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Children's Scholarship Fund

TESTIMONY

by the

CHILDREN'S SCHOLARSHIP FUND on behalf of the INVESTinED COALITION

to the

NEW YORK STATE SENATE FINANCE & ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEES

JOINT HEARING ON THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET 2015-16

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2015

Supporting Governor Cuomo's & Legislature's Education Tax Credit Program

Darla Romfo, President & Chief Operating Officer

Jorvelyn Tejada, Former Scholarship Recipient

My name is **Darla Romfo**, and I am the President and Chief Operating Officer of the Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF), the largest K-8 scholarship program in New York State. I was previously Legislative Director and Counsel to the Minority Whip, then-U.S. Sen. John Breaux of Louisiana, and served as Legislative Director and Tax Counsel for then-U.S. Sen. Kent Conrad of North Dakota, working closely with both senators in their roles on the Senate Finance Committee.

With me today is a representative of the thousands of children and families CSF has helped directly through our scholarship program since it was founded in 1998.

Jorvelyn Tejada is a former scholarship recipient from Washington Heights who now is a senior and an honor student at Notre Dame High School in Manhattan in the midst of her college application period. She has applied to Yale, Columbia, NYU, among others, and already knows that she eventually wants to study law. Her parents, who are immigrants from the Dominican Republic, first applied to CSF for a scholarship when Jorvelyn's brother, Jason, was in fourth grade. Jason went on to graduate from Columbia University and works in finance. He was featured along with several other scholarship recipients in the book "Opportunity and Hope" by author Naomi Schaefer Riley.

CSF also is part of the "InvestinED" Coalition, which comprises more than 100 organizations representing community-based, non-profit education service providers, organized labor, business groups, high-needs communities and religious entities.

Also with me today are some leaders of those organizations in the InvestinED Coalition:

- **Raki Barlow**, the Director of Arts and Education for Walk of Art Kids in Brooklyn, which brings arts enrichment education to children in public schools. Mr. Barlow has worked with public schools in New York City running after-school programs in Queens and Brooklyn, including providing free literacy and math tutoring.
- **Jason Pagan** is the Director of Legislative Affairs for Queens Council 23047 of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). LULAC's mission is to advance the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, housing, health and civil rights of the Hispanic population of the United States. He also has provided separate written testimony to the committees in support of the Education Tax Credit.
- **Antwan Allen** is the Principal of St. Mark the Evangelist school in upper Manhattan, a school serving a low-income population with more than half its students on scholarship. Mr. Allen has been Principal for the last four years, received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, and is himself the beneficiary of a high school scholarship from the Inner-city Scholarship Fund in New York City.
- **Julia Pignataro** is the president of the Federation of Catholic Teachers, Local 153, OPEIU, AFL-CIO, which represents the teachers serving in the Catholic Schools of the Archdiocese of New York. She also has provided separate written testimony to the committees in support of the Education Tax Credit.
- **Richard Lanigan** is the Secretary-Treasurer of the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU), representing the Federation of Catholic Teachers, Local 153.
- **Marisol Martinez** is a parent of a student attending public school and a student attending Catholic school in the Diocese of Rockville Centre, Long Island. Born in Puerto Rico, she attended Catholic school from K-12 and attended Houston University. She previously worked for Catholic Charities on Long Island where she served immigrant families and was a developer and organizer.
- **Amy Popadick** is the Executive Director of the BISON Children's Scholarship Fund, based in Buffalo, which provides scholarship assistance for grades K-8 to children from low-income families in the eight-county region of western New York. She has provided separate written testimony to the committees.

CHILDREN'S SCHOLARSHIP FUND SUPPORTS THE EDUCATION TAX CREDIT

We applaud Governor Andrew Cuomo's inclusion of the Education Tax Credit in his 2015-16 Executive Budget, and the State Senate for last month passing tax credit legislation (S.1976) on a

bipartisan vote. We also are encouraged at the bi-partisan support for the Education Tax Credit bill (A.2551) in the state Assembly.

The Education Tax Credit would be a “win-win” for education in New York. It would use the tax code to generate millions of dollars in new charitable donations to help school children and teachers, including non-profit entities that provide educational programming, and organizations that provide scholarships to children from low-income and working-class families.

As we have seen from the successes of CSF alumni, access for children from low-income families to private and parochial schools through privately funded scholarships is a “game-changer” for their future. This tax credit will empower more low-income and working families to provide the education that best meet their children’s needs and put them on the path to success.

HISTORY & MISSION OF CHILDREN’S SCHOLARSHIP FUND

The Children’s Scholarship Fund was founded in 1998, and is currently chaired by Mike McCurry, former press secretary to President Bill Clinton and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The Fund provides partial scholarships to low-income families so their children can attend the K-8 schools that best meet their needs, regardless of their ability to pay or where they live.

CSF is an independent, non-profit, non-sectarian organization. It is not affiliated with any religious denomination. It is the decision of the parent(s) or guardian(s) of the student as to where they will send their child to school with the scholarship award.

Since its inception nearly 17 years ago, CSF and its partner programs across the country have awarded scholarships worth \$610 million to 145,000 children nationwide, including more than 26,000 New York City students. This school year, more than 8,300 students are using CSF New York scholarships at 211 schools throughout New York City. In addition, our Buffalo partner, BISON Children’s Scholarship Fund, is serving nearly 2,000 children this year in the eight-county western New York region. The average household income of the scholarship recipients in New York is just over \$31,000, and nearly 80 percent of the children we serve are Black or Latino. A large number of our CSF Scholars are raised by single mothers and grandparents.

As an example of our impact, we recently surveyed alumni who graduated from eighth grade four years ago in 2010. We heard back from 72 percent of the class and found that 92 percent graduated on time this past June and 89 percent are now enrolled in college.

While we help support over 8,000 children in the City, it is a fraction of what we could be doing if the Education Tax Credit is passed. There are thousands more children we could help put on the path to graduation and much better life outcomes.

REACHING CHILDREN IN NEED: HOW THE SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM WORKS

The final point I wish to make is about the mechanics of a non-profit scholarship program, specifically, how it works, and how we reach the thousands of children that we help annually.

Families apply to us for scholarships by filling out a simple application form at the same time they are applying to a school. Eligible children must be in kindergarten through eighth grade. Most of our families in New York live close to or below the federal poverty line. We verify the family's need by asking them to provide their income information, whether that's a tax return or a budget letter and statement from their employer. The scholarship is awarded to the family and also would remain with the child if they want to move schools.

Each scholarship is calculated on a sliding scale; depending on a family's size and income, they receive 15 percent, 25 percent, 50 percent or 75 percent of the tuition based on guidelines used by the National School Lunch program.

To illustrate the high demand for scholarships, when we advertised our first round of 2,500 scholarships in New York in 1999, we received 168,000 applications, *representing nearly one-third* (32 percent) of the eligible population. Demand continues to outpace available charitable support. If the Education Tax Credit passes, we could afford to offer scholarships to many more needy families who want to give their children a better start in life.

As the largest K-8 scholarship organization in New York City, we have long-standing relationships with schools and community organizations that help us with outreach to potential scholarship families in every corner of the City. We have employed a multi-pronged approach to gathering applications, working with organizations and institutions including, but not limited to, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, community centers, local churches, and weekly community newspapers. We have also run Public Service Announcements on local television and radio. And of course, many families find us online through our website (www.ScholarshipFund.org), which includes details on how to apply for scholarship assistance.

Adoption of the Education Tax Credit would further the opportunity to offer more scholarships across the state.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to add that our scholarship families have the same desire as affluent families who can move to a good public school district or afford a private or parochial school. They recognize that providing their children with a quality education puts them on the path to future success and security.

The Education Tax Credit is a real opportunity for more families to have and keep their children *today* in the schools that best meet their needs, improving their odds of graduating high school and going on to live fulfilling lives, which will in turn improve the future for all New Yorkers.

Thank you for your time today.