

My name is Christine Ross, and I am from Canonsburg, PA. I am married, and I have three children, ages 13, 11, and 6. Our oldest daughter, Emily, was born 3 months prematurely, and she was very sick for several months after her birth. In her preschool years, she was a very quiet and timid child. Because of this, we looked for a school where the teachers would be able to give her more individual attention. We were very concerned that she would fall through the cracks in a large public school.

We asked around and soon found Central Christian Academy. It was only ten minutes from our home, and it was a Christian school. We were thrilled to find a smaller school that would both support and strengthen the Christian foundation that we were trying to provide at home. I was not brought up in a Christian family. My husband and I only began going to church after we were married, so we felt somewhat inadequate to be our children's only spiritual leaders and teachers. What a delight to find a school that could help us with this important job! Our journey at Central Christian began in 2001, and we have enjoyed every year since then.

Our oldest daughter's transformation from preschool to 8th grade has been amazing. This once timid child is now a confident, well adjusted teenager who plays volleyball and basketball, performs in plays and talent shows, and actually enjoys standing up in front of the class to do oral presentations or lead worship in weekly chapel services. I give so much credit to the teachers (who could get paid much more in a public school) who have sacrificed financially to teach in a small Christian school. Over the years, they have each taken the time to teach, nurture, counsel, pray for, and lead each of our three children. As a result, our children have a solid foundation in their Christian beliefs. I fully expect them to take what they have learned throughout these school years with them into their adulthood. They have been taught to be world changers.

In addition to providing a solid moral foundation, their Christian school experience has prepared them academically for high school and beyond. Our kids have consistently tested above grade level, and they are continually challenged in all academic areas. They have also had full access to sports, band, and the performing arts. My husband is employed as an after-school math tutor, and he has been quite impressed by the curriculum and the academic progress of the students from Central Christian Academy. Many graduates have testified that they were more than prepared for the challenges of high school after their years at Central Christian.

When we considered private education 10 years ago, we knew that there was going to be a long-term cost involved. Even though I have a PhD degree in Life-Span Developmental Psychology, I made the decision to stay home and raise my kids rather than having a full time paid career. Each year, we have had to carefully decide whether we could pay tuition with only one income. I am so thankful that I made the choice to stay home, and I would do it all again. However, it certainly has not been an easy road financially.

After his job at US Steel was downsized, my husband, Steve, opened a small math tutoring business in 2004. Anyone who has operated a small business can tell you that it takes years to build up, and you often don't get the financial payback for the many hours you invest. Even though we are extremely conservative with our money, we have had to rely on family, credit cards, and scholarships to keep from pulling our kids out of their school. It seems like we are always on the brink of a car breaking down or a major house or appliance repair that will drive us further into debt. We have gotten help from EITC scholarships throughout the years, which has somewhat lessened the load of tuition. Frankly, without scholarships, we absolutely could not afford to send our children to private school. In fact, we are anxiously awaiting the letter from Penn Gift about our scholarship for this school year. It is a necessity for our family.

I feel that I speak for so many other parents who agonize each year over the decision to make this same financial sacrifice. There are so many things competing for our money, and tuition is the major reason why so many opt not to choose private, Christian education. The reality of private schools is that tuition only covers a fraction of the cost of educating the children. Parents are still paying technology fees, book fees, sports fees, field trip costs, yearbook fees, and the list goes on. I have heard many parents say, "we just can't afford it," or, "why should we pay tuition when we already pay so much for school taxes." After the economic downturn over the last few years, our school's enrollment has dropped considerably for that reason. It breaks my heart because I know how much our entire family (immediate and extended) has been impacted by our small Christian school.

Being able to choose where to send our children to school would be a tremendous help to middle class families like us. It would take the financial pressure off significantly and open up school options that might better suit families with various educational needs. In our case, since we have already spent so much on elementary and middle school education, we have no idea how we are going to afford college for our three kids. If families were able to choose in these early years, they would certainly have more ability to send their kids to college without

getting as far into debt. I feel strongly that middle income families should have more access to private education for their children. I know that our lives have been forever changed by our experience at Central Christian Academy. School choice would help ensure that the legacy of our school and other private schools would continue to the next generation of students. Thank you for this opportunity to share our story.