

**United States Conference  
of Catholic Bishops**

April 12, 2022

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Financial Services  
and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Dirksen Room 133  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith  
Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Financial Services  
and General Government  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States Senate  
Dirksen Room 133  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Van Hollen and Ranking Member Hyde-Smith,

As Congress begins the appropriations process for Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23), many of the committees within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) are engaging on appropriations matters under their purview, including funding that supports the poor, migrants and refugees, environmental protection, healthcare, housing, nutrition, and other safety net programs which help people meet their most basic needs. We are writing on behalf of the USCCB Committee on Catholic Education, The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, and the many families across the District of Columbia who are served by our Catholic schools.

As you consider government funding levels for FY23, we write to request full authorized funding of \$60,000,000, without restrictions, for the Scholarships for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act in the Financial Services & General Government budget package.

We support equal funding to each of the three sectors of the SOAR Act: D.C. public schools, D.C. public charter schools, and scholarships for parents to select a private school of their choice, including one of our many fine local Catholic schools, through the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP).

This three-sector program to support D.C. schools and parents was established by Congress in 2003. In the last seventeen years, over 11,000 D.C. children have received opportunity scholarships to attend the school best suited to their needs. The SOAR Act received a four-year reauthorization in 2019 (P.L. 116-94) extending this successful program through 2023.

In the three years since that reauthorization, enrollment in the OSP has increased nearly 50 percent. This shows that when parents have the assurance the program will continue, demand for the OSP program increases. Each year, the program administrator receives well over 3,000 applications from interested D.C. families. As the program continues to grow and demonstrate lasting results, it is vital that Congress increase the appropriation in FY23 to the full authorized amount of \$60,000,000.

Many of the families of the over 11,000 children who have benefitted from OSP over the past seventeen years have chosen one of our fine Catholic schools, and we can attest that the program works. The great success of the program is clearly demonstrated by its strong educational outcomes and parental satisfaction with the program. With a better than 95 percent graduation rate and nearly 87 percent college enrollment rate, OSP has provided a vital opportunity to the thousands of children who have participated. Of the current participants, 96 percent of families expressed their satisfaction with the program.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, public support among DC parents for this important program is very strong. A recent poll by Beck Research<sup>2</sup> shows that 75 percent of DC parents support OSP, and 74 percent support increased funding to allow more students to benefit. The poll also shows strong support for reauthorizing this worthwhile program.

In addition to the funding amount, it is also vital that parents with scholarships can choose from a variety of high-quality education options, including D.C. Catholic schools. Last year, as in previous years, the House included language in the FY22 Financial Services and General Government appropriations bill that would severely limit the options available for scholarship recipients by eliminating virtually all private schools from OSP participation.<sup>3</sup>

This “poison pill” language imposes new conditions that would require private schools to certify compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, for which they receive no funding, and with other inapplicable federal statutes to be eligible to accept OSP students. These types of conditions are not consistent with the original intent and purpose of the bi-partisan SOAR Act and are plainly intended to restrict private school participation.

By limiting the ability of low-income families to select the school best suited for their children, these “poison pill” conditions would only harm the very same worthy families that

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://servingourchildrencdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/DC-OSP-Program-Summary-SY-2020-2021.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.federationforchildren.org/poll-families-support-dc-opportunity-scholarship-program/>

<sup>3</sup> Two “poison pill” provisions were inserted into the House FSGG FY2022 appropriations, stating that “none of the funds made available under this heading may be used for an opportunity scholarship for a student to attend a school which does not certify to the Secretary of Education that the student will be provided with the same protections under the Federal laws which are enforced by the Office for Civil Rights of the Department of Education which are provided to a student of a public elementary or secondary school in the District of Columbia, and which does not certify to the Secretary of Education that the student and the student’s parents will be provided with the same services, rights, and protections under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.) which are provided to a student and a student’s parents of a public elementary or secondary school in the District of Columbia, as enumerated in Table 2 of Government Accountability Office Report 18–94 (entitled ‘Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents Are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities’), issued November 2017.”

the SOAR Act is intended to serve. OSP primarily benefits children from minority communities who reside in our nation's capital and are most at risk of falling behind. The average family income is less than \$22,000 per year for a household of four, and 45 percent receive SNAP and/or TANF benefits; 93 percent of participating children are African-American and/or Hispanic; and over 40 percent live in Wards 7 or 8. Thus, it is critical that the House "poison pill" language remain out of any future appropriations bill so that low-income families and students in the District will continue to have access to use OSP funds for private schools if they so choose.

While the relief packages passed in the last two sessions included needed emergency funding for public and private schools to obtain things like PPE, cleaning supplies, and technology for distance learning, this aid did not provide any scholarship funding directly for families to choose a school that best suits their needs. Therefore, the SOAR Act is still critical to ensuring OSP families can keep their scholarships and remain in the optimal educational environment that they choose for their child.

The SOAR Act's three-sector strategy supports and enhances public education in the District of Columbia: two-thirds of SOAR Act funding goes to D.C. public schools and public charter schools. The funding from FY 2022 (at \$52,500,000) is insufficient to meet the growing needs of D.C. children. In order to provide the necessary educational support for D.C.'s schoolchildren, funding for the SOAR Act needs to increase to \$60,000,000. This will increase the federal contribution to D.C.'s public schools, and public charter schools, from \$17,500,000 to \$20,000,000 each.

The Catholic Church unequivocally teaches 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. In 1929, Pope Pius XI reiterated this teaching in his encyclical on Christian Education (*Divini Illius Magistri*<sup>1</sup>):

*"It is clear that in all these ways of promoting education and instruction, both public and private, the State should respect the inherent rights of the Church and of the family concerning Christian education, and moreover have regard for distributive justice."*

Finally, regarding a matter that is separate from our OSP request but directly relevant to the work of your subcommittee, we wish to note that the USCCB remains gravely concerned about continued efforts to expand taxpayer funding of abortion, which would occur if the Dornan Amendment or other life-saving appropriations riders were to be removed from the annual appropriations bills. It is vital that these bi-partisan appropriations riders remain in place during the 117th Congress and beyond. The USCCB will oppose any bill that expands taxpayer funding of abortion, including any appropriations bill.

---

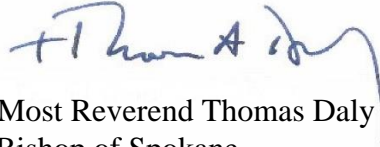
<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_31121929\\_divini-illius-magistri.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri.html)

We thank you for your consistent support of the SOAR Act, which provides additional funding to D.C.'s public schools, charter schools and allows low-income parents to choose the school best suited to the needs of their children. Please include full funding of \$60,000,000 for the SOAR Act, without restrictions, in your FY23 Financial Services & General Government budget package.

With prayerful best wishes,



✠ Wilton Cardinal Gregory,  
*Archbishop of Washington*



Most Reverend Thomas Daly  
Bishop of Spokane  
Chairman, Committee on Catholic Education  
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops