are 91 percent for those who used their scholarships. Improved reading scores for students. Parental satisfaction is overwhelming. The US Department of Education said that the program was one of the most effective programs they've ever studied. By any measure,

by any test, by any rational standard, this hearing should be about how we can expand this program not just in Washington, D.C. but into other parts of our nation. Instead, by a cruel twist of political fate, we're here trying to save the very program that should be a model for our nation.

Which leads me to the final point I need to make during my testimony. The importance of the OSP in the larger national education reform landscape. Since leaving the Council, I have been deeply immersed in the national education reform movement. Indeed, I have become a student of what ails our schools and what does or does not work for our kids.

The truth is, we know what works for our kids, but often we don't have the will or courage to truly put our kids first when we make policy that affects them. Plus, our over allegiance to a one size fits all approach to system reform has blinded us to the reality of many kids' lives today. Yes, we need to fix DC Public Schools and many other school districts around the country. But we also need to save individual children today. Children who can't wait for the 3-5 year reform plan dujour.

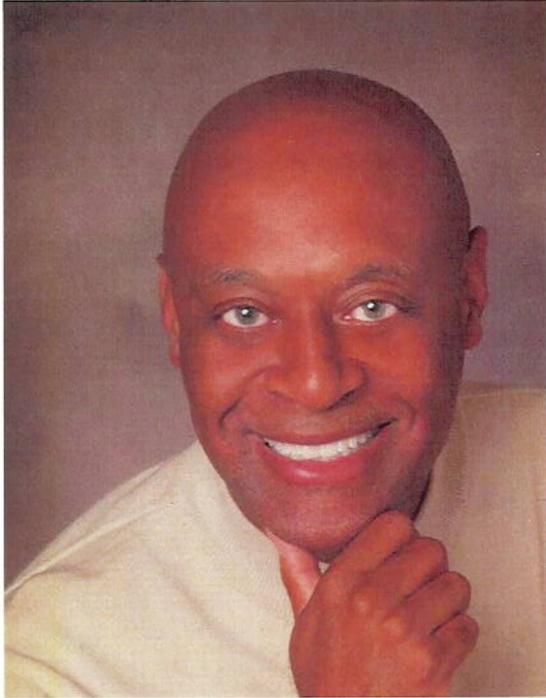
During the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King talked about the Fierce Urgency of Now. People should not have to wait to get their freedom, he argued, they are entitled to those freedoms now, not in the distant future.

Today, we are engaged in a similar freedom fight. One involving ensuring that all American children receive the education that they deserve. Like Dr. King's battle cry, our children are entitled to receive a quality education today, not tomorrow.

The DC OSP has responded to that clarion call by offering a quality education to children in this city who otherwise would be trapped in failing schools. I applaud those of you on this committee who support its reauthorization and urge all of you to join us as we fight to educate each and every child, by any means necessary.

Thank you.

## Kevin P. Chavous



Kevin P. Chavous is a noted attorney, author and national school reform leader. As a former member of the Council of the District of Columbia and Chair of the Council's Education Committee, Mr. Chavous was at the forefront of promoting change within the District public school system. His efforts led to over 500 million new dollars being made available to educate children in DC.

A leading national advocate for school choice, Mr. Chavous helped to shepherd the charter school movement into the nation's capital. Under his education committee chairmanship, the DC charter school movement became the most prolific charter school jurisdiction in the country, with now nearly 40% of DC's public school children attending charter schools. In addition, Mr. Chavous assisted in shaping the District's three sector education partnership with the federal government. That partnership led to fifty million new federal dollars for DC public schools, DC charter schools and it funded the first federal scholarship program to allow 2,000 low income children to attend private schools.

More recently, Mr. Chavous led the team working with Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal that advocated for the recently passed scholarship program in New Orleans. As a result of that legislation, nearly 2,000 students are now attending private schools of their choice in the New Orleans parish.

Mr. Chavous is a partner at the law firm SNR Denton LLP and he is also an accomplished author, having published *Serving Our Children: Charter Schools and the Reform of American Public Education*. His new book, *Voices of Determination: Children that Defy the Odds*, will be released in the fall, 2011. Mr. Chavous is involved with many education reform groups and is the Board Chair for both the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). He also is a Distinguished Fellow for the Center for Education Reform. Mr. Chavous was born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana and graduated from Wabash College, where he was an NCAA All-American in basketball. He also graduated from the Howard University School of Law, where he was president of his graduating class. He lives in Washington, DC.

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform  
Witness Disclosure Requirement – "Truth in Testimony"  
Required by House Rule XI, Clause 2(g)(5)

Name: **Kevin P. Chavous**

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1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2008. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

None

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2. Please list any entity you are testifying on behalf of and briefly describe your relationship with these entities.

None

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3. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants or subcontracts) received since October 1, 2008, by the entity(ies) you listed above. Include the source and amount of each grant or contract.

None

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*I certify that the above information is true and correct.*

Signature:

*Kevin P. Chavous*

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Date:

*2-21-11*