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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.

My name is Sam Siple, and I serve as the president of Eden Christian Academy. I also am the founding coordinator of PittsburghChristianSchools.net, a consortium of 24 faith-based schools in the area, and I am an appointed district representative to the Northeast Region of the Association of Christian Schools International, an accrediting and membership organization for over 5900 schools worldwide.

Eden is the largest private Christian school in western Pennsylvania and the second largest in the state. Our school, which was founded in 1983 with just 35 students, today has grown to an enrollment of 620 students from 3-year-old Prekindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This growth, especially in the past four years (in spite of the recession) is indicative of not only the mounting desire of parents seeking educational alternatives for their children, but also the quality of the educational programming we provide.

Eden Christian Academy primarily serves the North Hills area of Greater Pittsburgh across three campuses: an elementary campus in Ross Township and one in Wexford, and an upper school campus for grades 7-12 in Ohio Township. Our students, however, come from 26 local public school districts. Eden is a school established to partner with Christian parents seeking an educational experience that supports their families' values, although we are independent of any particular church or denomination. As a matter of fact, our families represent a diversity of over 100 local congregations.

The diversity at our school is also socio-economic. We have a healthy mix of students coming from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, whose parents range from CEOs and professional athletes, to retail workers and ministers. It is those, however, (as Scripture would put it: "the least of these") who can least afford to send their children to a school such as Eden and who will benefit the most from a voucher program in our Commonwealth.

It is not a stretch to see the correlation between low-income families and under-performing public schools. However, we encounter regularly families who feel trapped—trapped with no other opportunities for their children's education, forced to stay in a failing school because of where they live and because they cannot even imagine how they could afford to send their child to a school where he or she can thrive. Providing opportunities and choice through a voucher that follows the student is their only hope.

At Eden Christian Academy, we are committed to doing the best we can to meet the financial needs of families who desire the educational experience that we provide for our students. We award over \$300,000 annually in aid and other discounts based on the economic circumstances of enrolled families, thanks to charitable donors and particularly businesses supporting our scholarships through the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program.

Yet, there are countless families for whom even the most generous financial aid package still does not allow enrollment to be affordable for their child. These are the families who have researched our school to make sure their child would receive a solid education; these are the families who have toured the campus, sat-in on classes, met with the teachers and whose child has shadowed with current Eden students to see that we can meet their scholastic needs; and yet, after being accepted for admission and filling out all the financial aid applications, such an educational opportunity is still out of reach. And these are the people we know of. We will never know of those who simply look at our tuition rates on the website and go no further because they cannot fathom how they would ever pay for such an opportunity without a school-choice voucher.

After the end of each school year we field exit surveys to our parents whose students have not re-enrolled for the following year, seeking to understand what issues may have contribute to their child not returning. We ask about the quality of the education, satisfaction with our teachers, curriculum, classroom resources, and any number of controllable factors regarding the academic delivery and nurturing nature of our school. Year after year after year, we get high marks on all of these indicators, but the leading reason families cite for not coming back is not a dissatisfaction with their experience, but it is affordability. As one mother wrote on her questionnaire: "It breaks our heart that our daughter won't be coming back to Eden. She has flourished academically and spiritually during her time there. We have sacrificed personal expenses and taken extra jobs to afford the tuition, but we just cannot do it any longer. Unfortunately, she will be going back to [our public school], where we can only hope she does as well, but I doubt it." Parent testimonials like this are fairly typical of any number of Christian schools in our state.

Please do not misinterpret my testimony. This is not about pitting private schools against public schools, and categorically posturing that one is always superior to the other. However, this is about empowering citizens of this Commonwealth who have a moral obligation (if not a legal right) to decide what the best educational approach is for their children, especially those children with limited opportunities who cannot afford any other choice because their tax dollars are being confiscated to the local public school — even if their children don't attend there.

Eden Christian Academy, like other Christian schools in Pennsylvania, is not a *refuge* for those fleeing from bad neighborhoods and bad schools; rather, we stand ready as a *resource* for families who desire an educational experience that is aligned with their faith and a desire for their kids to grow in knowledge and character. I remind our faculty and staff that because we are not a default for parents but they must choose to send their kids to our school, all the more we must provide an education that is of greater value and benefit — for why else would somebody decide to pay good money for the same education they can get at their local public school at no additional cost.

I am not a constitutional lawyer nor am I an elected official, so I will not even attempt to debate the propriety of the language in Senate Bill 1; however, as the chief executive officer of Eden Christian Academy, I can attest to some of the misconceptions and presumed fallacies about schools like ours, such as accountability, standards, and accessibility.

First, accessibility. I have heard it said that even if parents wanted to use a voucher to send their child to a non-public school, “there’s no room at the inn.” As of this date, our school has capacity for an additional 305 students and a waiting list of teachers who would love to come to work for us to teach these children. I know of no other Christian schools around that have every seat filled.

Second, accountability standards. As I stated earlier, *because* we are a non-public school (not in spite of it) where parents make a conscious and sacrificial choice to enroll their children, all the more that we must meet and exceed the educational standards of the state. Moreover, Eden Christian Academy is dually accredited, not just by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools (accrediting the broadest spectrum of educational institutions in our region that the highest standards), but we are also accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International (requiring we meet the academic as well as the spiritual, social, and emotional needs of our students for a well-rounded education).

Eden insists that every teacher must hold a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, in addition to our faculty being state certified and maintaining the ongoing professional development required through Act 48 and ACSI. Nearly 30 percent of our teachers have also earned their master’s degrees in education. Our campus principals have also met the standards of being certified for their positions.

Perhaps the greatest metric of ensuring a quality education is in student outcomes. Through regular and standardized testing and evaluation, we can see that our students are performing exceptionally well from year to year. From Grades 1 through 9, student learning is measured with the Stanford 10 Achievement Test, and every year Eden students score in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile range for total reading and math.

Likewise, our high schoolers are performing exceedingly well. The acceptance rate of our graduating seniors is 100 percent for those who pursue higher education. From large public universities to prestigious private colleges, Eden graduates are thriving. And through surveying of our alumni, they regularly attest to how well prepared they are for the rigors of higher education thanks to their Eden experience. On the SATs, Eden students outpace the national and state averages. In a 2007 analysis by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* of the SAT scores throughout western PA, Eden’s composite score ranked third highest from among the 170 schools in Allegheny and contiguous counties; that’s not just of Christian or private schools, but also the much larger and more well funded public schools.

I know it has been argued that private schools like Eden are able to show higher scores because we are highly selective, not accepting of students with special needs. While it is true we cannot accommodate the most severe disabilities because of limited funding, Eden is able to meet the needs of many students requiring remedial and therapeutic services with our Discovery Program, through which our specially trained teachers are certified by the National Institute for Learning Disabilities.

In summary, may my testimony be representative of the commitment of schools like Eden to maintaining the highest levels of academic standards, ensuring our students are educationally prepared for the challenges of today's world. As part of the Christian school community, we too are prepared to expand our partnership with parents and citizens of Pennsylvania who desire to choose an educational resource that best meets their children's needs. The only thing preventing them from attaining this opportunity is the ability to have their tax dollars support their children's education at the school of their choice. Through legislation that permits school vouchers to be used for such purposes, you can make this a reality for students who otherwise would have no hope.

Thank you for your time and consideration.