

**Statement before the United States Congress House Committee on
Education and the Workforce**

"Expanding Educational Opportunity Through School Choice"

Presented by: N.C. House Representative Rob Bryan

Good morning, Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Committee. It is an honor for me to be here this morning. Legislators, like the laborers in the Bible parables, arrive at different times and play different roles in planting and harvesting the crops (i.e. sponsoring and passing good legislation). Working for school choice, and Opportunity Scholarships in particular, has been a long labor. In North Carolina, there was much prior sowing of seeds to expand opportunities for parents and students across our state. As a freshman legislator in 2013, I had the privilege of arriving at the right time to be a part of the first fruits for school choice in NC.

Now, by way of background (and going back about 20 years), I was an early Teach for America teacher in a bilingual classroom in inner-city Los Angeles and, between my two years teaching, I was the first intern at the Center for Education Reform here in DC. These experiences shaped my perspective as a legislator and made me a fan of expanding school choice opportunities, especially for low-income families with the fewest options.

All this led me to be the primary sponsor of North Carolina's opportunity scholarship law which now provides roughly 6,000 low-income students (and families) a scholarship to go to the school of their choice. Moreover, I am proud that this historic legislation had bipartisan leadership with two Republican and two Democratic House Members standing together to make this opportunity a reality for thousands of children and families. Additionally, I'm proud to note that our state's first school choice program, the Special Needs Education Scholarship Grant passed in 2011, which was designed for families whose children are in need of specialized education, passed both NC chambers easily, garnering almost unanimous support from Republicans and nearly 70% of Democrats.

Unfortunately, many education establishment folks (and often the press) aren't fans of opportunity scholarships – they outline all our fears and pessimism (what about some bad schools, the lack of regulation, etc.), while neglecting our hopes, our opportunities – and the EVIDENCE.

As a lawyer, I appreciate looking at the evidence. There are significant pieces of evidence that are of importance in discussing opportunity scholarships. In reverse order of importance -

- 1) OS save money. Both at the state and local level.
- 2) OS improve public schools.
- 3) OS improve outcomes for students.

I think this is good policy for North Carolina and the rest of the country. Where does this policy intersect with reality – the reality for families in each of your districts? It is easy for us as legislators to fail to recognize the real lives impacted by our decisions.

The needs of these families are compelling – the Opportunity Scholarship program combined with North Carolina's existing Special Needs Education Scholarship has provided new opportunities and challenges:

- 1) To date, due to the high-demand of families for Special Needs Scholarships, there are no remaining funds available and we have over 500 families in North Carolina on the waiting list for this program.
- 2) To date, The Opportunity Scholarship Program has over 13,000 student applications and this staggering number will increase dramatically as new registration season has recently opened.

Numbers are thrown at us all constantly – but please try individualizing each of these numbers. Think about each one of these families that are on the waiting list hoping and praying for a scholarship. It's interesting that we call it the waiting list - I've looked parents in the eye while they share their very personal story of why their child desperately needs this scholarship. They can wait no longer!

Distinguished members of this committee, we expect options and choices in today's world – many families are making choices - North Carolina has over 1.3 million students in public district schools but our state has over 107,000 kids that are homeschooled; nearly 100,000 kids taught in private school; and nearly 80,000 kids taught in public charter schools. We are a state that is embracing parental school choice. However, historically, the families who were exercising this precious option were families who could afford to do so.

I am happy to say that North Carolina, through the passage and implementation of these scholarship programs, is now creating pathways for lower-income and working-class families to participate in parental school choice – and they are doing so by the thousands.

Unfortunately, thousands upon thousands more need your help. And though I'm here representing the great state of North Carolina, I know that there are other states like ours who appreciate the fact that you, our members of the United States House of Representatives, are exploring ideas of how more can be done to assist families like the ones I've described.

I am glad to be with you today to highlight the positive impact that OS is having on the families in North Carolina. As I look out the window in my legal office on the 35th floor, I see First Baptist Church which houses the Brookstone Schools which is an academically excellent, urban Christian school serving low-income families. This school has a rich history of engaging, educating and empowering students coming out of poverty and often from the most dysfunctional of homes and communities. Today, Brookstone Schools participates in the Opportunity Scholarship Program where they've enrolled 23 students this year. I am fortunate to see much of the City of Charlotte from the 35th floor, but I must tell you, this view – the view of Brookstone Schools – has become my favorite in Uptown Charlotte.

Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and distinguished members of the Committee, I want to thank you once again for your initiative in holding this hearing and I'm honored to have had the opportunity to share with you this morning.