



**House Democratic Policy Committee Written Testimony  
Submitted by Philip G. Puleo, Head of School, Harrisburg Christian School  
On Thursday, April 7, 2011 -- Room 418 Main Capitol Building**

Chairmen Sturla and Members of the Democratic Policy Committee, I am thankful for the opportunity to voice support for a parent's right to choose their child's education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

My name is Phil Puleo and I serve as the Head of School of Harrisburg Christian School, a regionally accredited K-12 academic community that has served children in four counties for over half a century. Our mission is to help students explore their God-given talents, excel in both learning and in life, and to engage and make a difference in their community and in their world.

It's those students that motivate me to encourage you to support legislation that allows parents to fulfill their fundamental responsibility and their God-given mandate to educate their children. Let me tell you about one of those students. For the sake of her privacy I will call her Nora. Nora and her family are native Egyptians who hold to the Christian faith. As Coptic Christians, Nora's family came to the United States in 2004 in search of religious freedom and economic hope. Unfortunately, as Arab children in America following 9-11, Nora and her brothers experienced some unfortunate harassing and harmful incidences in the public school in which they enrolled. Let me note here that I mention these incidences so that you understand Nora's experience not to disparage my educational colleagues and friends who serve in the public school system. I admire their efforts, unprecedented in the world, to fully educate every American child regardless of economic status, racial background, and academic capability.

As a result of Nora's experience, her family sought out help from the Center for Champions, a community organization on South 13<sup>th</sup> Street that seeks to assist at-risk families in economically depressed sections of Harrisburg and Steelton. In turn, the Center for Champions sought out help from Harrisburg Christian School.

In 2005, Nora enrolled in HCS in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade. At the time of her enrollment at HCS, Nora was three grade levels behind and scoring in the 2<sup>nd</sup> percentile in reading. Today, as an 11<sup>th</sup> grader, Nora is reading at grade level and has plans to dually enroll at both Harrisburg Christian School and Harrisburg Area Community College next year.

I tell you about Nora's life changing experience at Harrisburg Christian School not because HCS, or any other private or public school, is a panacea for all that disappoints us about education or eases our anxiety about the ever changing world that our children will live in. Rather I tell you

about Nora because it represents how when given a choice a community of parents, students, educators, legislators, and civic leaders can provide a child hope and opportunity for success. Let me for a moment tell you about the quality, accountability, diversity, and community of private schools like Harrisburg Christian School.

Nora is receiving a quality education at Harrisburg Christian School. HCS offers 10 Advanced Placement courses and opportunities for on-line learning and dual college enrollment. We have had the privilege of educating 18 National Merit Finalists and Commended Scholars in the past 18 years and 10 AP Scholars in the past 6 years. Our choir has sung at Walt Disney World and at the Annual Fraternal Order of Police Memorial Service. Our athletic teams regularly compete for Conference championships and in the District Playoffs.

How do I know that Nora is receiving a quality education at Harrisburg Christian School? First, I know that because students at Harrisburg Christian School are regularly tested using nationally recognized normative assessments. In Grades K, 3, 5, 8 students take the full battery of the Stanford 10 Achievement Test while in High School students take the ACT Plan test, the PSAT, ACT, SAT, SAT Subject Tests, and AP Exams. Secondly, we know that HCS offers a quality education because parents and regionally accrediting organizations such as Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and the Association of Christian Schools International not only confirm the quality of education but serve as a mechanism for accountability to ensure the quality of education. While John has spoken to this issue from an accrediting agency perspective, allow me to focus on the accountability provided by parents. And if you don't think parents hold me and my teachers accountable for the education we offer, you have never sat in my chair or taught in one of my classrooms. As a legislator, your constituents assess your work and hold you accountable every other year at the voting booth. I wish I was so fortunate. Parents, as customers who are electing to purchase the product of education from an educational organization, can hold HCS accountable every time they come in to voice a concern or each month when they choose to pay their tuition. My reality is this . . . at any time they choose, a parent can walk into my office, withdraw their child, and save the amount of money they pay monthly on tuition. Unlike my public school counterparts, I do not get to keep their tuition when they decide to educate their child somewhere else. Furthermore, if a parent wants to hold a public school accountable they can do so only at the expense of thousands of dollars for an alternate educational option.

Some would say, OK, Phil, I get that that HCS offers a quality educational experience and is held accountable by parents and regional accrediting agencies, but isn't it true that schools like yours succeed because it is able to choose the very best students to enroll? Unfortunately that is a misrepresentation of our school's mission and the devaluing of the efforts of teachers that personally sacrifice to offer a quality education to students. At HCS, it is true that we enroll families who hold to the Christian faith. Other than that, we have a wide range of students from the National Merit Finalists to the ones like Nora that struggle academically . . . HCS has students across the social-economic spectrum from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

While issues of quality, accountability, and diversity are important, if you take anything from Nora's experience take this . . . education is a community effort. It always has been and it needs to be seen as that once again. For Nora it began with loving parents who wanted to

choose the best educational environment for their child . . . it included teachers who created individualized lessons and spent many extra hours over the years in educational support . . . it took a civic group, the Center for Champions, which provided support to the family and extra tutoring for Nora . . . It took public school support through special services using the I.U. and government and school support through scholarship money provided by generous businesses through the Educational Improvement Tax Credit and additional scholarship monies from generous donors and caring contributors. Nora's success is a tragedy if anyone of those groups failed to play its role or if anyone of those groups overstepped its responsibility and attempted to perform the responsibility of the other. In 1986, Hillary Clinton spoke to the Democratic National Convention in what has become known as the "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child" speech where she said that all components of a society -- families, schools, government and business -- were important in raising a child. She spoke about a "network of relationships and values that connect us and bind us together."

"A network of relationships that connect us" . . . She was talking about Nora. The partnership of parents and schools, government and business, civic organizations and houses of worship. For one purpose . . . the successful education of a child.

The reality is when the lights of this hearing room are dimmed and we all go back to our offices, we all want the same thing. We want our children to have the very best education possible and we want to do everything we can to assure their success. I've got bad news for all of us, educators and legislators alike. That is ultimately outside of our control. The reality is that neither the school house or the State House can parent a child. Neither of us have control over a culture that teaches kids that bouncing a ball or singing on American Idol is the best path toward success and happiness.

Hilary Clinton said that it is the "role of government to support families as they cope with the moral, social and economic stresses of caring for children." I ask this of your caucus. Support families. Give them a realistic opportunity to choose the education best for their child. As educators and legislators we have the best intentions when we write curriculum and create laws and it is right that we do so. But in the end, our job is to provide parents with the best opportunity to educate their children. We must give them the opportunity to fulfill this responsibility by providing them the practical means to choose their child's education. Let parents choose . . . they love their child more. Let parents choose . . . they know their child best. Let parents choose . . . they hope for their child more. Vouchers are not a panacea for what worries us the most. It is simply another tool in the educational tool box. A tool box that contains schools both public and private, cyber and traditional, college-preparatory and vocational. Schools of different missions, of different faiths and beliefs, of varying appeals. A tool box that includes government and private business, civic organizations and houses of worship. Together we can provide children with a variety of avenues for children to reach their God-given potential. Supporting school vouchers will provide parents, like those of Nora, throughout the Commonwealth to best meet the educational needs of their children.