

Testimony Provided to the PA House of Representatives Public Policy Committee
April 20, 2011
By Rev. James C. Petty, Jr. B.S., M.Div., D.Min.

Four Reasons to Vote Yes on Senate Bill #1

I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about Senate Bill #1.

Reason #1: Faith based schools generally work educationally for under-resourced urban students:

I am the Executive Director of the Children's Jubilee Fund. Since 1997 we have worked to open the doors for low-income families in Philadelphia, Camden, Chester and Norristown to quality Christian schooling. We currently have 280 children on scholarship at 23 schools that serve the urban community.

As a young pastor straight out of seminary, I was involved in planting three urban churches in Philadelphia during the 70's. The churches grew and the 60+ weddings I performed translated into an abundance of children. In 1977 a parents committee investigated the Lea School in West Philadelphia for our children to attend but found it to be a place where learning was not paramount because the school struggled to cope with the dysfunction, and conflict in the school climate. We saw that Lea and similar neighborhood schools were not the nurturing place our children from South Philly, Southwest and West Phila needed. Not wanting our children to just survive but thrive, in 1978 we began a K-8 school at 42nd and Baltimore Ave and signed up 35 students from the churches. We were mobbed with scores of parents from the neighborhoods asking if their children could attend. Within a few years we had maxed out our space at 180 children. While the school was predominately low-income and minority, 90% the children either went on to Christian high schools or jumped into Philadelphia's Magnet school system and from there to college. My daughter went to Girls High and then to UD.

Spruce Hill Christian continued to improve educationally; in 1988 it was accredited by Middle States with 75% of our West Philly kids now proficient. Unfortunately Lea School continued its decline with only 48% of its student's proficient. Significant numbers of former Lea students were now at Spruce Hill because of \$500,000 in annual scholarships available through Spruce Hill. These families that came from the Lea attendance area yet we have seen very different outcomes for our graduates.

So why do faith based schools seem to work so well for low income children?

The difference is not attributable to better trained teachers, better curriculum, better facilities, less administration, or lack of a union, etc... Low tier public schools, like Lea don't work well because of a destructive school climate. They have a climate of conflict, distraction from educational process, and fear on the part of students. Schools like Spruce Hill do work well because there is a climate, not so much of order or even non-violence, but of positive peace, nurture and family. There is a robust set of lived values (love one another, even your enemies) to help students learn to love, care for and help one another – as that is promoted by Christ, modeled by the teacher and taught in school.

I believe that faith-based schools are positioned to be a place of rest, nurture, and family, that ignites learning when competent pedagogy is added. Somehow this school climate makes a huge difference for

the children coming from the lowest economic ladder rung, dealing with many of the curses of poverty, family dissolution, etc... These children thrive personally, socially, and emotionally in our schools and that opens up a door to learning. Some schools do a better job than others, but education becomes truly possible in this climate.

This climate issue is not as critical for children of middle income homes: Middle class kids do almost as well in public school as they do in private schools. There is not a lot of difference between the outcomes where there are middle class elementary schools with magnet schools or special admission tracks for high schools. Public schools should continue to do this well for our communities.

The real difference is with low income families – which is the purpose of Senate Bill #1.

Reason #2: We could serve up to 50% of the low income children in our urban areas.

Most of our 100 protestant day schools in SE PA could dramatically extend our service to under-resourced urban students, if we had the support of even the state portion of educational funding. Our average cost of education is about \$8,000 and average tuition is about \$6,000. I estimate we could serve 3,000 in year one; 6,000 in year two, 10,000 in year three; and 20,000-25,000 in year 10. That would mean our school size would grow from 100 to 250. Together with the Jewish, Catholic, Lutheran and Quaker schools, I think we could meet the need for the 50% of the low-income parents who would like that kind of option for their children – based on the response to the Children’s Scholarship Fund advertising in 1999. In Philadelphia, for instance, I estimate that number to be 40,000 to 50,000 of the 100,000 low income students currently in general admission public schools. That is within the capacity of our 150 schools—assuming we could lease unused public school space.

Unfortunately, there are children we do not have the facilities to help. Some, based on their personal convictions, do not want faith-based schools or lack confidence in the perceived academics because so many poor children are enrolled. Some arrive on our doorstep in 9th grade with a third grade reading level. Or, they have severe learning or other disabilities. Or they have been adjudicated and need special schools. Perhaps 10% of parents are so absent, incarcerated, addicted or otherwise overwhelmed that they cannot find the resources to even apply. We would love to start schools to assist these children, but, as of yet, we do not have the resources to help more than a few. We do hope that our public schools can find ways to reach them more effectively.

Reason #3: Senate Bill One will Help the Public Schools minister to the most needy:

We expect in 10 years when 40,000 Opportunity Scholarships are flowing, it will save \$9,000 per child or \$320,000,000 in Philadelphia alone. These funds will be retained by the school district from local taxes and can be put to use to reduce taxes or increase services to the remaining children. In addition, EITC could save state and local systems up to \$500,000,000 annually. Again, this will enable public schools to reduce class size and have more supports for the kids that they only have the financial resources to help.

Reason #4: It will be a strong force in renewal of our urban communities.

When it becomes clear that there are good educational options for folks who make less than \$70,000 per year, we will see a steady re-entry of families back into Chester and Philadelphia. Where else can you get a home for \$50,000, have taxes under \$2000 and heating bill less than \$1000 for the year? But without good schools, we will continue to lose those who can escape. When they escape to Charter schools, they take all their funds with them. But under SB 1, if they use an opportunity scholarship they leave half of the funds to help the neediest kids. If they use an EITC scholarship, they will be leaving virtually all of their funds behind to help those who need it the most. As a result, I believe per pupil funding will rise to over \$22,000 in the next three years. In the longer term, we will see a renewal of our urban communities as they once again become viable places to rear children, and as employable young adults become available to the work force, and as the beneficent cycle of new life in old communities catches hold for good. Tax revenues will go up and that will help even more children in their educational progress.

For all these reasons I (and the 1500 low income families I represent) urge you to vote “yes” on Senate Bill 1.

Thank you.

James C Petty, Jr.
Executive Director
Children’s Jubilee Fund
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Biographical Information

James C. Petty, Jr.



PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY

2004 – present: Executive Director, Children’s Jubilee Fund
1982-2004: Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation, Glenside, PA. Staff counselor and the Director of Development.
1970 -1982: Pastor, Church of the Redeemer (Presbyterian Church in America), Philadelphia, PA.
1968 – 1970: Church Planter, Church of the Redeemer (PCA), Philadelphia, PA

EDUCATION

Institute for Christian Conciliation, Peacemaker Ministries. Certificate in Christian Conciliation 1998 and member of National Panel of Mentors (1998-present)
Westminster Theological Seminary ('97) Philadelphia, PA. D.Min., Counseling
Westminster Theological Seminary ('70) Philadelphia, PA. M.Div., Pastoral Ministry
Wheaton College ('66), Wheaton, IL. B.S., Physics

VOLUNTEER MINISTRY

Urban Student Scholarship Assistance Fund (A public charitable foundation), Founding Board Chairman (1994-2004)
Children’s Jubilee Fund (formerly USSA Fund) Executive Director (September 04 to present). Currently paid for three days a week but work full time for Jubilee.
Spruce Hill Christian School, Philadelphia, PA., Founder and Board Chairman (1978-1993)
Center for Urban Theological Studies, Philadelphia, PA., Board member (1978-1993, 2005-present) and chair of Development Committee

PERSONAL AND FAMILY

Birth date: November 14, 1944
Married: Marsha H. Petty, BA, MA, Adjunct Professor of Religion and Philosophy, Arcadia University
Children: Laura (34), Jim (32), Steve, (29)
Hobbies: Astronomy, Boatbuilding, Fishing.

AFFILIATIONS

Ministerial Member: Presbytery of Philadelphia, Presbyterian Church in America. Ordained 1971.
Certified Christian Conciliator, Institute for Christian Conciliation, Peacemaker Ministries
Mentor (inactive), Institute for Christian Conciliation, Peacemaker Ministries
Member: Center for Public Justice, Washington, D.C.
Member: American Association of Christian Counselors

Anecdotal Documentation: School Climate is Key to Student attitude.

Quotes from nine students (out of 18 thank you letters to donors).

I'm in 1st Grade. I like my school because everyone is nice to me.

- *(9th grader) I love coming to school and on most days I don't want to go home. I am learning plenty and growing in Christ.*
- *I am in 7th grade. I like my school because it is a nice environment and the people are kind.*
- *I enjoy coming to school not only for the great educational benefits but for the friends and teachers I can talk and connect to. The alternatives to PMCA are schools that are undesirable and for the most part, unsafe.*
- *I like my school so much because of the nice teachers and students... I also like my school because they teach you about God and the right way to live...*
- *I am in the 7th grade. I like my school because its not a big school when you can't get attention that I need to exceed. It's like a big happy family.*
- *I like my school because I learn good things...the best thing I learned is caring about others.*
- *I am in 9th grade. I like my school because the other kids are nice to me and I am safe*
- *One first grader said "I like my school because it is like being homeschooled"*

Comments on the Accountability of Private Tax Exempt Schools

Some have fears that money would be given to schools without accountability. That is a legitimate fear if you are dealing with for profit schools. Our schools are more accountable in more ways than any individual public school. Let me illustrate:

- Most of our schools have a truly independent board with full legal authority to hire and fire the head of school, set financial and educational policy, and govern the school for its educational mission. This is a requirement of the IRS and is being strictly enforced. Church owned schools do not have as much IRS oversight, but that is changing and could be built into required reporting for schools lacking their own tax exempt status.

- This kind of board is much closer to the school than anything comparable in the public schools. In fact, there are usually very involved parents from the school on the board itself, as well as school alumni. They know what is happening in their school in a direct and more intimate way and provide more direct accountability for the education. Hell has no fury to match that of a parent on the board of a school where his or her child attends.
- Among the 23 particular schools we fund, each of our schools test the children each year and uses that information to evaluate how the individual student is doing and that info is shared with the parents. The combined scores are also available to any prospective parents that inquire at the school. This is done at all our schools and is done with board directive. I think that if SB 1 is implemented, that you will find that while some forms of public accounting may be needed that there is a higher functional accountability for each individual school than in the public sphere.
- This of course, is in addition to the fact that our schools are accountable to each parent who must be won to the idea of sending their child and paying tuition and always have the freedom to pull their child out and attend a different school. It is hard to over-emphasize the power of this in the actual functioning of the schools administration and board.