

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 16, 2008

The Honorable David R. Obey
Chairman
House Appropriations Committee
H-218 Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Robert C. Byrd
Chairman
Senate Appropriations Committee
S-131 Capitol
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable José E. Serrano
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services
and General Government
B300 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Richard J. Durbin
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services
and General Government
SD-184
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Mr. Chairman,

We understand that staff is currently negotiating a fiscal year 2009 omnibus bill to complete action on the appropriations bills that were not enacted during the 110th Congress. During this negotiation, we urge the adoption of the House position on the D. C. Opportunity Scholarship Program from the Committee-passed Fiscal Year 2009 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Bill (H.R. 7323).

As you know, the Opportunity Scholarship program provides close to 2,000 disadvantaged children the opportunity to attend private schools in the nation's capital. These children are from some of the poorest families in the District of Columbia with average incomes of approximately \$23,000 per year. While we commend Mayor Fenty and Chancellor Rhee for their heroic reform efforts, the D.C. Public School System is still struggling to improve student achievement and address school violence. The Opportunity Scholarship program provides an educational alternative for children whose parents would otherwise be financially unable to send their child to a better performing school.

Since 2004, the Congress has provided resources for three programs to improve education in the District of Columbia including funding for public schools, public charter schools and opportunity scholarships. In testimony before the House Appropriations Committee in April, Mayor Fenty and Council Chairman Gray both testified that they support the three sector funding approach.

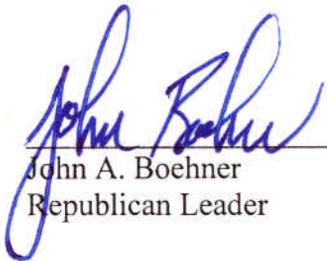
While the House Financial Services bill does not provide the increase in funding requested by the District of Columbia and the President for the Opportunity Scholarships program, it does not suggest termination of the three sector funding strategy in the future years as the Senate Financial Services bill does. The Senate bill would prohibit funding for the Opportunity Scholarship program beyond the 2009-2010 school year unless Congress and the

District of Columbia reauthorize the program. The Senate bill also prohibits new participants from entering the program.

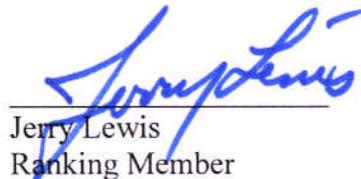
The Senate language will provide uncertainty to the City's poorest families regarding their children's academic opportunities for the 2009-2010 school year and beyond. If funding is terminated beyond the 2009-2010 school year, nearly 2,000 students that do not have the means to pay for private school will be forced back to public schools that are not the schools their parents have chosen for them. In a December 27, 2007 Wall Street Journal article, Chancellor Rhee stated "I would never, as long as I am in this role, do anything to limit another parent's ability to make a choice for their child. Ever."

We ask that you listen to local City officials that support the three sector funding. Now is not the time to limit academic choice for the City's poorest families. We urge you to adopt the House language regarding Opportunity Scholarship in the staff negotiated omnibus appropriations bill, continuing the three sector funding strategy for fiscal year 2009 and future years.

Sincerely,



John A. Boehner
Republican Leader



Jerry Lewis
Ranking Member
House Appropriations
Committee



Ralph Regula
Ranking Member
House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Financial
Services and General Government