



Committee on Catholic Education

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October 5, 2015

The Honorable John F. Boehner
Speaker
U. S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jason Chaffetz
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Daniel Lipinski
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John Kline
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Todd Rokita
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Luke Messer
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Representatives:

I write you today on behalf of the Committee on Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to welcome the introduction of the *Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act of 2015* (H.R.10) and urge swift passage of this vital support for low-income students and their families in the District of Columbia.

In addition to providing additional funding for public and private schools in D.C., the SOAR Act also provides D.C. Opportunity Scholarships for low-income students to attend private schools. The reauthorization of this program will not only benefit low-income families but all families who have students in public and charter schools in D.C. In particular, we welcome the fact that the reauthorization improves oversight in the program and ensures greater accountability and effectiveness of the schools that serve OSP students.

Since its inception in 2001, OSP has been an educational lifeline for nearly 6,000 children from low-income families in the District of Columbia. The great success of the program is clearly demonstrated by its strong educational outcomes and parental satisfaction with the program. With a better than 90 percent graduation rate and nearly 90 percent college enrollment rate, OSP has provided a vital opportunity to the 6,000 children who have participated in the program.

The program also gives crucial support to low-income and minority families and children. The average family in the program makes less than \$22,000 per year; 97 percent of participating children are African American and/or Hispanic; and 87 percent of participating children come from zones whose schools are designated as in need of improvement.

H.R. 10 improves access to and participation in OSP by ensuring that eligible children are enrolled and receive scholarships, and the program is implemented in accordance with the provisions of current law. We also support H.R. 10's inclusion of language to expand background checks on employees who have direct and unsupervised interaction with students, and we support requiring accreditation of schools participating in the program. These are measures which have long been implemented by the Catholic schools participating in the program, and the expansion of these requirements will help ensure that all schools provide a safe and effective educational setting.

As Pope Francis recently reminded us in his address to the United Nations, the fulfillment of the right to education is a sacred duty of parents, and this program assists low-income parents in fulfilling this important obligation. The Catholic Church has consistently taught that parents have the right and responsibility to serve as the primary educators of their children. To assist them in this sacred duty, the Church has articulated clearly that children have the universal right to an education, and the state has a fundamental obligation to support parents in fulfilling such a right.

We thank you and support your introduction of this important piece of legislation.

With prayerful best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "George J. Lucas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

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