

Testimony

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Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Piccola. My name is Darlene Callands and I am the president and CEO of the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, known as BAEO. I want to thank you for holding this hearing and for introducing Senate Bill 1.

I also want to recognize:

- Senator Williams, who is a member of our Board of Directors, for co-sponsoring Senate Bill 1 and
- Representative Dwight Evans, also a BAEO Board member for being a School Choice Champion.

You three men deserve praise for getting school choice to the forefront in Pennsylvania and developing new strategies to fix the failures of our current educational system.

From both a personal and professional perspective, I support parental choice and ensuring children and youth from all income levels have quality educational options.

From the personal perspective, I am a product of the Philadelphia public school system, graduate of Roxborough High in 1981. And, a proud mother of three young ladies 26, 21, and 20. Due to personal sacrifices and support of my family, I was able to exercise parental choice and send my children to a quality school.

My professional perspective comes from the work we do at BAEO. BAEO is a non profit, non partisan organization whose mission is to increase access to high-quality educational options for Black children by actively supporting parental choice policies and programs that empower low-income and working class Black families. Amongst many other duties, for over a decade, I had the pleasure of meeting and empowering over 5,000 parents throughout the City of Philadelphia around educational options. Over the past nine years, BAEO has given out 677 scholarships for parochial and private schools; 77 percent of our scholarship dollars are funded through the Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credit.

With me today are many parents who traveled from Philadelphia to encourage legislation of quality opportunities.

Why Parental Choice Is Needed

Right now, in Pennsylvania, affluent families have choice because they can move to different neighborhoods or communities, send their children to private schools, or supplement schooling with tutors and enrichment programs.

School choice means that families get the best education possible for their children. Lower-income and working-class families, are typically trapped with one option - a school that is persistently low performing.

In Philadelphia, only 56 percent of public school students graduate in four years. The rates for minority male students are worse: 45 percent for African American males and 43 percent for Latino males.ⁱ

Put it another way: Just one out of 10 students who entered a Philadelphia public high school in 1999 had earned a two-or four-year college degree 10 years later. You heard that right: one out of 10 students who entered a Philadelphia public high school had earned a two-or four-year college degree.ⁱⁱ

That's shameful.

Educational Options for Philadelphia's Children

In Philadelphia, what choices do parents have and are they **quality** options?

According to Research for Action, 70 percent of District 8th graders apply to attend a school other than their local, non-selected high school. Fifty-five percent of those who had applied elsewhere end up enrolled in their neighborhood schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

We have these public school options in Philadelphia, for district schools:

- neighborhood schools
- citywide admission high schools
- special admission high schools

There are 162,000 students in district city schools.^{iv}

We have another public school option in Philadelphia: charter schools - traditional charters and cyber schools - which enroll 40,000 students.^v

The other options, which parents need to pay for are:

- parochial schools, with 29,884 students
- and independent private schools, with 15,795 students^{vi}

And the last option is home schooling.

Despite the vast array of options, parents want more. In a report released by The Pew Charitable Trusts in June, 72 percent of parents surveyed say they do not have enough good choices in picking a school, with the figures slightly higher among Black parents and parents under age 30.^{vii}

Parents are choosing charter schools and home schooling as quality options for their children.

The traditional public schools, run by the School District of Philadelphia, have lost 19 percent of their enrollment over the past five years. Catholic schools have lost 37 percent of their enrollment over the same period.^{viii}

Charter schools - which are public schools – have grown 170 percent.^{ix}

Put another way, one public school student in Philadelphia out of every five students attends a charter school.^x

The problem is that charter schools in Philadelphia have waiting lists of nearly 30,000.^{xi} This does not include cyber schools.

Lukius White

Meet Lukius White, a BAEO member's child who is on waiting lists for charter schools. Lukius presently attends a persistently lowest-achieving school.

Lukius White is 13 years old, in 7th grade. This is his third year at Birney Elementary, a neighborhood public school in Philadelphia. Birney is K to 8th grade school and one of 18 schools in Philadelphia that will be run by a new school operator next school year.

Last year, the 2009 PSSA results for 6th grade - the year that Lukius was in 6th grade - 26 percent of the students scored proficient or better on the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) test scores in math. In reading in 6th grade, 16 percent of the students scored proficient or better on the PSSA. Both scores, in math and reading, for 6th graders in 2009, were way below the School District of Philadelphia average scores, with 54 percent scoring proficient or better in math and 43 percent scoring proficient or better in reading.

Lukius was on the honor roll in his South Carolina school and remains on the honor roll at Birney. He is in English honors, which is not a challenge for him. Lukius struggles everyday to stay out of trouble and to perform well. It is a struggle for him to avoid violence at the school and neighborhood where he lives.

The first year at Birney, Lukius' teachers told his dad that Lukius had potential and suggested that they find another school for Lukius. They wanted something better for Lukius.

About a year and half ago, Lukius' dad started the process to identify a better school for his son, a school that would meet his son's needs. He went to BAEO for help and attended workshops to learn how to identify a better school. He submitted applications to two charter schools.

What he learned that there are no spaces left for his son and was told he needed to hit the lottery for his son to attend this school. Lukius is now on a waiting list with 50 children ahead of him.

It's not fair. Leaving Lukius in a school that the teachers recommended he leave and one that has been labeled persistently low.

Michell Williams

Let me share another real story from a new member of BAEO. Her name is Michell Williams. She is a single parent, a grandmother raising four children. Two attend Francis Pastorius Elementary School.

The problems that Ms. Williams faces are safety and very poor performance at Pastorius. She has a seven-year grandchild, in 2nd grade at Pastorius. Her name is Breonna.

Breonna was choked several times by a boy in her class. Two months ago, a student chased Breonna – when a teacher was present – with a scissors and cut her hair out. The other day she came home saying her chest hurts because another child elbowed her in the chest.

Ms. Williams filed a complaint with the school about the scissors incident and is still waiting for the results of the school's investigation. She has submitted an extenuating circumstances transfer application for Breonna.

Meanwhile, at Pastorious test scores are the pits. Last year, the 2009 PSSA results for 7th grade 26 percent of the students scored proficient or better on the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) test scores in math. In reading in 7th grade, 29 percent of the students scored proficient or better on the PSSA. Both scores, in math and reading, for 7th graders in 2009, were way below the School District of Philadelphia average scores. What's more important to know is that the test scores in reading were a huge drop from the prior year.

Pastorious does not have a chance to improve: It is NOT one of the 18 schools that the School District of Philadelphia is doing radical restructuring.

Ms. Williams says that she feels that she is failing her grandchildren because she cannot give them the education they deserve. She wants both of her grandchildren out of Pastorious now.

The reality is if you have money in Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, and in America, you've got choice! You can move to another neighborhood, which has a quality school, or pay for your child to attend a high performing school. In other words, parental school choice is widespread in America unless you are poor.

Recommendations to Change the System

The school system must be customer driven where parents have the opportunity to choose their child's school and schools compete for students. We must put the educational needs of children first and stop allowing groups with special interests to prevail. The struggle for choice has not been, and will not get easy, while virtually every entrenched bureaucracy fights until death to preserve its monopoly position.

Nationwide, 60 percent of Black male high school dropouts are eventually incarcerated. If current trends persist, a Black male born in the U.S. today will have a 33 percent chance of going to prison during his lifetime.^{xii}

The question is do you want to support educating students or incarcerating criminals?

We must do better! We, as parents, are tired of waiting, no more excuses, and enough is enough!

This is about looking at every child and saying what's the best option for this child and no one can make that decision better than an informed, empowered parent.

For those naysayers who say that vouchers do not improve academic achievement let me explain why they are wrong.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), established in 1990, is the nation's oldest example of school choice. A study released this month by Dr. John Warren of the University of Minnesota found that students in the MPCP had an 82 percent graduation rate in 2009, compared with 70 percent in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). MPCP ranked higher than MPS in graduation rate in six of the seven years in the study. A report from the University of Arkansas estimated that MPCP saved taxpayers \$37.2 million in 2009, because the size of the voucher is significantly smaller than per-pupil spending in Milwaukee Public Schools.^{xiii}

A review of empirical studies by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice found that, out of 17 studies examining how vouchers affect academic achievement in public schools, 16 showed improvement. None showed that vouchers harm public schools. The review found that "every empirical study ever conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, Ohio, Texas, Maine and Vermont finds that voucher programs in those places improved public school."^{xiv}

For those naysayers who say that nonpublic schools lack transparency and are unaccountable let me explain why they are wrong.

The SAT scores and college acceptance rates of private and parochial schools clearly demonstrate these schools performance, which are often far superior to their public school counterparts. Also parents can vote with their feet if they are unhappy with their private or parochial school.

For those naysayers who say that vouchers divert resources from the public education let me explain why they are wrong.

Now I'm talking about Philadelphia only. There are now 70,000 vacant seats in Philadelphia public school classrooms. It is projected that by 2015, the District's regular enrollment is expected to drop another 11 percent. I read that Superintendent Ackerman is looking to save \$25 million through closings and consolidations in the next two years. She said that charter schools would get right of first refusal when buildings are sold.^{xv}

While the School District of Philadelphia is supportive of good charter schools – those with proven records - the problem is that many of the District's traditional schools have been failing for over a decade. Senate Bill 1 is tailored to address the needs of those students who are trapped in schools that are not working by forcing those schools to compete or shut down.

EITC

I mentioned earlier in my testimony that over the past nine years, BAEO has given out 677 scholarships for parochial and private schools; 77 percent of our scholarship dollars are funded through the Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credit.

Senate Bill 1 does more than offering vouchers to low-income families. The Bill would also call for increasing the EITC, to \$100 million from \$75 million, which allows businesses to receive a tax break for making contributions to education efforts.

Now the average family income for EITC recipients is \$29,000. With a robust voucher program for low-income students, EITC dollars would be freed up for the middle class, allowing families with one child with incomes up to \$72,000 to receive a scholarship.

Let me share a story about why EITC is so important.

Cynthia Armstrong

Cynthia Armstrong is a single parent with two children, a daughter in 7th grade and son in 10th grade. She lives in West Oak Lane. She worked in early childhood education for 15 years then two things happened to her that changed her life.

When her daughter, Destanie was in 4th grade her private school closed because of lack of funds. The other thing that happened to Ms. Armstrong is she became disabled. She went to the hospital for a routine procedure and had a stroke. She had to learn how to talk and walk again.

She saw the challenges that children in her neighborhood face with their schools and was not going to let that happen. She knows what a quality school is. The problem is that after her stroke she had no back up plans to fund her children's education.

Ms. Armstrong came to BAEO and applied for a scholarship. She got a \$2,000 scholarship, which is almost half of the full tuition at Destanie's current school, Hope Church School.

Destanie is an honor roll student at Hope Church School, located in her neighborhood. Destanie tells us that her school is preparing her for high school and college.

Assuming that Ms. Armstrong's income is the same next year, Destanie would qualify for another EITC scholarship.

Conclusion

I am reminded of the words from Juan Williams, one of America's leading journalists and author, and his book, *Enough*.

Enough phony leaders: our children deserve the best.

Enough dead end movements: we need action and we need it now.

Enough culture of failure: teach and inspire the young.

The time has come to offer students another option. Or as Senator Piccola said, quoting Albert Einstein's definition of insanity: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

We must rethink our strategies. Other states and cities have come to the same conclusion. Now is time to provide a quality education in Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your time.

Sources

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- ^{iv} Kristen A. Graham, \$400M district shortfall possible, The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 11, 2011.
- ^v Kristen A. Graham, \$400M district shortfall possible, The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 11, 2011.
- ^{vi} Martha Woodall, Partnership pledges cash for school overhauls, The Philadelphia Inquirer, October 8, 2010.
- ^{vii} The Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia’s Changing Schools and What Parents Want from Them, June 2010.
- ^{viii} The Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia’s Changing Schools and What Parents Want from Them, June 2010.
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- ^x Based on figures from Kristen A. Graham, \$400M district shortfall possible, The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 11, 2011.
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- ^{xii} Mincy, Ronald, Urban Institute Press, Black Males Left Behind, February 2006.
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