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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY HOUSE DEMOCRATIC POLICY COMMITTEE - March 23, 2011

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

I was privileged to be among the founders of our school in 1975. Except for two years of leave, where I served as a technology consultant and technology instructor at Clarion University, I have spent the past thirty-six years in private education.

I respect your efforts to gather testimony regarding the impact of SB1 on education in Pennsylvania. What I share on behalf of our school, I know to be representative of the vast majority of Christian schools in our region.

Christian Life Academy has always taken the education of children very seriously – as a sacred responsibility. All of our instructors are certified teachers, but they possess far more than academic qualifications and legal clearances. We believe that *teachers teach a little by what they say, more by what they do, but most by what they are*. Therefore we labor and we pray to always place before children, teachers who possess a proven quality of character, teachers who themselves are genuinely successful people, men and women who have demonstrated a measurable commitment to children, to their families and to our community. Our teachers are the heart and the soul of our schools. They are the most remarkable people I have ever known.

Christian Life Academy reaches students in seven school districts in Northwest Pennsylvania. We accept students without regard to race, gender, economic status, or ethnic origin. More than half of all new admissions are students facing academic or social needs. Most of these difficulties stem from broken homes compounded by economic hardships. These children are why we have a school. Most children are at our door because they simply need more. They need more personal attention, more structure in their education, they need a peaceful, well-ordered classroom – they simply need to be loved. Our parents want the values of their faith to be fully integrated into the life of the school.

Sophia came to us as a first grader with a long history of seizures. She was profoundly unprepared for our first grade program. We kept Sophia with her class, but we assembled a team to provide her with learning support. As I write this our kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Q., is taking Sophia through a Learning Recovery program. Mrs. Q. is certified early childhood, has her masters in literacy, and is a certified trainer in two reading recovery programs. Sophia also spends time most days with a reading and math specialist provided by our regional Intermediate Unit. Sophia's IEP will involve work throughout the summer, but by next fall we

think she may be a competent second grade girl. Our team meets with the family periodically, and our faculty prays for Sophia often.

This is Christian Life Academy. If Sophia remains with us she will almost certainly be scoring above average in our annual Stanford Achievement testing. Our students average almost two years above the national norms. I know that Sophia will graduate because 100% of our students graduate. Will she attend college? Most likely she will, because 78% of our graduates go on to higher education – many to prestigious schools. In the past several years we have frequently been the only school in our area producing a National Merit Scholarship Finalist. Someday it could be Sophia.

Christian Life Academy resides in a beautiful facility. It once housed a public school but was vacated due to consolidation. We presently have more than eighty empty seats. In spite of an excellent athletic program, fabulous science fairs, speech meets, spelling bees, and much more, our enrollment has been declining. Even our modest tuition is unrealistic for most families in our area.

We are having this conversation because our children's education in this state is in grave trouble. No one who has observed our faltering educational system for any length of time believes that more money, more policies or more bureaucracy can possibly turn the tide. I believe that it is time to trust the competence of parents. SB1 claims that the Opportunity Scholarships and increased EITC funding *"will foster development of a more capable and better-education work force and will better enable the Commonwealth to fulfill its obligation of providing children with the opportunity to receive quality education."*

I agree without reservation. If I have learned anything in thirty-four years and thousands of family meetings, it is that parents know their children best and that the far reaching majority act wisely and sacrificially to provide the finest, most appropriate education they can afford. There is an army of capable leadership across our state that – if funded- will produce a quality of school that we may have never before seen. The freeing of individual enterprise and individual initiative is what distinguishes our liberties from the rest of the world. We are ready for the challenge. Thank you.