

Second Draft for consideration of testimony of the March 15, 2011 Senate Bill 1 Democratic Hearing in Erie, PA.

Chairman Sturla and Members of the House Democratic Policy Committee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak on behalf of school choice.

My name is Karen Brumagin and I have been administrator of Girard Alliance Christian Academy for six years. I have a PA teacher's certificate, having graduated summa cum laude from Edinboro University of PA in 1992. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education plus 15 post graduate credits in a variety of courses for teaching and administration. I hold an ACSI Standard Teacher's Certificate and an ACSI Administrator's Certificate. I have been a professional educator for 18 years.

Girard Alliance Christian Academy is located in Girard, a community in northwestern Pennsylvania. The Academy was established in 1979 by the Girard Alliance Church, in partnership with parents, to provide a comprehensive, Christ-centered education. We are governed by an Academy Council made up of 7-9 members who meet monthly. We have committed our resources to provide a quality educational program through these years. The full-time faculty must have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in the content area in which they teach. Financial resources are invested in curriculum that best meet our mission and expectation for rigorous instruction. The instructional day and school calendar meet the 180 day school year requirement. Attendance records are kept and submitted annually to our home school district. Chronic issues of absences require a doctor's excuse. Unexcused absences will negatively impact grades, can accumulate to the point of academic failure, and can lead to legal interventions.

The Academy has graduated over 200 students. Students have enrolled and graduated from a variety of graduate and post graduate programs as well as two year programs. Several graduates serve in the military. Others have chosen to enter the work force from high school. Our students are enrolled in or alumni of colleges and universities such as Wheaton College, Messiah College, Geneva College, Grove City College, Carnegie Mellon, Houghton College, Edinboro University of PA, Penn State University (both the Behrend Campus and Main campuses), Creighton University Law School, Liberty University, Philadelphia Biblical University, Nyack College, Mercyhurst College, Moody Bible Institute, Thiel College, Slippery Rock University of PA, Clarion University of PA, Gannon University, and SUNY at Buffalo. Students have attended vocational and two year programs through institutions such as Tri State Business, Triangle Tech, Great Lakes Institute of Technology, Williamson Trade School, Hocking Hills Culinary School, Mercyhurst North East, Harrington Institute of Interior Design, Northern VA Community College, and Spartan School of Aeronautics.

Graduates have become teachers, nurses and other health field providers, CPA, lawyer, pastors, missionaries, manufacturing workers, engineers, sales and marketing people, businessmen/women in banking, insurance, accounting, and the computer field.

We have combined classes with traditional teacher-directed instruction. Twenty-six credits are required for graduation, with either a general or college prep diploma. High school students can take weighted classes such as Spanish 3 and 4, Physics, Trigonometry, and Calculus. We participate in the Regional Choice Initiative and have students enrolled in college courses through this program. Students are held to an academic standard with a rigorous grading scale. Teacher expectations are high and assessments are an integral part of each academic course. Parent Conferences are held twice a year. Teachers and parents are encouraged to communicate regularly with one another. We give the Stanford Achievement Test in grades K-12 each year. We also provide the PSAT to prepare students to take the SAT and/or the ACT. Students in K-12 take Bible courses and attend a weekly Chapel. Teachers are a vital part of the instructional process as they not only prepare and teach their classes, they also offer after school tutoring for those in need.

The school has one administrator and one administrative assistant. The faculty consists of six full-time and three part-time people. We also employ two teacher aides. Professional development is provided in-house as well as through participation in the Association of Christian Schools teacher conferences. The Academy is also served by loyal volunteers who help with lunch duties, fund-raising, and clerical duties.

We have transportation from five school districts including Girard, Fairview, Northwestern, General McLane, and Millcreek. Located near the western PA border we also serve students from nearby communities in Ohio. Currently we have 45 students in our K-12 program. We offer a full academic program for our students including physical education and art. We offer high school sports for boys and girls including volleyball, soccer, and basketball. We encourage our students to be concerned for others through food drives and services days.

The majority of our students are from the Christian background. While not all students or families profess a personal faith in Jesus Christ, the Academy does expect family and student cooperation with our mission and to participate fully in our academic program.

The Academy provides for a diverse student population. We have students from single parent families and well as two parent families. We have enjoyed foreign students at the high school level. And have served adoptive students from other countries. While we are not equipped to meet all special education needs, we do provide for individualized instruction within the classroom. Act 89 faculty and IU Pupil services also provide us student and faculty support.

Our students wear a school uniform with many opportunities to earn dress-down days. There is a behavior expectation of respect for staff, fellow students, self, visitors, and the building. Students receive the typical loss of privileges for inappropriate behavior including loss of recess for elementary, and after school detentions for Middle and High school students. Upon acceptance into the school each student is subject to a 90 day probation period. This is for both the student/family and for the Academy to make sure this school is the right fit for their child(ren).

The Academy is currently at 50% capacity. We have had as many as 140 students in the 1990s. Our tuition averages at \$3500 per student. This covers about 55% of the costs to educate a child at G.A.C.A. Our families are involved in many fundraisers, and the school is supported by generous donations. We have also partnered with the Stuckey Family Foundation for seven years to provide matching grants. The EITC program provides scholarship for our families. The amount received through the scholarship organizations was considerably less last year. This combined with area employment concerns negatively impacted interested families. When enrollment goes down, program offerings are reduced, and that too, has caused families to leave the Academy.

The Academy is in a precarious place at this time. We may not be in business to enter into year three of this Senate Bill 1 which would have the most impact for the families we serve. But we urge you to seriously consider the positive impact that Christian schools have had on the Commonwealth children over a period of many years. We do not offer a lesser educational program for we are in the business of raising students capable of success in our changing world. Offering school choice will allow parents to honor their responsibility to consider the alternatives and choose the best education for their child(ren).

Thank you for your consideration of our experience at Girard Alliance Christian Academy.

Respectfully,
Karen Brumagin
Administrator

