



**Testimony of Orthodox Union**  
**In support of SB.1: Opportunity Scholarship & Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act**  
**Pennsylvania Legislature | The Senate | Committee on Education**  
**Harrisburg, PA | February 16, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

The Jewish people have earned their reputation as the “people of the book.” For millennia Jewish communities maintained and supported educational institutions, long before their host countries and societies thought the issue one of importance. Jews even risked their lives to educate their children, operating schools in the Nazi ghettos and under the ever watchful eyes of the Communist secret police.

So it should come as no surprise the Orthodox Union, the nation’s largest Orthodox Jewish umbrella organization, representing member synagogues and Orthodox communities across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, including Allentown, Harrisburg, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh respectfully submits this testimony in support of SB. 1, the Opportunity Scholarship & Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act.

At the outset, we note that the Orthodox Union is proudly supportive of public education, and we believe every school whether it be public or private should be excellent. As well, we note, our support for this legislation is, in part, parochial. The Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) has provided thousands of scholarships to moderate and middle income families who struggle to provide a quality education for their children. Particularly in the economic climate of these past few years, but even during the boom years in the early part of the century, EITC has been a lifeline for families in need.

SB 1 thus expands this assistance in two key ways. First, it increases the amount of money available to EITC to a total of \$100 million. As well, it puts EITC into the School Code so that schools, families and organizations like ours need not fight every year for needed scholarship funds to be appropriated.

We note too that EITC is a national model, having been copied in other states and with several states having pending legislation that looks conspicuously like EITC. At the Orthodox Union, we believe EITC is a model for other reasons as well, beyond its success at helping those in need. It allows businesses a vehicle to partner with and connect to their local schools and communities. It would be nice if everyone gave charity because it was the right thing to do. But this program, like others here in the Commonwealth incentivizes businesses to be good corporate citizens. In addition, because it has a public and nonpublic school component and because the funding comes out of the general fund and not the education budget, this program has worked to



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increase the monies available to both public and nonpublic schools alike, rather than pitting them one against the other.

SB 1 also does one other thing. It creates a low income voucher program. It is modest, and affects only those making 130% of the poverty limit or less. It is also implemented over three years in a gradual way. That makes them more than good policy; it makes them fiscally responsible.

This scholarship program will help our community in two ways: first, by helping the poorest among us to attend a quality school. Second, by taking care of the children who are in the very lowest income bracket, this frees up EITC funds other families struggling to make ends meet and provide for their children's education.

As we noted, there are parochial reasons for supporting this legislation. But the Jewish ideal of "tikkun olam" – repairing the world – is an overarching moral and philosophical underpinning to all that we do. For that reason alone, the Orthodox Union supports this crucial piece of legislation. This program and legislation are tied directly to the Jewish ideal of helping others in need. We must fund and find for others that which we value so very much for ourselves and our families. If we value a good education for our own children, we can't be satisfied until every child, regardless of their religion, has one too.

Passing SB 1 will help ensure that all children in Pennsylvania get the education they rightly deserve. The Orthodox Union and its thousands of families in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania respectfully request an immediate and favorable report of SB 1.

Thank you.

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Orthodox Union  
Howie Beigelman  
*Deputy Director of Public Policy*



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## Addendum #1

### **Support for Choice Means Results**

The Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, February 03, 2011

#### **Howie Beigelman**

Everyone knows the Orthodox community supports school reform for "parochial" reasons -- the strain on our household budgets from multiple tuitions at Jewish day school.

But Orthodox support is about far more. It's about Jewish values. The poor and near poor in our society are trapped in failing schools. That's not right or fair.

That was also the message of 900 students -- many from minority communities or from failing school districts -- with whom I and others, including students from Kohelet Yeshiva High School in Merion Station joined in Harrisburg last week to lobby for school choice.

Our community proudly remembers marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and rightly boasts of standing up for the needy and oppressed -- even a world away. But there's a civil rights issue right here at home. Education is the most critical civil rights issue, the most burning social justice question, of the 21st century.

Ensuring that every child, regardless of zip code or parent's income, accesses a quality education shouldn't be controversial. And it no longer is. In our hyper-partisan era, education reform has liberals and conservatives agreeing. Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch and President Ronald Reagan agreed decades ago. Today President Barack Obama, N.J. Gov. Chris Christie, and Mayors Michael Bloomberg of New York and Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles agree.

The Orthodox Union supports school reform and choice in all forms -- charters, public choice and government funding (in constitutionally permissible ways) of private -- even parochial -- schools, including scholarships, tax credits and vouchers.

This support is based on deeply Jewish values-- education and social justice. Lord Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, writes, "Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers." The prophets long ago beat into our national psyche the Torah's charge to be a light unto the nations, act justly and help the poor. As Jews who care as we do about tikkun olam, forcing children in failing schools is anathema.

Moreover, the Jewish community's experiences prove that government funding can support critical needs through nonprofit or private providers delivering results. Tax dollars fund Jewish



*Howie  
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federation hospitals, day care, senior facilities, soup kitchens, food pantries and more. Why shouldn't government also support all secular K-12 education?

Some say that choice violates the U.S. Constitution.

Thirty-nine state constitutions, including Pennsylvania's, have a religious "no aid" provision, or Blaine amendment. (Congressman James Blaine fueled his 19th century run for the presidency with anti-Catholic bigotry that hoped to amend the U.S. Constitution to bar public funding of sectarian -- read Catholic -- institutions. Although his effort to amend the U.S. Constitution failed, many individual states took on the measure.

However, most aid programs are crafted to stand up to scrutiny under the Blaine amendment, including Pennsylvania's EITC program that raises millions for Jewish education.

And the federal courts have ruled that neutrally crafted choice programs that include religious schools are constitutionally kosher and well within the boundaries of vigorous first amendment protections promoting religious liberty

So the question isn't a now long-settled legal one, but a policy one: Is school choice and reform good policy?

Some suggest the results are unproven. But the research is in. These reforms work.

Professor Paul E. Peterson, who directs Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance, (no conservative bastion) recently wrote on the Education Next blog that study after study shows us "that schools of choice are compiling a consistently better record than that of traditional public schools."

Sure, we who care about Jewish education, days schools and continuity will likely support constitutionally permitted choice. But all who care about creating a fairer, more equal society for every child must advocate for education reforms that have results today.

*Howie Beigelman is the Orthodox Union's Deputy Director of Public Policy, responsible for the group's state government affairs nationally.*

<http://www.jewishexponent.com/article/22815/>



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## Addendum #2

The Philadelphia Inquirer: Posted on Sun, Dec. 5, 2010

### **Quality schools for all must be a top priority**

Howie Beigelman

is the deputy director of public policy for the New York-based Orthodox Union, an advocacy and support group for the Jewish community

Education in America is the civil rights issue of the 21st century. While we can respectfully debate the solutions, we should all agree on one thing: Every child deserves the opportunity to attend a great school.

The Orthodox Union is ready to advocate for that reality through school choice and reform that increases access to quality education options for all Pennsylvania students.

It's no surprise that the Orthodox Union is committed to quality education, or that we staunchly support reform efforts. The Jewish people risked much throughout history for education, even establishing schools under the watchful eyes of Nazi storm troopers and Communist secret police. As Sir Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, said in his maiden speech to the House of Lords: "To defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilization you need schools."

Better Pennsylvania schools will come about by increasing and expanding the earned-income tax credit program that has benefited thousands of students across the commonwealth and by enacting opportunity scholarships, now before the Senate. What food stamps are to nutrition, Section 8 to housing, and Head Start to pre-K, the scholarships would be to K-12 education: providing needed funds to help those in need.

Other options include increasing aid to students in all schools - for books, technology, special services, transportation - so all children are in the best environment for them. And it may mean increasing the number of charter schools.

What we cannot - may not - do is nothing. Today we are not providing every student the chance at a great education. That's more than a pity. It's a shame.

The situation in West Philadelphia is a perfect illustration of why we need to give all families more options. As part of a visit organized by Students First for religious leaders, we were able to see firsthand three different high schools and better understand how each provides for families in the community.



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Our tour encompassed just 15 blocks, with stops at a parochial, a traditional public, and a public charter school: West Philadelphia Catholic, West Philadelphia High, and Boys' Latin.

After such a tour one notices, first, that the usual bogeymen of urban education - bad teachers and a lack of resources - were nowhere to be found.

Teachers in every classroom at all three schools were working hard and putting their resources to good use. Each of the schools had some of the latest in educational technology needed to help students gain the skills they'll need to compete for 21st-century jobs, such as smart boards and laptops. West Philly High even had a state-of-the-art U.S. Air Force flight simulator for its Junior ROTC program.

Yet, the learning environments at these three schools seemed so different. "Every man is the architect of his own future" is the motto of Boys' Latin. The students who attend seem to take it to heart; there's a distinct camaraderie among the students and a palpable respect for the teachers. The educators and administrators - and the students themselves - have high expectations.

Staff and students had a similarly optimistic outlook at West Philly Catholic, where each year about 95 percent of graduating students pursue some higher education.

The atmosphere at West Philly High, on the other hand, was less hopeful. Teachers keep their doors locked during class periods, and violence has occurred on the campus.

The three schools may be within walking distance of one another and serve families from the same community, but they might as well be worlds apart. As we know, West Catholic must charge tuition and Boys' Latin has a limited enrollment, about one-half the size of West Philadelphia High. So despite living in a community with multiple school options, most students have access only to West Philadelphia.

One mother and father we met that day described the challenges they face and the sacrifices they made trying to find safe, quality schools for their children, including busing them across the city. Parents shouldn't have to struggle so hard to find good schools for their children.

We will all be held to account when the success or failure of our actions or inaction becomes clear in a generation. Policymakers, educators, parents, and all concerned citizens must partner to ensure that a child's education no longer depends on his or her zip code, and certainly that it doesn't differ vastly within just 15 blocks.

[http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/20101205\\_Quality\\_schools\\_for\\_all\\_must\\_be\\_a\\_top\\_priority.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/20101205_Quality_schools_for_all_must_be_a_top_priority.html)



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