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United States Conference
of Catholic Bishops

April 25, 2016

The Honorable Jason Chaffetz
United States House of Representatives
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Chaffetz,

On behalf of the Committee on Catholic Education of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Archdiocese of Washington, we write to urge support for H.R. 4901, the *Scholarships for Opportunity and Results Reauthorization Act of 2016*. H.R. 4901 will reauthorize and strengthen this highly successful program that benefits all families who have students in public, charter, and private schools in Washington, D.C.

In addition to providing additional funding for public schools in Washington, D.C., the SOAR Act provides D.C. Opportunity Scholarships (OSP) for students from low-income families to attend the school of their choice.

The OSP has been an educational lifeline for nearly 6,400 children from low-income families since it began in the 2004-2005 school year. 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 thousands of children who have participated. Of the current participants, 92 percent expressed their satisfaction with the program.

The program primarily benefits children from minority communities who are most at risk of falling behind. 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. 4901 expands 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. Significantly, this legislation allows access to the “carryover funds” so that those dollars can be put to work improving students’ educational outcomes.

We also support the inclusion of language to expand background checks on employees who have direct and unsupervised interaction with students, as well as the improved accreditation requirements for schools participating in the program. These are measures that 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.

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 the 1965 Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*), the Second Vatican Council reiterated:

“Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools. Consequently, the public power, which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens, must see to it, in its concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are paid out in such a way that parents are truly free to choose according to their conscience the schools they want for their children.”

We thank you for introducing H.R. 4901 and urge your colleagues to support its passage.

With prayerful best wishes,



Donald Cardinal Wuerl
Archbishop of Washington



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