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**Testimony for the Pennsylvania General Assembly House Democratic Policy Committee**

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Representative Kirkland and members of the House Democratic Policy Committee - thank you for allowing me the opportunity to address you today on this important matter of school choice. SB1 provides a remarkable opportunity for the children of our state, and I would urge you to support this legislation which will ultimately benefit all Pennsylvanians.

**Personal background**

My name is Steve Dill and I serve as the Head of School at Delaware County Christian School in Newtown Square, where I have served as an educator for 38 years. My doctorate in educational leadership is from Temple University; and I also serve as an adjunct professor of education at several graduate schools in Pennsylvania. I serve on the board of ADVIS, the Association of Delaware Valley Independent Schools based in Bryn Mawr, PA, and ACSI – the Association of Christian Schools International, based in Colorado with a regional office in Lancaster. I speak to you today as a representative of my school, other independent schools in the Philadelphia area, and Christian schools around the state.

**Description of Delaware County Christian School**

Delaware County Christian School is a PK-12<sup>th</sup> grade school founded over 60 years ago currently serving 800 students. I am one of more than 3000 students who have graduated from the school. Our Upper School (grades 6-12) campus is located in Newtown Township on the Radnor Township border. Our elementary campus is located in Easttown Township (Chester County), on the Newtown Township border. The school provides a college preparatory education; over 95% of the graduates go on to higher education. Students who attend the school reside in Philadelphia, Delaware, Chester and Montgomery Counties. The school is far more ethnically diverse than any of the adjacent school districts with a 30% non-white student population, of which the largest group is African-American students. 20% of our student body comes from Philadelphia and school districts from southern Delaware County. We have parents – including single parents – who take on two jobs in order to pay for their children to attend the school. Tuition and fees range from \$4000 for half day PK to \$13,000 for high school. Over one third of our families receive tuition assistance and do not pay full price. Some of those assistance dollars come from the current EITC scholarship program that SB1 will expand.

Delaware County Christian School is not a selective prep school only for the best and brightest students. We accept students with learning disabilities, who with proper support, will be able to function successfully in a college bound program. We have over 100 students who receive

different learning support services, with additional students who have 504 plans. We have graduates each year who matriculate at some of the finest colleges in the country. Current seniors will matriculate this fall at Dartmouth, the US Naval Academy, UC Berkley, UCLA, NYU, along with others who will attend local colleges including West Chester, Temple, Delaware County Community College, and Eastern University. Our graduates are well prepared for college and nearly 90% complete college in five years, nearly double the national percentage.

My purpose in all of that background is to illustrate that our school is one of many in Pennsylvania that is ethnically, socio-economically, and academically diverse – and provides tremendous value to the parents who make significant sacrifices for their children to attend.

In my comments today, I want to emphasize three brief points:

### **1. School Choice improves student achievement.**

There is a growing body of educational research – neutral, empirical studies – that demonstrate gains in student achievement when school choice is present. Although in some studies the gains are small, there are some studies showing significant gains. There have not been any studies that have indicated any negative results from providing school choice.

In a summary study published last month, the author collected the results of all available empirical studies using the best available scientific methods to measure how school vouchers affect academic outcomes for participants, and all available studies on how vouchers affect outcomes in public schools. Contrary to the widespread claim that vouchers do not benefit participants and hurt public schools, the empirical evidence consistently shows that vouchers improve outcomes for both participants and public schools. In addition to helping the participants by giving them more options, there are a variety of explanations for why vouchers might improve public schools as well. The most important is that competition from vouchers introduces healthy incentives for public schools to improve.

Key findings include:

- Ten empirical studies have used random assignment, the gold standard of social science, to examine how vouchers affect participants. Nine studies find that vouchers improve student outcomes, six that all students benefit and three that some benefit and some are not affected. One study finds no visible impact. None of these studies finds a negative impact.
- Nineteen empirical studies have examined how vouchers affect outcomes in public schools. Of these studies, 18 find that vouchers improved public schools and one finds no visible impact. No empirical studies find that vouchers harm public schools.
- Every empirical study ever conducted in those places improved public schools.

- Only one study, conducted in Washington D.C., found no visible impact from vouchers in the surrounding public schools. This is not surprising, since the D.C. voucher program is the only one designed to shield public schools from the impact of competition. There were improvements in the outcomes among the students receiving the vouchers. Thus, the D.C. study does not detract from the research consensus in favor of a positive effect from voucher competition.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The most important constituency for this issue is students, not adults.**

One of the challenges I face in my non-public school environment is not unlike the challenges that you as legislative leaders must face. You have different stakeholders with vastly different perspectives on the issues before you. On a much smaller scale, the primary stakeholders in my decision making arena are students, parents and teachers. Because of the common commitment to our mission, I can usually make decisions that please all of my stakeholders. But even in my small world, there are days when I must choose between what is best for teachers and what is best for students. Public and non-public schools are both operating in a challenging economic environment. We may not have a position for a particular faculty member next year. Or we may have an extra 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and need to hire a kindergarten teacher. Do we automatically put the existing 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher into the kindergarten classroom? If teachers are our primary stakeholder, yes we would. If we want to do what is best for the students in the classroom, we will open up that position to the best qualified kindergarten teacher, which may or may not be the current 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. And we may have a very unhappy 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.

**The point of that illustration is to emphasize what we all know to be true – schools exist primarily for students, not for teachers.** We can't have good schools without effective teachers, but schools do not exist in order to create jobs for teachers. In a similar way, I would urge our legislative leaders to recognize that what is best for students may not be best for existing structures and existing teachers in existing schools. Perhaps that student would be much better served in a different school.

This past October Austin and Jasmine (not the real names of two of our African-American students) entered our school. They lived in the William Penn School District, and their parents did not want their children to attend the district schools. They home schooled for a while but were not able to provide the quality of education that they wanted their children to have. The mother was the primary provider for the family because the father had health issues and was unemployed. They scrapped whatever money they could to enroll and they received substantial (2/3) financial aid. Both children (10<sup>th</sup> grade and 6<sup>th</sup> grade) struggled at first, but they worked hard. They made friends and got involved in school activities. I can see their smiling faces clearly in my mind. Because of their hard work, they were succeeding academically. But they could not afford their portion of tuition, they withdrew from our school in late March. I do not know what they are doing for schooling today, but I do know that those children were in tears

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<sup>1</sup> Forster, Greg. *A Win Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Vouchers*, Foundation for Educational Choice, March 2011.

because they had to withdraw. From my perspective, they were given a chance for academic and life success that then had to be taken away. I believe SB1 will provide a life line to the Austins and Jasmynes of our state. If this bill is enacted in this session, those students – who live in an area where they would attend what the bill defines as a failing school – would be able to reenroll in the school that they love for the coming school year.

Will SB1 drain resources from existing school districts? To a small degree, yes, and a few jobs may disappear in some districts. But the Austins and the Jasmynes of those districts will be able to receive a high quality education, and the limited resources of the state should place a higher priority on providing quality educational options for many children than the protection of existing jobs. New jobs will be created that will follow student demand.

### **3. Final decisions for education should be given to parents, not zip codes.**

Who is best equipped to make the decision as to the best school for a student? **Clearly parents have a significant vested interest for the best schooling for their children and they should be empowered to make that choice.** Austin and Jasmine's parents wanted to make a choice but current law only gave them one affordable option – the local public school.

Will parents move their students from one school to another on the whims of personal preference? This is not likely, since schooling choices have consequences for a long period of time. Will Austin and Jasmine struggle in adapting back to home school or cyber charter school? Perhaps – but with effort they were able to transition into our school back in October. We have accepted students into our school who have come to us from public schools, other non-public schools, home schools, and cyber schools. Some students have needed extra help to catch up to our standards; others have entered without difficulty.

The primary accountability factor in SB1 is given to parents. At our school, parents vote with their feet each year. If they do not believe our school is providing adequate value for the price that they are paying, they do not return to our school for the following year. We have no hold on them – and if we do not deliver excellence and value – they will leave. We do not have a model that provides resources regardless of the perceived value of services rendered by the users.

Most non-public schools seek accreditation by outside groups, which also provides accountability. Our school was the first Christian school accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (1960) and has been maintained since then. We have also maintained accreditation from the Association of Christian Schools International since 1988.

**In conclusion,** let me repeat that SB1 will provide a significant opportunity for students to access quality education. It could make a difference for thousands of students in our state. Thank you. I would be happy to respond to any questions.