



Otto Banks – Executive Director
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Testimony on Senate Bill 1
Senate Education Committee
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Good morning. I want to start by thanking Senator Piccola and Senator Williams for their leadership on this important issue. I also want to thank Senator Dinniman and the entire Senate Education Committee for the time and attention they have spent studying this issue and their dedication to children across the Commonwealth.

My name is Otto Banks and I am the Executive Director of the REACH Alliance and Reach Foundation. I am the former United States Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of the Nation's Economic Development Policy, Commissioner on a Tri-County Regional Planning Commission, Eastern Region Director of Development for Alternative Education Programs, and a City Councilman. I was also a latchkey kid from a one parent household that narrowly escaped a homeless shelter and the only child of four siblings to graduate from high school and college. Growing up, I attended both Harrisburg city public schools and also parochial schools, when my family could afford it. I know first-hand what a struggle a lack of school choice can be for low-income families. Now I advocate for families, like mine, whose school choice options are limited or nonexistent.

Founded in 1991 to advance educational options, REACH (Road to Educational Achievement through Choice) is Pennsylvania's grassroots coalition for school choice, drawing upon a powerful network of statewide members and coalition partners of non-public education, faith, business, parent and labor organizations.

REACH efforts in the state Senate in 1991 led to passage of a statewide school choice plan in the state Senate, though the bill was later defeated on a procedural vote in the House. In 1995 and 1999, REACH led lobbying and grass roots efforts to support Governor Tom Ridge's school choice legislation, and secured an historic victory for parents with the 2001 passage of the Educational improvement Tax Credit (EITC).

Senate Bill 1 creates Opportunity Scholarships for low-income families with a focus on failing schools in the first two years of the program. In year three, this program will expand to include all Pennsylvania families that meet the income criteria set forth in the bill. Senate Bill 1 also expands the very popular and successful EITC program by providing \$100 million in funding to the program.

REACH is supportive of Senate Bill 1 for a multitude of reasons, but none are more important than the fact that this legislation will allow more Pennsylvania families than ever to exercise their freedom of choice by choosing the school that best fits the needs of their child.

Currently, in large part, the quality of a child's education depends on their zip code. Far too many Pennsylvania children are trapped in schools that are failing or not addressing their individual needs.

The Opportunity Scholarships created and the increase in the EITC program set forth in Senate Bill 1 will change this dynamic by providing families with the freedom of choice they so desperately desire.

Senator Williams has often said school choice is the civil rights issue of our time. He and Senator Piccola have developed a plan to help save our kids and that plan is captured in Senate Bill 1. Choice and competition are the hallmarks of Senate Bill 1 and REACH believes those pillars will raise student achievement levels and improve "customer" satisfaction in our education system.

The REACH mantra since our inception has been to empower parents by giving them the liberty to choose the school that best fits the needs of their child. Parents truly are the ultimate accountability standard because they, more than anyone, want what's best for their children.

Choice in education is a natural extension of the choices provided to needy Pennsylvanians in health care, nutrition purchases, and a host of other programs offered to citizens in a free and democratic society.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania provides low income families with medical and dental coverage, giving them the opportunity to pick and choose their child's health-care service providers. The Commonwealth also provides food vouchers for life giving sustenance through the food stamp program, enabling parents to select their grocer of choice. Unfortunately, the Commonwealth does not extend the same freedom of parental choice when it comes to the education of their child. For the benefit of our children, it is time to extend that choice to education.

The arguments of various groups opposed to Senate Bill 1 have been focused on issues unrelated to what is most beneficial for children. In REACH's opinion, the opportunities offered in Senate Bill 1 will be of great benefit to students and their families. This bill provides families educational liberty that they do not currently have.

"Later on today you will hear from several opponents of this bill. Please note that while they are full of criticism for Senate Bill 1, they are running on empty when it comes to solutions. Supporters of the status quo have become the new "party of No." Meanwhile, as opponents continue to peck away at Senate Bill 1, children continue to flounder in failing schools and

schools that do not meet their needs. While critics attempt to kill the bill with questions, they offer no answers to the problem of children trapped in failing schools.”

In addition to creating Opportunity Scholarships, Senate Bill 1 also increases the EITC program by \$25 million. This is a very important component of the bill for many reasons. EITC is a very popular program that has been called the best educational initiative passed in Pennsylvania in the last 15 years.

The EITC program serves both low-income families and the broad middle class. The creation of Opportunity Scholarships in Senate Bill 1, which are focused on low-income households, will ensure middle-income families receive additional EITC dollars.

This is one vital aspect of Senate Bill 1 that has not been focused on enough. The creation of Opportunity Scholarships and an expansion of the EITC program will provide school choice options to not only many low-income families in Pennsylvania, but also to a large number of the Commonwealth’s middle-income families.

The EITC is a lifeboat for more than 44,000 students who can attend the school of their choice because of scholarships they receive from this money. Many families rely on this funding to keep children in the schools of their choice. Even more will benefit from the expansion of the EITC program set forth in Senate Bill 1.

Associate Justice James Clark McReynolds in the U.S. Supreme Court Decision of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* wrote the opinion of the Court. He stated that children were not "the mere creature[s] of the state" (268 U.S. 510, 535), and that, by its very nature, the traditional American understanding of the term liberty prevented the state from forcing students to accept instruction only from public schools. He stated that this responsibility belonged to the child's parents or guardians, and that the ability to make such a choice was a "liberty" protected by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Senate Bill 1 really is all about a parent’s ability to choose which school works best for their child. As you can tell by my comments, REACH enthusiastically supports Senate Bill 1. We look forward to working with the Committee on this issue and I thank you for allowing me to present testimony before you today.