



Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators
Proud Leadership for Pennsylvania Schools

Testimony on Senate Bill 1
Before the
Senate Education Committee
February 16, 2011

Good afternoon Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Richard Fry. I serve as Superintendent of Big Spring School District in Cumberland County and also chair the Legislative Committee of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). PASA represents school superintendents and other school administrators from across the Commonwealth. We thank the Committee for the opportunity today to share our thoughts on Senate Bill 1, the Opportunity Scholarship and Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act.

PASA members have a wide range of views about Senate Bill 1. At one end of the spectrum is unequivocal opposition to the bill. At the other end are some who support the bill and other who would support a more targeted, limited program of school choice. Other PASA members are withholding judgment until they have a more complete understanding of the legislation and how it will affect students, state funding and district funding. Others want to hear from Governor Corbett and whether he will propose his own program before taking a position on this bill. Given the variety of opinions and many unknowns, PASA is not currently taking a position on Senate Bill 1.

We are all aware of the level of heat and light that this issue generates. Passions are stimulated more by this issue probably more than any other current educational issue. PASA is working to see clearly through all the smoke to determine the actual impact on students, schools and funding should this bill become law. The biggest challenge we see is that people on both

sides of the issue take as a matter of faith that this will either improve educational opportunities for students or lead to the destruction of our system of public education.

We can all agree that at this time we do not know the number of public, private or religious schools that will accept students with grants, their eligibility for acceptance or the number of students they will accept.

We would like to hear more from Governor Corbett and his administration as to what he had in mind as he discussed school choice during his campaign and in his inaugural address. We are anxious to hear his ideas to put such a program in place beyond what Secretary-designee Tomalis described in his testimony before this committee this morning.

We all must recognize that should Senate Bill 1 or a similar proposal become law, the vast majority of Pennsylvania's 1.7 million public school students will remain enrolled in public schools and public charter schools. In the vast majority of public schools where student achievement, graduation rates, college-enrollment rates continue to improve, we need to maintain continued commitment to support these schools. The vast majority of public schools in this state are not broke and should not be tampered with.

The other important fact is that underachieving public schools and charter schools, for example the 144 schools eligible in year one, make up fewer than 4.6 percent of the 3,121 public schools and public charter schools statewide. With that said, we recognize that prompt action needs to be taken to address the needs of students enrolled in the lowest performing five percent of public schools. Student achievement in these schools remains at unacceptable levels despite years of interventions and assistance to improve performance. However, we also recognize that students who remain enrolled in these schools also deserve the opportunity for a quality education, and therefore these schools cannot maintain the status quo and aggressive action must be taken to restructure, turn the schools into charter schools or close them.

We have several concerns about Senate Bill 1. The first is that it does not establish a strategy to improve educational opportunities for those students who do not choose to accept the

opportunity grant or who, because of a disability, limited English proficiency or other reason is not accepted by a private or religious school.

We believe that the only way to determine the success of this experiment designed to improve educational opportunity is to utilize a common measuring stick to assess student achievement. Students who use opportunity grants must be systemically tested using the PSSA and Keystone Exams the same way as students enrolled in regular public schools and public charter schools are assessed. Student attendance, promotion rates, truancy and graduation rates should also be reported so that students, parents and taxpayers can determine whether their selected school is in fact producing better results than experienced in their resident school. This will also assist other parents who are considering whether to enroll their child in the school in the future by providing them with unbiased data on the quality of instruction at the school.

PASA is also concerned about the mechanism for a resident school district to cover the costs of providing special education services to a student enrolled in another district using an opportunity grant. The bill provides that the resident school district must determine the amount of funds that it would have spent to provide special education services to the student had the student remained enrolled in the school district. This amount is to be deducted by PDE from the resident district's special education funding and provided to the district in which the student is currently enrolled. While this approach is a much more fair way of funding special education services than the way they are funded for charter schools, this approach is wrought with problems as to the manner in which the amount is determined. It will be a paperwork nightmare that subjects district business office staff to make educated guesses when calculating the amount they would have spent on a student had the student remained enrolled in the school district.

Another concern is the fact that at least three of the schools included on the list are schools that exclusively provide educational services to students who are persistently disruptive or have been expelled for one year or more from public school. We suggest that schools that exclusively educate students who are disruptive or have been expelled be excluded from eligibility for opportunity grants just as have charter, cyber charter and area vocational technical

schools. We doubt that private and religious schools enroll students who are persistently disruptive or have been expelled from their public school.

Another issue that must be addressed is the year two eligibility criteria that expands eligibility for opportunity scholarships to include students enrolled in a nonpublic school in 2010-11 who will reside within the attendance boundary of a persistently lowest achieving school in 2012-13. In the School District of Philadelphia, where sixty-four percent of persistently lowest achieving schools are located, there are citywide admission elementary/middle schools, special admission middle schools, citywide admission high schools and special admission high schools. Since the attendance boundaries for citywide admission elementary, middle and high schools and special admission middle and high schools are citywide, should any one of these schools be identified as a persistently lowest school, every low-income nonpublic school student residing in the School District of Philadelphia would be eligible to receive an opportunity scholarship. Needless to say, unless this provision is changed, the impact of this provision on the finances of the School District of Philadelphia will be catastrophic.

These are just a few of the many concerns that PASA members have shared regarding Senate Bill 1. As PASA learns more about the bill and its impact on students, schools and funding we will continue to communicate with the leadership and members of this Committee to provide our additional perspective.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 1.

I would be pleased to respond to your questions.