



July 27, 2011

House Education Committee Chair
Hon. Paul L. Clymer
311 North 7th Street
Perkasie, PA 18944

House Education Democratic Chair
Hon. James R. Roebuck Jr.
4712 Baltimore Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19143

To: Representatives Paul Clymer & James Roebuck, Jr., House Education Committee Members and Attendees,

UNITEPA is grateful for this opportunity to share our testimony on School Choice in Pennsylvania. UNITEPA is a Constitutional and principled organization born of the grassroots movement in response to a corrupt, overreaching, non-transparent government. We are dedicated to upholding and preserving the principles and values set forth by America's founding documents and the ideals of our Founding Fathers. Our testimony is submitted on behalf of UNITEPA and the Grassroots Coalition for Real School Choice, representing thousands of informed Patriotic citizens across the Commonwealth.

UNITEPA and the Coalition have been deeply engaged in the school choice debate and public conversation for over six months. Our goal, at a **minimum** has always been to ensure that **every child in every failing school** be treated equitably, with the promise of a proper and quality education regardless of income, race or zip code. SB1, the original school choice bill failed to provide that promise, which is in part why we are here today. Our objective today is to share our ideas and our thoughts on achieving that goal and to provide insight into the expansion of School Choice beyond failing schools.

The State interprets Article III Section 14 of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as follows: "The General Assembly shall provide for a system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth" - When in fact it actually reads "The General Assembly shall **provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education** to serve the needs of the Commonwealth". This is very important in this debate because the state assumes and mandates that public education is the sole resource for educating our children.

Some may say that is not true. Unfortunately it is true. Most parents cannot afford to educate their children outside of the public school system because of their limited personal income, the number of children, property tax burden in upwards of \$10,000 per year in some counties, personal debt and so on. It is by design and by default that students in failing schools are unable to be rescued. It is not just the low-income families that are struggling either. If the middle-income families that live in a failing school district could afford to move or place their child in a private school, they would have done so already.

The state has failed miserably in its responsibility to provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education all the while protecting the unions and placing our **children's' needs last**.

Although reform is being prompted by failing schools, it should be about **choice** and giving parents the ability to choose what is best for their child. We fully understand the **dynamics** of a failing school which results in a failing student. However, the state does not understand that the Constitution applies to every child and that it does not have the **power to mandate public education** or discriminate against any child based on race, income or zipcode.

The solution to this education crisis is not that complicated. Parents want "school choice". The opportunity to choose where their child goes to school based on their own personal needs. Our children need to be liberated from the bureaucracy that has held them hostage for way too long.

A vast majority of citizens do not want another entitlement program which would serve as a mechanism for big government, furthering the redistribution of wealth. They want "academic freedom" for their children. Our children are our future leaders of Pennsylvania. If they are not proficient in basic math and reading, everything that we have done to preserve this Commonwealth will be in vain.

We support and/or propose the following:

1. The expansion of the successful EITC Program as described HB1330. The EITC program saved the taxpayers over \$51 million dollars in 2007-2008, benefiting over 44,000 students. HB1330 passed the house overwhelmingly 190-7 therefore we encourage the Senate to follow suit. The EITC program is the most expansive and successful program in the country. It has paved the way for Real School Choice by providing evidence that academic freedom is possible when you give parents the power to choose.
2. Vouchers at a maximum of \$5,000 for **every student in every failing school** regardless of income. SB1 was extremely inequitable regarding the distribution of vouchers. The voucher amount was dependant upon your resident school's state contribution and your income, not your child's need. SB1 would have discriminated against almost 30,000 students. We support Representative Curt Schroder's bill "The Failing Schools Students Rescue Act" - HB 1678.
3. EITC funds should be made available to homeschooling students as described in Rep Curt Schroder's bills (HB 1678 & HB 1679): offsetting educational expenses, private school tuition and homeschooling expenses. There are approximately 22,000+ homeschoolers in PA, saving the state approximately 286 million per year based on the average cost to educate a child in PA. We are confident that the homeschooling community is open to educational scholarship monies via corporate donations provided through the EITC program. Again, not every child's needs are met in private school. Homeschooling is the most cost effective and efficient system in the state, yet it is continually overlooked as a viable option for parents who want to remove their child from public school.
4. Review the current EITC program under the Innovative Program and the Pre-School Program to determine effectiveness, efficiency and value. We understand that the Pre-School funding is more than adequate. There is more funding than there are students. These monies could be made available to homeschooling families or private cyber students.
5. Personal income tax credits for contributions to scholarship organizations. Individuals could contribute to the EITC program, not just corporations and businesses.
6. Educational Savings Accounts where the state would contribute funds in exchange for parents agreeing not to enroll their child in a public school. Parents would be free to use the account for a wide range of educational services, including alternative school choices and higher education. Furthermore, parents would be able to contribute to their account tax free and withdraw from the account without tax penalties.
7. Ensure that any language written in any bill protects the sovereignty of every private school. UNITEPA and the Coalition worked extremely hard to ensure that language was changed in SB1 to reflect those safeguards.

8. Lastly, we insist that our legislators work with the grassroots citizens in developing a roadmap for the future of education in this Commonwealth. It is crystal clear that this administration and many legislators have had absolutely no clarity on the issue of School Choice. We cannot afford to "wing it" like the Senate attempted to do with the blundered SB1 School Choice bill.

UNITEPA and the Grassroots Coalition wholeheartedly support 'real school choice' and are looking forward to seeing these discussions unfold, potentially creating a principled roadmap and fair solutions for this Commonwealth. Thank you again for this opportunity to share our ideas and our thoughts. We will continue to be engaged in this process to ensure transparency by continuing to shed light on the issues that matter most.

Respectfully Submitted,

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