



The Roman Catholic
Archdiocese of Washington



United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops

Secretariat of
Catholic Education

September 09, 2025

Dear Representative:

We write to you on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Catholic Education and the Archdiocese of Washington to welcome the introduction of the *SOAR Act Improvement Acts* (H.R. 5181), which will reauthorize and enhance the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Act (SOAR Act). In 2003, Congress enacted the bipartisan D.C. School Choice Incentive Act of 2003¹, the predecessor to SOAR, which established what later became known as the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), which enabled D.C. parents to pursue a high-quality education at a private school of their choice. This legislation also provided additional federal funding for public sector schools in the District of Columbia, namely traditional public schools and public charter schools, to supplement other appropriations for the District. This 2003 Act was replaced in 2011 with the SOAR Act², again with champions in both parties.

Since the 2004-2005 school year, nearly 12,000 students have received Opportunity Scholarships.³ Congressional authorization for this critical initiative expired in 2023, making long-term reauthorization a vital priority.

In both the 2003 and 2011 Acts, Congress expressly found that:

“Parents are best equipped to make decisions for their children, including the educational setting that will best serve the interests and educational needs of their child.”

We wholeheartedly agree. The Catholic Church recognizes that parents are the first and primary educators of their children and, therefore have the right to select the best educational environment for their child⁴. To assist them with this sacred duty, the Church has clearly articulated that the state has the obligation to support parents in fulfilling this right:

“As those first responsible for the education of their children, **parents have the right to choose a school for them** which corresponds to their own convictions. This right is fundamental. As far as possible, parents have the duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their task as Christian educators. **Public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and of ensuring the concrete conditions for its exercise.**”⁵

¹ Public Law 108-199; 118 Stat. 126 (<https://www.congress.gov/108/plaws/publ199/PLAW-108publ199.pdf>).

² Public Law 112-10; 125 Stat. 200 (<https://www.congress.gov/112/statute/STATUTE-125/STATUTE-125-Pg38.pdf>).

³ <https://servingourchildrendc.org/about-us/>

⁴ Code of Canon Law 797

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2229 (citing *Gravissimum Educationis*) (emphasis added)

This past school year, we proudly recognized the 20th anniversary of the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program and now celebrate two decades of expanded educational opportunity for families in the District of Columbia. Over these past 20 years of the OSP program, Congress has rightly supported thousands of parents in fulfilling their rights by ensuring that they have access to their choice of traditional public schools, charter schools, or private schools, as best fits the needs of their child.

OSP has also been instrumental in empowering families with the greatest need. In the 2024-2025 school year, OSP served 3,212 D.C. students. The average income for OSP families this year was roughly \$27,000 per year, with 42 percent receiving public benefits like SNAP and TANF; 94 percent of participating children are African-American and/or Hispanic; and 37 percent live in Wards 7 or 8, the most disadvantaged sections of the District.⁶ These are the families who will benefit the most from long-term reauthorization of this critical program.

This legislation enhances funding for OSP and makes critical improvements that will open more doors to opportunities for children and families in need, while continuing to split the appropriations evenly between public and non-public schools. Many OSP families have chosen one of the fine Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, so we have seen first-hand how beneficial and essential this opportunity has been for young people in the District of Columbia to be able to build better lives for themselves and contribute meaningfully to society. The reauthorization will expand this critical program to include pre-kindergarten, which will provide our youngest learners with a strong foundation from the very start of their educational journey. We also support inclusion of robust language that explicitly protects the religious liberty of participating schools and respects private school autonomy.

We thank you for your leadership on this legislation, which will preserve and strengthen the three-sector federal educational initiative which is so vital to thousands of D.C. families. We urge swift passage of this bill.

With prayerful best wishes,



Robert Cardinal McElroy
Archbishop of Washington



Most Reverend David M. O'Connell, C.M.
Bishop of Trenton
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education

⁶ https://servingourchildrendc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/DC-OSP-Program-Fact-Sheet-SY-2024-2025_6.2025.pdf