

## **Chairman Piccola's Opening Remarks**

### **Senate Education Committee Public Hearing: SB 1**

Sixteen years ago, Governor Tom Ridge changed the debate on education in Pennsylvania. Up until 1995 it was always about how much more money are we going to spend on education. Governor Ridge challenged us to ask what are we getting for the money we are spending. In doing so he launched the debate on school choice and accountability. It is a debate that focuses on the needs of children and taxpayers and not on the employment and the turf of adults.

While his voucher proposals failed, over the next several years we had some successes for kids with the passage of the Charter School Law in 1997, EITC in 2001, and Cyber Charter Law in 2002. We also instituted academic standards and assessments known as PSSA's and more recently under Governor Rendell the Keystone Exams and the measurement of academic growth through Pennsylvania's Value Added System (PVAS). During those years the education establishment fought the Ridge school choice plans and each of these smaller innovations that we were able to enact to benefit kids and their families. Now 16 years later, the arguments of that same establishment have not changed. Give us more time; Give us more money; Hire more teachers, Reduce class sizes; and "Fix" the system. One school official even went

so far as to tell me just give us more money and get out of the way. When Sen. Dinniman and I attempted to work with these very same groups to reauthorize the Education Empowerment Act last spring, they refused to negotiate and signed this letter – HOLD UP LETTER -- opposing the then SB 1192 which focused exclusively on fixing the same schools we are discussing in SB 1. They organized together the fixing of the same schools that we are talking about today.

The moral imperative in this current debate is clear. Time has run out. We have trapped and failed thousands of children and their families and failed the taxpayers who have paid for this expensive failure with their hard-earned tax dollars. I have seen this first hand here in the city school district of the City of Harrisburg.

SB 1 is not an attack on public education as the opponents have attempted to frame it. It is an attack on expensive failure. We have many good schools in PA and many great teachers. Families blessed with resources move into those school districts and receive the benefit of a good education or they send their kids to a private school. That is the key, however -- under our current system, families must have sufficient financial resources to execute any meaningful choice.

That is where Senate Bill 1 is deeply rooted. Giving every child and family the opportunity to take a state voucher – I am not afraid of using the word “voucher” – to choose the school that is best for their needs – where they can have opportunity and academic achievement and, yes, a ticket to success in our society.

Opponents of SB 1 claim it is a “ticket to nowhere”. We know right now there are thousands of open seats in nonpublic schools ready to educate the kids trapped in failure because of their zip code. While the establishment rails against SB 1 claiming these children will be given no opportunities to excel, in the next breath they claim that SB 1 will be hugely expensive ignoring the evidence in many other states and communities showing that the participation rate is relatively low, particularly in a statewide plan like Florida. These are the very same people who only a short time ago were advocating for a bogus, so called, Costing Out Study that would gouge our taxpayers for billions of more dollars for public education and drive our state and school districts to bankruptcy. Now that their monopoly is threatened they rail against a relatively small amount of money to really help kids.

Those who understand how free markets work, understand that when we arm each child with a state voucher and empower parents with

choice, an educational free market will be created that will meet the demand of every family and meet the academic needs of every child.

Doublespeak is something our friends in the Alphabet Soup groups excel at. In one of the various propaganda pieces they are bombarding the legislature with they have the audacity to point to charter schools and EITC as current choices available to parents. Even though they fought those reforms with every fiber of their being and continue to do so.

Let us make no mistake about the true nature of the debate about SB 1. The education establishment wants to protect a state monopoly with as narrow a definition possible for what constitutes “public education”. If children are trapped in failure because of their need to protect this monopoly, then they resort to pointing to these reforms they had nothing to do with and even opposed. In fact one high ranking PSBA official has adopted the Marie Antoinette “let them eat cake” approach to choice saying “if a family wants a good education, move to a good school district.”

Sen. Williams and I and many other legislators, Gov. Tom Corbett, and thousands of Pennsylvanians, are fighting to redefine public education

as a broad spectrum of choices that fit the needs of each child according to their parent's decisions.

This is why SB 1 is such a threat to the establishment which has turf and union jobs to protect, and a vast enterprise that costs \$26 billion each year.

Let us not forget that SB 1 also contains another key principle and that is enhancing the EITC by \$25 million. This increase will allow thousands of struggling, middle-class families to achieve choice. The Williams/Piccola plan recognizes that "one size does not fit all" and that our middle-income families deserve assistance consistent with our budgetary constraints.

It also recognizes in Year Three of the plan that low-income families across this Commonwealth who cannot move to good schools deserve a state voucher. We cannot in good conscience rescue kids from failing buildings and abandon those families who may be trapped in mediocre schools and still lack the resources to move to a good school district. For those who have concerns about Year Three and why parents might want to take their kids out of an ostensibly good school district - a story that came out of southeast Pennsylvania.

I call to everyone's attention a news story I just read this morning coming out of the Pennsbury School District in Bucks County Pennsylvania, where the teachers are working under an expired contract. Fifth graders at the Pennsbury Elementary School received a whole story/comprehensive exercise that was aimed at pro-union mentalities.

Questions were – why don't we pay teachers enough for the very important job they are doing? School boards around the country believe they'll be able to lure one million of the best minds if they offer meager salaries that are in decline. What is the solution? Well the correct answer is raising the salaries of teachers.

Another question was asking students to identify the initials of the National Education Association, the teachers' union. Shame on those teachers who made that assignment and shame on the Pennsbury Education Association for injecting union activities into the classroom. That is why parents in ostensibly good districts, in many cases, want to send their children elsewhere.

The cost of SB 1 has been grossly exaggerated by some. We are confident that Year One will cost less than \$50 million and that is with

the EITC increase of \$25 million factored in. In a budget of \$26 billion for public education – doubled since we began this debate sixteen years ago – there is room for school choice. Today, Pennsylvania taxpayers spend more than \$13,000 per student—\$2,000 more than the national average and more than 39 other states. In some of our chronically underperforming public schools, taxpayers are paying nearly \$20,000 per student. In the last eight years alone, public education funding rose 40% with very little to show in academic achievement but with enrollments declining overall by about 1%.

It is time to retire this tired old playbook. The Williams/Piccola plan represents a more efficient and moral way for taxpayers to educate kids

So that the committee does not think we are resting after consideration of SB 1, we will tackle in April overhauling our charter school law to make chartering schools easier and to make those schools more accountable. If school districts take up the challenge and think outside the box they will be able to use this law to avoid many expensive mandates and deliver a quality education.

Also in April, we will take up a substantial mandate relief package that will include the ability to furlough teachers for economic reasons.

Nowhere else in America does this job protection exist except in school districts. Mandate relief will go beyond the furlough issue with the aim of relieving school districts of expensive mandates and allow them the flexibility to meet the educational needs of kids. Some who oppose us on SB 1 should be supportive of these other efforts. We shall see if they put the same vigor, resources and attention toward promoting mandate relief as they do in attacking SB 1. We all have the same stated goals...quality educational opportunity for our kids at a reasonable cost to the taxpayer.

While this may sound corny to the foes of SB 1, I will say it anyway. SB 1 is rooted in freedom. It represents what is best about this country whose foundations are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. SB 1 recognizes that monopolies do not work and are not what this country is about.

It also continues a movement and cause for which many lost their lives, the civil rights movement. My friend, Sen. Williams, has been a proud leader in that cause as was his father who I also served with, and Sen. Williams can speak much more eloquently than I can on the



fundamental civil right that has been denied to so many children of color.

In 1989, the Berlin Wall came crashing down. Until the very end, those who wished to keep the wall up fought to do so. There is a Berlin Wall around our failing schools and proponents are clinging to that wall attempting to wall out freedom and educational opportunity. Some have even threatened publicly to “stand in the school house door” to keep kids from leaving a bad school. Opponents of SB 1 are the party of “no” defending the indefensible. But the walls are coming down and kids, families and our taxpayers will be the beneficiaries.

I look forward to a vigorous debate and receiving testimony from both sides on the Williams/Piccola plan. Thank you.

Sen. Dinniman for opening remarks.