

House Democratic Policy Committee Testimony

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the important matter of education in our Pennsylvania schools. In order to give my comments some context, it will be helpful for you to have a little background on my journey in education. I began teaching in the public schools of Michigan. During my years there I was elected to the Michigan Education Association as a representative from my district. My next experience brought me to Miami where I served for 15 years as a school head in a parent owned Christian school. While there I helped form the Florida Association of Academic Non-Public Schools (FAANS) which is still a positive force for excellence in education in Florida. For the past 31 years I have been a senior administrator at a parent owned Christian school in Newtown Square, PA. While in that role, I have served on the board of a church owned Christian school in the Hunting Park region of Philadelphia for the past 11 years. I have been a commissioner on the secondary commission of Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and a board member with the Association of Christian Schools International. Since much of my work with these two Associations has been with accreditation, I have had the opportunity to observe schools in the middle states region and in many other countries.

This brief background is intended to show that I have worked with both public and non-public schools and personnel all my life and from that perspective I have become totally convinced that the quality of education that children receive each day is of utmost importance. To ignore its significance is to be tragically shortsighted and to be laying the foundation for a host of societal ills.

Permit me to make four observations from my experience.

1. I have observed that there are many reasons that schools fail and they are not all found in the schools themselves. But one that I have found to be in some schools is a culture of low expectations. When teachers and administrators become accustomed to and comfortable with low achievement, the results are regrettable. My experience with an urban school called Hunting Park Christian Academy has shown this to be true. The school enrolls students who come from the local public schools. There is a 53.4 drop out rate in that community. 6.5% of the 8th graders in are designated as proficient in math and 18.6% in reading. HPCA's student body is 57% Hispanic and 36% African American. 80% of our children meet the poverty guideline. Yet when these students enter our school and have a quality teacher who not only begins the year with them but ends the year with them, they show progress greater than one year's school experience. Our teachers expect success.

But this phenomenon of low expectations is not only found in our urban schools. Low expectations are also hurting kids in the suburban schools. Our family has been very involved in foster care. One of our foster daughters, Anna, came to our home from a well-funded suburban public school in which she was enrolled in a cosmetology program with very little academic content. She has a brother and

sister who have always been in special educational programs. She was a part of the foster care system. But when she came to our home and began attending Delaware County Christian School, she began to succeed in her academic work. Teachers pushed her and demanded things from her. She graduated from high school. She graduated from college. She is currently the program director at Mel mark Home, a residential program for mentally challenged youth and adults. And she is working on her Master's degree. What is my point? The point is that parents deserve the right to make a change in the school of their child when they see that their child is failing to make progress. In my daughter Anna's case and in the children who come to Hunting Park Christian Academy, they have been well served because someone had the right and the ability to make a choice of school. The results have been obvious.

2. Educational choice places accountability precisely where it belongs: with the parents. If a school fails to provide an education that shows improvement to the parents, they have the right and should exercise that right to go to a school that will provide results. Each child only has one shot at a successful educational experience. No parent can waste that opportunity. At Hunting Park Christian Academy all students are tested each year with the Stanford Achievement Test. Many schools in the Philadelphia area belong to the Philadelphia Association of Christian Schools and all of these schools test the students each year and share the results of these tests with their parents. These schools would be out of business if parents were not able to see that their children were making progress and that their children were being prepared for a successful future.
3. One criticism of non-public schools is that they are not required to take any student that they do not want to take. This is true. But just because this is true does not mean that these schools are heartless or incapable of doing excellent things for many needy students. As headmaster of Delaware County Christian School, I can point to students who were released from drug rehab programs what we accepted and held them accountable with full cooperation of the parents. Students with learning disabilities have been admitted when they were floundering in other schools because we have a director of special services and ten therapists who work one on one with children who could not succeed without this help. Non public schools do not select only the best and the brightest students, but seek to endorse the inestimable value of every human life in the sight of God.
4. For my final point, let me comment on my own parents. They were both people of deep faith. For them, their faith dictated certain consequences. One of these consequences was their commitment to a Christian education. They were not rich. My parents did not own a home or a car. Yet they were able with the help of others to provide a Christian education for me and my sister. For them, a Christian education was never viewed as a matter of choice. Their view of life

was that all life was sacred and that no part of any day was to be restricted from the fact that God was the center of all truth and only people who knew the truth were qualified to teach their children about the world and the life of faith they intended me to live. They were not separatists from the rest of society, but believed that their children had a responsibility to live a life of service and blessing to the rest of the culture. I was being sent to a special kind of school so that I could render a special kind of service to all of life. As a result I have been involved in public education. I have spent my energies trying to battle poverty issues and educational injustice issues. I have been concerned that only parents with the necessary coins have the freedom to choose a school that best serves their child. This right should be the right of all parents. And for many parents who are deeply appreciative of public education, they should be the freedom to choose public schools. The richness of the tapestry of education in our country is enhanced by variety. Increased competition in education benefits all children. But for real variety to be available there needs to be a more level playing field than currently exists.

If we intend to break the poverty cycles of our cities and the children who are trapped in failing schools, we need to come alongside these children and their parents in permitting them to select a school that may more effectively contribute to a positive future them. I believe that Senate Bill #1 is a step in the right direction that will give a fresh sense of hope and empowerment to many deserving and desperate families.

Thank you for your patient and thoughtful attention to my reflections on these terribly important matters. I close with these words from a Hunting Park parent: since our daughter came to HPCA, I know that when she walks in those doors, she is in a place where she is safe and loved. I would want that for all our children.