

Testimony  
Senate Bill 1 – Opportunity Scholarships and EITC  
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Good morning. Thank you Chairman Piccola, Chairman Dinniman and members of the Senate Education Committee for the opportunity to speak with you this morning on Senate Bill 1 and the importance of enhancing educational opportunities and options for students throughout the Commonwealth.

On behalf of Governor Tom Corbett, I look forward to continued dialogue between the administration and the legislature on these topics. I believe it is the mutual objective of Governor Corbett and many members of the General Assembly to enact substantive education reform this session that helps provide students and parents the diverse tools they need to succeed in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century education system.

While we examine the critical issues that are presented to us in SB1, it is important to recognize that the concept of parental choice in education is not a new issue in the Commonwealth. We have incorporated into our system of education multiple opportunities for parental choice --- from the successful Education Improvement Tax Credit program , to the development and expansion of charter schools, from enhanced cyber charter options, to more blended learning programs in traditional public schools, from specialized private schools for children with the

severe disabilities, to expanded career and technical school options all provide flexibility, choice and specialization in education that is tailored to the needs of the individual student.

However, just as we should acknowledge the addition of these critical alternatives for students, we should also acknowledge that in far too many circumstances the range of opportunities for certain children is still insufficient. That is why throughout the recent gubernatorial campaign, Governor Corbett has championed parental choice, stating: “Parents should have the right to choose the public school their child attends. Parents should be able to make a choice outside the public system when their child’s public school is a failing one.”

While it is an unavoidable fact that the vast majority of our lowest-performing schools are populated by students from our lowest-income families, it is equally true that there are many schools throughout the nation that serve predominantly low-income students and deliver a high quality education as measured by state tests and as reported by families living in those school communities. In those schools, the educators possess both the skill and the will to create and sustain a relentless focus on academic achievement. The cycle of poverty can be successfully redirected when access to quality education disrupts the status quo.

In those schools where low-income students demonstrate outstanding achievement, the principals, teachers and families have embraced the belief that “failure is not an option.” And yet, for too many of our students in the Commonwealth, failure is the *only* option. That is, failing schools – schools that year after year are unable to generate even the most modest gains

in student achievement – are the only option available to the children and their families who live in those neighborhoods, and who cannot afford to live where there are better schools.

Although “low-income” students in “failing schools” may have the most immediate need for action to provide school choice and flexibility in educational options, it is important to note these initiatives have exponential benefits to all incomes and school districts. The injection of competition in almost any system is a natural motivator that forces each individual component of that system to improve itself. With competition comes diversity, and with diversity adoption of programs to meet the individual needs of the student.

Only through the diversity of options can we move away from the “one size fits all” approach to education that many have lamented as an impediment to children achieving academically.

As you know, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has an obligation to provide for “a thorough and efficient system of public education.” (Pa. Const. art. 3, § 14) The current system in place is responsible for preparing “students for adult life by attending to their intellectual and developmental needs and challenging them to achieve at their highest level possible. . . . In conjunction with families and other community institutions, public education prepares students to become self-directed, life-long learners and responsible, involved citizens.” When one considers the statistics associated not only with student achievement in our lowest performing schools, but also the data on drop-outs and the relationship to incarceration rates, one can only assume our current system is not working for all students. So, while we have already modified our system of education to incorporate more parental options through such things as charter

schools or the EITC, our understanding of a “system of public education” needs to expand to be more inclusive of any means by which we can publicly support a more effective approach to achieving the mandate of our Constitution.

The purpose of school choice is to make factors other than geography the basis for parents selecting the best school for their children. How can more students be provided a better education if they are destined to attend the school that is identified as their own by a single factor – where they live? Public schools that have been languishing in mediocrity with no real consequences for their inability to improve are not going to change without a more compelling reason. Indeed, those schools didn’t get in that condition overnight – in fact it has been years in the making. While we work to institute programs that will help those schools improve, choice is the only option for the parents of children in those schools who don’t have the luxury of sacrificing another generation of children until improvement occurs.

The most thorough and efficient system of public education will be one that is inclusive of as many choices as necessary to meet the needs of the individual students being served by such a system. Creating multiple pathways for students to achieve their potential and become productive citizens is in the best interests of both the children for whom we act, and the society in which we live.

In closing, I would like to observe that I believe we are approaching a fundamental paradigm shift in our society that will have a profound impact on our education system. For years, my generation and several generations before me have accepted the fact that based primarily on zip

code and residential domicile, a student was placed in a specific school, was given a specific teacher and was provided a specific curriculum. If the student followed this path with at least minimal competency, then they were awarded with a piece of parchment and a hand-shake of good luck from a principal or superintendent after completing their K-12 experience. This factory model system of education has served us well.

But this is no longer the world in which we live and the education system students and parents deserve. Every day, a new profile of parents is showing up at school board meetings or parent teacher conferences, parents who are not grounded in the patterns of old but rather who have exercised choice through nearly every aspect of their lives. From how they shop for groceries to their selection of music, from choices in entertainment to how they remain informed of what is happening in the world, choice has been a fundamental element of nearly every aspect of these young parents' lives. And now, these young people are entering an education system as parents, an education system where the factory model still dominates. It is my opinion that we are about to face a clash between the ideals and expectations of the new generation of parents and a system that is designed for a generation of the past. I believe Pennsylvania should be at the head of this paradigm shift in educational choice and not at the tail of it.

Senate Bill 1 starts the conversation on how Pennsylvania should best adapt to this shift, and I believe this dialogue will lead to the enactment of comprehensive legislation that puts the Commonwealth at the forefront of this education movement.

In closing, I know the debate over Senate Bill 1 and other potential school choice legislation will not be easy. Concerns and diverse opinions will be expressed by parents, teachers, school boards, administrators, the unions or associations that represent these interests, along with other possible entities. As we go forward, I believe that it is not our job to defend a system when that system fails to meet the needs of children. A willingness to negotiate in good faith, with the future success of students as the top priority, is prerequisite in future discussions.

Thank you again Chairmen Piccola, Dinniman and members of this committee for the opportunity to testify today.