



AMERICAN FEDERATION
for Children

April 25, 2016

TO: Members of the U.S. House of Representatives
RE: YES on HR 4901

The American Federation for Children (AFC), the nation's voice for educational choice, urges all House members to support HR 4901, the *Scholarships for Results and Opportunity (SOAR) Reauthorization Act of 2016*. HR 4901 will reauthorize and strengthen the highly successful D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), and ensure continued authorized funding for D.C. charter schools and school improvement in D.C.'s public schools as part of the three-sector federal investment.

This bill is supported by thousands of low-income families in the District of Columbia whose children are currently enrolled, have previously participated, or who wish to enter the OSP. This bill is also supported by D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser and a majority of the D.C. City Council.

For 11 years, the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program has served students and families in Washington, D.C. It's an incredibly successful program that has been an educational lifeline for 6,400 children from very low-income D.C. families since it began in the 2004-05 school year. Since 2010, the OSP has shown a 90 percent graduation rate for students using a scholarship and a near 90 percent college enrollment for those graduates. According to the last U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (IES) report (2010), 91 percent of children who used their opportunity scholarships graduated from high school, 21 percent higher than those who applied, but did not receive a scholarship. There was also a statistically significant increase in reading scores according to a 2013 summary article published by the first OSP federal evaluation team in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, a top scientific peer reviewed publication.

The success in educational outcomes for OSP students is complemented by the fact that the program serves low-income families with an average income of less than \$22,000 per year and more than 97 percent of participants are African-American or Hispanic. In addition, 88 percent of participating students would otherwise be zoned for low achieving public schools.

The demand for the OSP among District families remains very strong. More than 16,000 families have applied to participate in the program since 2004 and the program administrator has more than 2000 *new applicants* for the 2016-2017 school year.

HR 4901 will reauthorize the OSP for five years and strengthen the program. HR 4901 includes language to ensure that all eligible families, especially siblings of existing participants, can participate. Children from low achieving public schools will continue to be the first priority for entry into the program. HR 4901 makes it clear that unobligated funds from previous fiscal years shall be used for new scholarships. This will ensure that the U.S. Department of Education can no longer deny eligible children entry into the OSP by refusing to grant the program administrator access to the unobligated funds from previous years.

Importantly, HR 4901 will improve the federally mandated evaluation of the program by comparing students receiving scholarships with similarly situated students in public schools. Moreover, the new evaluation will include all students participating in the program, and not just new participants who won a lottery, so it will be more comprehensive than previous studies.

Finally, HR 4901 retains provisions for background checks for school employees who directly interact with students and requires those few participating schools not already accredited to do so within five years.

Washington, D.C. is an excellent example of parental choice at work. Parents get to choose traditional public schools, charters or the OSP, and this has helped to improve K-12 education in the District for all children. AFC is committed to ensuring that every child – no matter their ZIP code or family income – has access to a quality education. Reauthorizing the OSP will ensure that low-income families in D.C. will continue to have access to this successful program. We urge all members to support HR 4901. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Schilling". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

John Schilling
Chief Operating Officer
American Federation for Children