

## **PCCY Senate Education Committee Testimony**

### **February 16, 2011**

I am Taimarie Adams from Public Citizens for Children and Youth. As you may know, PCCY has been working to improve the lives and life chances of our region's children through thoughtful and informed advocacy for 30 years. We appreciate the opportunity to provide our comments on Senate Bill 1, the proposed voucher legislation.

As we navigate one of the worst economic times in many decades, we need to ensure that every educational expenditure is spent on programs that 1) have proven positive impact on student achievement, 2) do not result in students with special needs, English language learners, religious groups, or children with emotional and behavioral issues being excluded, 3) do not leave the children left behind in worse shape, and 4) provide parents and the public a framework to understand (transparency) and evaluate (accountability) the program.

The current voucher bill, SB1, ***does not meet*** these criteria.

#### **Expenditures Must have Proven Impacts on Student Achievement**

Despite optimism about the promise of educational access through voucher programs, research has not shown that vouchers improve student achievement. Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington D.C., for example, have tried to walk the path to educational freedom promised by vouchers, only to find that few students were actually freed. Is this voucher program different?

We all struggle with the pace educational reform has taken, but we cannot deny that change is occurring. In recent years, the state has invested in improving our public schools through a formula whose goal is to provide the necessary support for students to meet state-achievement criteria. That formula is working. For example, in Philadelphia alone, higher student achievement has gone hand-in-hand with increased funding. Between 2005 and 2010 increased state and local revenue funding has resulted in a 20% increase in the percentage of students advanced or proficient in math, and a 15% increase in the percentage of students advanced or proficient in reading. If we want to hasten the pace of educational reform, we must pour any additional resources into replicating models that are already working.

#### **Educational Expenditures Must Not Exclude Students**

The bill provides no requirement that participating schools accept all students. Many student populations, such as students with special needs, English language learners, or children with behavioral and emotional problems, are especially vulnerable to being refused admission into private or parochial schools. Private schools are not required to provide special education services required in public schools, private school are not required to enroll students with a

history of behavioral or emotional issues, and nothing prevents private schools from expelling students for behavioral issues after they are admitted.

### **Expenditures Must Not Leave the Children Left Behind in Worse Shape**

One of the shortcomings in investing scarce resources in an unproven voucher system is that vouchers do not address the larger policy need to improve Pennsylvania's public schools, for all of our children. In essence, this bill would give private schools the choice to cherry-pick select students, leaving the rest of our students in the same schools, with fewer resources. We cannot fund a system that does nothing to improve the educational outcomes of all Pennsylvania students, and has the potential to negatively impact the students who remain in our public schools. The proposed voucher system could leave many of our children in schools with less intellectual diversity and a disproportionate number of students with special needs, behavioral issues, and English acquisition needs.

### **Expenditures Must Provide a Framework for Parents and the Public to Evaluate Schools**

At the same time Pennsylvania has demanded increased accountability and testing in public schools, we are introducing a private voucher system that will operate under different rules. Private schools are not required to provide any data on test scores, academic achievement, or measure their students' progress. Moreover, the bill places no standards, such as academic performance, growth, safety, or student attendance, on schools that opt into the voucher program. How can parents make informed choices without this vital information?

Likewise, there is no framework to evaluate the voucher program. The bill provides for an Education Opportunity Board to oversee the voucher program, but does not provide academic, safety, or performance benchmarks to measure the outcomes of the program. More troubling is that beyond the boilerplate language disallowing discrimination in the bill, there is no mechanism to identify if students are being excluded. We should not do this, and we cannot do this now.

We believe that these are a few of the many issues that must be addressed when evaluating any voucher legislation. Given the dwindling budget for our schools, the voucher system will weaken public schools and drain financial resources, provide choice for only a few, and will not necessarily provide increased educational opportunities for the students who participate in the voucher program. Any voucher bill slated to provide funding for students to leave our public schools must have a strong accountability framework, proven positive impacts on the students who participate in the voucher program, and cannot negatively impact the children who remain in our public schools. We believe our priority and focus should be creating good public schools for every child and to make certain we do no harm. This bill fails on these accounts.

Thank you.