

Testimony regarding Senate Bill 1:  
The Opportunity Scholarship & Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act  
3/31/2011

Chairmen Sturla and Members of the Democratic Policy Committee:

My name is Bob Gresh and I am the founder of Grace Prep High School in State College, Pa. As a businessman and entrepreneur, seven years ago I took up a challenge to fill a need in the State College community since there was no other private high school within a school district of nearly 8,000 students.

At the time that I went to enroll my son in ninth grade in the public school there were 937 kids in the freshman class and nearly 3,000 in the high school. I was introduced to the two guidance counselors for his class. One was in charge of counseling students with names ending in A – M and the other with students from N – Z. Perhaps it was in that moment I was struck by the enormous difficulty of the public school mission and how private schools with different missions could aid the public schools, not detract from them.

I'm not an opponent of the public schools. In fact I greatly respect what they do and I recognize that there is only so much that they can do. The simple fact of the matter is that just as we, as adults, have different personalities, different interests, different skills, and respond to people in different environments in different ways our children need the same flexibility and opportunity in their quest to achieve their individual success. Not all adults want to live in the big city and work for big corporations. In fact, many forced into this life style would be unsuccessful not because they lack the skills or talent but, simply because their skills and talents are not suited to the environment.

Public schools are a vital resource in our community but they strain at the task to be all things to all people. Certainly I could give much time explaining how I believe my faith and the values we teach at Grace Prep High School are good for the lives of our students, but that is not the reason I need to use to support many of the aspects of SB1.

In fact, I started Grace Prep to show what a small school could do. We have the freedom to hire the best teachers and fire the worst ones. And we have the opportunity to provide the environment that a school with 100 students offers rather than 3,000. We value any occupation that a student feels passionate about that will bring lifelong joy and success.

My personal story is that I was a student with attention deficit disorder and I didn't really like school. I did well in some classes and horrible in others. And so I understand students who feel the same way. Generally these students are known as problem students or students unwilling to be educated. They might be considered lazy or apathetic. But I can tell you with all certainty that these are honestly some of our best and brightest. They are inventors, explorers, politicians and entrepreneurs. And they often fall through the cracks of an educational system not designed for them.

I support SB1 not out of desperation for our current school system, but for the tremendous success that we will achieve when parents and children can select schools that are suited to their environment as you've been able to select an environment where you're successful.

Obviously those of us with resources have that choice. You have that choice. Perhaps many of you or your staff have selected private schools. Why? Because you think it is the best environment for your children to learn and to grow. I've made that same choice and I believe it is honorable, compassionate and ethical for those without our means to have that same choice.

Furthermore, I believe with the right creative solutions, the public school can be aided by the fact that students who attend are there by choice, not by force. Why has Grace Prep been successful in producing a national commended scholar and a national merit scholar among our first 100 graduates when some school districts in our area haven't produced one in 17 years? Why have we produced three Penn State Schreyer Scholars among our first 7 graduates? It is because they made the choice to come to Grace Prep and that has created a community and environment of students working together and being served in a system that conforms to them if possible rather than making them conform to a system.

In my mind, this is an ethical issue.

Will you give students who are poor, disadvantaged and poorly served by the system the same choice that your own children have? I believe the answer to that question should be obvious. SB1 has the opportunity to provide public schools support and clarity for their mission rather than bring them harm.

What we are doing currently is not as effective as any of us would like and I am certain that SB1 is a creative solution that will help us take great steps towards serving parents and allowing children to achieve the fullest access to their potential.

Finally, please allow me to tell you a student which makes us proud. We had a student named Renee who came to us in our first year. She had lupus, was into the occult, and was a serious drug user. She lived with an aunt because her mother and father were drug users and could care less about Renee. We took Renee in because she had no other option. The fact is with this history, she was expelled from the public school.

A large part of our mission is to rescue these kids--kids that are "circling the drain" and have no other chance. Frankly, Renee was a pain in the neck at first. For months we tried to reach into her heart. Slowly, we gained access. She started doing well in her classes (and when I mean well, I mean passing them which is something she hadn't done before.)

She started to respond and make friends with both teachers and students. One day I got a call from the church office, which was around the corner from the school. They called and said one of our students was smoking on the corner and I knew immediately it was Renee. So I asked the question most obvious to me...What was she smoking?!

I was relieved to find out it was only cigarettes. And in an ironic way and somewhat pitiful way, that showed us a great deal of progress. We were happy for every little step.

Renee went to Zambia with us that year as we built a piggery and provided AIDs education to 5000 students in the public schools there. Renee taught students along with all of us there and it changed her life.

Was it the public school's fault that Renee wasn't successful before she got to us? I don't think so. But I know that Renee is thankful today that she had a choice. And I know that she is certain that it saved her life.

There are a lot of Renees out there. You know them and I know them. They have no money or influence. Renee was lucky to have even one advocate. But choice changed her life and will change the lives of millions of kids in the next generation because of your courage to lead.

Thank you.