

Testimony of Joe Watkins
Chairman, Students First
Presented To The Senate Education Committee
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Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and Members of the Senate Education Committee:

On behalf of Students First, I would like to thank you for inviting me to appear before the Committee to tell you why we support Senate Bill 1.

We believe that access to a good education can be a life-changing experience. Whether a child is tackling algebra in a public classroom or fine-tuning a term paper in a private school, we all want Pennsylvania's children to receive the best education available to them. We also believe that parents should be able to choose the course of instruction that is best for their children. This is especially true for families who wake up each day facing the challenges of a failing school. For them, Senate Bill 1 represents a tremendous opportunity – the chance to enter a learning environment that will give them the foundation they need to succeed the rest of their lives.

Students First applauds Sens. Piccola and Williams for taking a two-pronged approach in their attempt to bring real choice to education in our Commonwealth. Through opportunity scholarships, SB 1 will provide substantial help to Pennsylvania's poorest families struggling in some of Pennsylvania's lowest performing schools. But, the bill does much more. Realizing the countless financial pressures that wear on the middle class, Sens. Piccola and Williams also included provisions to expand the Education Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program to assist these families. As a result this bill will help an extremely wide range of families whose top priority is to improve the educational opportunities of their children.

And for me, SB 1 really hits home.

I grew up in a city with lots of under-performing schools. Fortunately, education was very important in my household. My parents taught us early on that education was the great equalizer in society. They said that a good education would prepare us to be full, contributing members of the society.

My father was a schoolteacher, a member of the teachers' union, and even a school principal. My mother taught all of us to read before kindergarten. And, both of my parents checked our homework every evening. If our homework had mistakes or was messy, we had to do it over again. They took a great interest in everything that we were doing in school and demanded that we perform to the best of our abilities.

I like to think all those hours and all those "re-dos" really paid off. As a 13-year-old, I won a scholarship to a top private school, where I received excellent instruction. From there I was admitted to a great Pennsylvania university, the University of Pennsylvania, which further prepared me academically. After completing my undergraduate studies, I was admitted to graduate school at Princeton Theological Seminary from which I received a master's degree.

My life experience continues to prove to me that the education I received as a young child not only equipped to compete in society, but also to contribute to it as well. Had I not been given the opportunity to attend a better school early on – one that better reflected the academic goals and expectations of my family – perhaps, we would not be having this conversation. Perhaps I wouldn't be sitting before you today as a college instructor, or as a former advisor to a U.S. Senator or as an equity partner in an investment firm, or as a political analyst on national television or anything else I've been able to accomplish because of the education I was so fortunate to receive. Most importantly, I might not have been able to become a pastor – something I feel incredibly blest to be able to do.

I tell you about the opportunities I've had throughout my life, not to sound boastful, but to demonstrate the kinds of chances that result from an excellent education – whether it's public or private. And, Students First believes that every kid deserves what I was so fortunate to get – a decent shot at a good education. SB 1 will help give them that shot.

For too many students and their parents, the educational system is broken. No single bill will fix every single problem, but these students and their parents can't wait any longer – they need you to try right now. More importantly, they need you to succeed right now. SB 1 will open the door of opportunity and begin the process of leveling the educational playing field for all of our children. It will give unprecedented help for those families most in need as well as additional aid to the middle class by expanding the EITC. Quite simply, this landmark legislation gives us a chance to fix the system by putting students first.

Students First – and I personally – support this bill with great enthusiasm. Offering the educational options and opportunities provided for in SB 1 is absolutely the right thing to do.

Thank you again for allowing me to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.