

Rod Paige, Former Secretary of Education, in a speech, stated that "...it is unacceptable to waste a child's life, to treat a child as unimportant or marginal, or to simply pretend the child is invisible." Then he asks, "Who among us would condemn a child to an inferior education? Which child? Who's child?" As embarrassing as these questions are for our nation, they are ones for which we have answers. In my own city of Philadelphia, like the cities across our nation, the children condemned to an inferior education are poor, Black, and Latino children. They are condemned because the schools they must attend in their neighborhoods are failing on every front. They are condemned because they have no choice in the matter.

Who among us would condemn our child to a school in which the majority of the students are performing below grade level? What parent or grandparent among us would condemn our child to a school that will leave her well behind her suburban or international peers? None would desire to condemn their child, but some live in neighborhoods with overcrowded, unsafe schools which lack basic textbooks and equipment, and where the arts program has been cut. These parents and grandparents grieve because they have no choice in the matter. If they had a choice, they would happily move to another school district where the school maintains a reputation of academic achievement and preparation for college. But they cannot afford a home in an area with an acceptable school. They are economically bound to failing schools.

But these parents and grandparents do not give up easily. They call the nearby private and parochial schools, hoping against hope that these schools will save their children from a substandard education. Each year at Spruce Hill, we receive hundreds and hundreds of calls for the very few seats we have open. When a parent or grandparent calls, they almost never ask about class sizes, computers, test scores, second language offerings, or the educational level of the teaching staff. Almost always, their first question is, "What is your tuition?"

Is this the most important question for a parent to ask? It certainly is! Let me rephrase the question: "Dr. Cohen, what is the cost of your school for one year? Can I keep a roof over my family and provide an adequate education for my child? Dr. Cohen, can I provide my child with medicine and a school environment where she feels safe and stimulated to learn? Dr. Cohen, can I afford food and heat in the winter and provide my child with an education that will prepare him for a life full of the choices I lack?"

At Spruce Hill Christian School and City Center Academy, we believe that parents should not have to make these choices. So we step up to the plate, offering a college preparatory education to any qualified

student, regardless of their ability to pay. How do we do it? We do it by asking parents to pay some of the tuition from their already stretched resources, by paying highly professional teachers far less than they could make in the public sector, and by relying on the generosity of supporters: businesses, churches, foundations, and individuals. This year alone, our supporters will provide \$750,000 to educate our students. So much work year after year – is it worth it?

You bet! You cannot imagine the face of a grandmother living on a fixed income, raising three grandchildren and facing a \$15,000 tuition bill, when she is told we have scholarship available and all she will need to pay is \$40 a month for ten months (\$400 a year) for all three children. You should see the tears of joy when a single mother, working full time and attending University at night to become a nurse, learns that all she will need is \$200 a month to educate her two boys. It's better than Christmas morning.

These are the choices parents want to make. In the city of Philadelphia -- where the ideal of freedom gave birth to a nation that fundamentally believes that all people deserve the freedom to choose for themselves and their children -- far too many are choiceless. Pennsylvania's Educational Tax Credit (EITC) has been a great source of funding for non-public schools that are committed to parents having choices. At Spruce Hill Christian School and City Center Academy we have awarded \$328,000 to 140 low income students or about 54% of the student population.

The business community, legislators from both parties and of course parents has heartily embraced this program. In Pennsylvania, the EITC has created real choices for people who lacked choices. It is an enormous step in the right direction. But the work is not over. Together, we must keep working eagerly for the day when every parent and grandparent, regardless of economics, race, or neighborhood, will be free to choose a school that will educate their children well, preparing them for college and a lifetime of good citizenship.

Seth R. Cohen, Ed.D.

Headmaster

Spruce Hill Christian School

City Center Academy