



PA House of Representatives
Republican Policy Committee

414, Main Capitol Building
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Rep. Joshua D. Kail
Chairman

PA House Republican Policy Committee Hearing
“Education: A Lifeline to Opportunity”

September 12, 2023, at 2 p.m.

IUPAT District Council 21
2980 Southampton Rd.
Philadelphia, PA 19154

- 2:00 p.m. Welcome and Pledge of Allegiance
- From Our Schools Panel**
- 2:10 p.m. Andrew Brady
President, West Catholic Preparatory High School
- 2:15 p.m. Joy Converse
Former Public School Teacher
- 2:20 p.m. Jaslin Vasquez-Gonzalez
Student, St. Joseph’s University
- 2:25 p.m. Questions for the From Our Schools Panel
- From Our Homes Panel**
- 2:55 p.m. Kemah Brewington
Parent
- 3:00 p.m. Shannon Mitchell
Parent
- 3:05 p.m. Questions for the From Our Homes Panel
- 3:35 p.m. Closing Comments



Testifier Biographies

PA House of Representatives Policy Committee Hearing
"Education: A Lifeline to Opportunity"



Andrew Brady
President, West Catholic Preparatory High School

Andrew Brady is the President of West Catholic Preparatory High School after previously serving as the Interim President.

Mr. Brady served WCPHS first as a faculty member 2006-2010 and returned in January 2013 for two years as Director of Annual Giving. He then served as Development Director for Business Leadership Organized for Catholic Schools (BLOCS) before coming back to WCPHS in 2016 as the Vice President of Institutional Advancement.

He graduated from Cabrini College in 2006.

Joy Converse
Former Public School Teacher

Joy, a retired teacher, dedicated 26 years to the public school education system. She brought her expertise to schools in both Philadelphia and Delaware County, serving in diverse roles as both a classroom and specialist teacher.

Jaslin Vasquez-Gonzalez
Student, St. Joseph's University

A first-generation college student, Jaslin worked two jobs while attending Little Flower Catholic High School, participated in various clubs and sports and graduated with a 5.3 grade point average. Jaslin currently attends St. Joseph's University.

Kemah Brewington
Parent

Shannon Mitchell
Parent

Republican Policy Committee Testimony
Education: A Lifeline to Opportunity

My name is Andrew Brady, President of West Catholic Preparatory High School in West Philadelphia. West Catholic Prep has stood as a symbol of promise, hope, and stability for its students and families throughout its century-long history. Since its founding in 1916, it has been committed to serving the communities of West and Southwest Philadelphia. I would like to express my appreciation for allowing me to be a part of this hearing.

In our nation, in our state, and in our city, we have a massive education problem, and the lack of educational opportunities is only furthering inequality. First, I want to be clear I am not anti-public or anti-charter schools, nor am I anti-union. I think that too often this conversation devolves into picking a side – I am on the side of the children who urgently need access to a quality education. The remedy for our educational challenges is going to require a herculean effort from legislators, public, charter, and private schools, all united in the pursuit of improving the education of the young people we serve.

I understand the significance of programs like the PASS Scholarship program because they are designed to aid children like me. I grew up in Southwest Philadelphia and for much of my life lived in a single-parent household. My father worked tirelessly, holding two jobs to provide for our family. By day, he was a Glazier, a proud member of Local 252, and by night, he worked minimum wage at US air, loading bags. While we didn't have much, my father made remarkable sacrifices to send me to West Catholic for high school.

During my time at West Catholic as a student, I experienced firsthand the transformative power of surrounding a young person with motivated peers, as well as faculty and staff who could inspire and propel them academically. Despite being a mediocre student by most standards, and that may be generous, my teachers recognized something in me that I had not seen in myself. These teachers constantly pushed and challenged me to see the potential that was within me, and eventually, I began to realize that potential. My high school education altered the trajectory of my life, eventually leading me to choose a career in education. Today, I stand before you, embarking on my 16th year at West Catholic Prep.

It is a great honor to serve as President of West Catholic Prep, particularly because of the extraordinary families we primarily serve from West and Southwest Philadelphia. Our student body comprises 97% people of color, with a median family income just below \$40,000. At West Catholic Prep, we firmly believe that every young person deserves access to a high-quality education, irrespective of their zip code or socioeconomic status. Although our stated tuition is \$9,400, the generosity of our supporters allows us to award over \$2,000,000 in tuition assistance annually to our 450 students, with approximately \$1,000,000 coming from EITC/OSTC funding. However, affordability still remains a substantial challenge for families in our community. We have hard working parents who want nothing but the best for their child, and they know that at West Catholic their child will be safe, loved, and equipped with the education needed to prepare them for the next step in their lives. Because of that

they are willing to make significant financial sacrifice, but there are many families each year that are not able to enroll their child because they cannot afford to do so.

When the discussion around PASS scholarships gained momentum this summer, I felt a sense of hope—not because of what it could mean for schools like West Catholic Prep, but more so because it finally felt like we were willing to have conversations around things that really matter. Communities like West and Southwest Philadelphia are too often afterthoughts, especially in discussions about education. These families yearn for educational opportunities for their children. Yes, they want great public schools, but they also want great charter and private school options that their child could possibly attend.

The lack of educational opportunity for our children is an injustice, and we bear a moral and ethical responsibility to address it immediately. As we sit in this hearing today, there are students throughout the state sitting in schools where they do not feel safe, and are not able to be given the support, encouragement, and academic instruction they need to reach their potential. We have an opportunity to change this through the PASS scholarship program, and to delay that would be to betray our young people.

Thank you.

Lifeline Scholarships/PassProgram Testimony by Joy Converse

Good afternoon,

I'd like to thank Chairman Josh Kail, Representative Martina White and the members of the policy committee for this opportunity to testify.

My name is Joy Converse, a retired teacher. My career spans 36 years, 26 of those being in public school education. Those years were quite diverse, about half spent in the Philadelphia public school system, and the other half out on the main line in Delaware County.

I wore many hats during those years; that of per-diem sub, long-term sub, full and part time teacher in positions such as Prep or Specialist teacher, Kindergarten teacher, and then finally ESL teacher. However, most of my teaching experience has been in Kindergarten.

Based on my diverse public school teaching experience as well as what has continued to occur in public school education since my retiring, I am an advocate for School Choice and Lifeline Scholarships/Pass Program.

There are so many stories I could tell, but since time is short, will share some highlights. During my years in Philadelphia, I experienced overcrowded classrooms with a lack of support personnel and help, occasions of dangerous, isolated classroom situations, and often, a great lack of teaching supplies, resulting in \$200 to \$300 of my own money spent yearly.

These situations resulted in great stress, eventually affecting both my health and well-being. Fear was often also experienced for both the students' safety as well as mine. All of this eventually drove me to seek a teaching position in the suburbs.

As a teacher, I had the option of applying to other school districts, whereas the parents of my students did not have the luxury of moving for their children to attend a better, safer school.

Although my initial suburban public school experiences were positive ones with fewer children in the classroom, adequate support personnel and help as well as an abundance of classroom materials, my positive experiences began to change with **No Child Left Behind**. As a result, it was all about standards and testing, a one-size-fits-all policy. Schools became more like factories, turning out a product. Say goodbye to different aptitudes, abilities, talents, learning styles, and the multiple intelligences that exist in our students. They were being reduced to a number on a page - a test score.

In order to prepare them for future standardized testing, Kindergartners were now expected to start reading, which is developmentally inappropriate. Kindergarten became the new Grade One. Some five year olds may be ready to read, but most are not. One such student, not yet ready to read but seeing those who could, simply figured he was stupid and then shared this with his mom.

When she shared this with me, I was heartbroken and knew I couldn't do this anymore so decided to become ESL certified, thinking this emphasis on standardized testing wouldn't be

foisted upon students who are not proficient in English. But no, both immigrant and transient international students were expected to take the same English language standardized tests as their native English speaking peers.

It takes 5 to 7 years for academic language to develop. Until that occurs, students shouldn't be subjected to taking a test in a language in which they are not proficient. The score will only reflect the poor quality of their English, nothing more. But because these poor scores were assisting in pulling down the building score, meaning less money for the district, all I kept being asked was, "What are you going to do to raise the scores?" It was a losing battle. This teaching to the test was extremely stressful on both students and me, once again affecting my health and well-being. This eventually forced me into early retirement.

Since then, much has continued to occur in public school education affecting both inner-city and suburban schools, the Covid shut downs, as well as the teaching of ideas with which many parents, as well as myself, are not comfortable, and believe have no place in the classroom. And yet parents are told they have no say. The school knows best. So, unless parents can afford to send their child to the school of their choice, they're stuck.

Parents are the first educators of their children. As the first educators as well as tax payers, they deserve to be at the table for deciding their children's education. A home address should not be the deciding factor.

Although these are definitely important, there is more to education than reading, writing, math, and science. Memory is crucial, especially good, sacred memories which can influence the mindset and future decisions in the lives of our children. Good, sacred memories cannot be forged in failing schools.

I'd like to close with a quote by the character, Alyosha, from Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov*, which became my philosophy of teaching - to create a classroom environment, the foundation upon which good, sacred memories will flourish.

"You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us."

Lifeline Scholarships/Pass Program will enable parents to choose schools with classroom environments where good, sacred memories will flourish, and perhaps, "be the means of saving us."

Thank you.

The first time I ever saw my dad cry, he was being detained by what we thought was the police. The tears that fell with such intensity and the look of regret on his face, left me paralyzed.

In 7th grade, I had a traumatizing year that began with ICE taking my dad. They illegally pulled us over, questioned me, and threatened to take me despite my being a citizen. The next year of my life was filled with lawyers, statements, and prison visits. If this was not overwhelming enough, It was time to pick a high school. My mom was left with three kids and piles of bills that she had to pay all on her own despite my dad being the income earner. My mom made one thing clear to me. If I could not find a way to pay to go to Little Flower, I was going to have to go to the public school in front of my house which was notorious for fights and ongoing altercations. No matter how badly she wanted to help me, she couldn't. I was a scared 14 year old carrying the weight of having to find a way to not go to a school that consistently showed patterns of violence and disruption.

I knew that the fate of my high school career was in my hands and it was all because of money. The lack of money was going to decide my fate for the next four years. Money was in the way of giving me the education that every kid deserves. More than just that, every kid deserves to go to a school where they feel safe, protected, and encouraged. In Philadelphia, public schools are progressively showing signs of violence and unsafety. My very own friends who attend public school confirmed this fear with their ongoing stories of fights and misguidance. My very own cousin confirmed this fear when she got beat and stabbed at Olney High school, another nearby public school.

Luckily for me, a nun who used to work for Little Flower, made as many calls as she could to get me an additional scholarship so that I could afford to go to Little Flower. I am extremely grateful to Sr. Sheila for helping me and my family because I went on to show that to excel, I just needed someone to invest in my future. I went on to be the President of LAS FLORES, Vice-President of the Spanish Honor Society, Vice-President of Model UN, Treasurer of the Community Service Corps, and a member of the Tennis team, National Honor Society, Student Government, Black Student Union, Little Flower Ambassadors, and Athletes Helping Athletes. I did all this while maintaining a 5.3 GPA, taking college classes, and working two jobs my senior year of high school. I became an active leader in my school community and an example that you are not your circumstances, but what you make of them. I was given a chance. I was given an opportunity. I got lucky, but there are an extremely high number of kids that will not be given that same chance.

I can't help but wonder what would've happened to that scared 14 year old girl if she would've had to go to a school that terrified her. Not all public schools are violent places that breed miseducated students. However, in Philadelphia, there are too many. In Philadelphia, not all public schools are failing their students, but there are too many that are. Hundreds of thousands of kids are not being educated properly which contributes to our city's growing violence. They are not being given a place where they feel safe so they end up in the streets where they are more likely to be put in jail or killed. I got the chance to escape the tortuous and unforgiving streets of Philadelphia but for many students, this same culture follows them into the classroom. A lot of people ask me, if I still think I would have been as successful if I ended up at my nearby public school and I honestly don't know, but what I do know is that it is hard to excel in a place where you are more worried about surviving than succeeding. I was educated, encouraged, uplifted, and loved. To think that I almost didn't get that because of money, is honestly terrifying. What's more terrifying than that is that there are real children right now that are facing this same situation but will not get help like me. As I look back on my high school career, I can truly say I am prepared to start my college journey because of the encouragement, education, and community that Little

Flower provided me and all I can do is hope that money does not stop any more children from experiencing that too.

Lifeline Scholarships could positively impact so many families and save so many kids from a failing system. Money should not be the reason that a kid doesn't receive the education they deserve. No kid deserves to be stuck in a failing school that makes them feel scared and alone, and with Lifeline scholarships, they won't have to.

Testimony:

My family's high school journey starts out in September 2022. I took my very excited tweens to the Philadelphia convention center for the high school fair. We walked into the jam packed room of stands feeling a bit overwhelmed. Immediately you would be able to point out the most sought after schools by their long lines. Also, by the eager parents shuffling and firmly guiding their child to the front to speak to the school's representative. Super schools. In contrast, you immediately noticed the 'not so sought after' schools. By the empty booths, and school rep filling his time catching up on his twitter feed. Super obvious, right?

During this convention we were told that the School District of Philadelphia was implementing a brand new system. Philadelphia school district "school select" system. Meaning you were no longer able to apply directly to a school. No, you would have to apply via the school district's new system. The district would look at your grades, test scores, and other contributing factors such as behavior. After all was computed you would have access to the public schools the district said your child was eligible for.

This was great for my daughter. Straight A's. Good behavior. Good test scores. However, her twin brother was a different story. Like so many children across America he has ADHD. Anyone who knows a child who suffers from ADHD understands **their** journey isn't so cut and dry. It would take more than looking at their grades, test score, and etc. to get a good picture of what kind of student they are.

However, with the district's new school selection system, my son's application wouldn't even **reach a** super school. My daughter, on the other hand, would go on to apply for CAPA. It's a very sought after performing arts school with great academics. Student must audition to make in this super school. We'll touch on that in a bit.

Out of the whole fair there were **two** schools that would give my son a chance. They were indeed super schools. However, they were private super schools. And this is the part in the **journey** that led me here speaking in front of you today. The upcoming circumstances would mold me into a genuine believer, supporter, and advocate of the PASS scholarship program.

After a lot of work we finally secured a spot for my son in the Catholic school, Neumann Geretti. Then the real anxiety kicked in. Tuition was about 10k per school year. I spent many hours scouring the internet in search of some type of grant, aid, or scholarship. Something. I applied to several outside organizations. All were at capacity. Like myself there was hundreds of families out there searching for the same thing? Remember, I started out in September of last year. Fast forward to June of this year, and im almost having an anxiety attack. The tuition fees were now due every month. After the \$2000 that was awarded to us by the school the tuition was, you're ready, \$732 per month! I remember just breaking down crying one night. Not knowing how I was going to pay the fees. Just the thought of my child going to the neighborhood public high school made me cringe.

I'm raising a little black boy. This little black boy has come to fork in the road. This means the slightest deviation from a positive path could be the demise of his future. Linking up with the wrong crowd. "Birds of a feather will flock together. Meaning it only takes my child being around the wrong people to throw away years of hard work. Now, this could happen with any child. However, I'd hope we'd all agree that some children are more at risk than others.

Just in the nick of time meeting, by chance, Sharon and Marc from EdChoice, Guy from the commonwealth foundation, and Dave from BLOCS; I was able to secure a full grant for my child. G-d is truly great. He may not come exactly when you call. But he's always right on time.

But this is just one case. One miracle. What about the other scholars whose only choice is to go to the neighborhood school? What if going to that school would only mean that child harm? Only perpetuating one bad cycle or another. Well, I feel the PASS scholarship will be that miracle in preventing this from happening.

What will it take for every child to benefit from this legislation? Exactly what brought us here today. Education. Parents must be educated on the processes. Every parent cannot have another full-time job scouring the internet for grants. They may be tied down to a rigorous job schedule, not so good at research, not so good a tech, and etc. There has to be a mass parent education campaign. Not by politicians or anyone they may feel patronized from. But ordinary parents just like them. Whom they can relate to. Who they can call up when they get stuck in the process. Someone who's relatable and tangible. We must start educating the students themselves to take action where they may lack support at home. Allow them to fill out some forms. Allow "Parents must attend" to turn to "Parents are strongly encouraged to attend". How many times has a young person this year alone helped you with something tech related?

If you're still in the "hard NO" zone after that then I would encourage you to look at the district "school select" system. How many children did that harm? Mediocre grades and test scores? No super school for your child. Missed the October dead line to select a school? Ouuu, too bad. Child's information incorrectly documented? And you didn't know you had to file an appeal with School Select by the December deadline? "Next!" If your child transferred to the school district after selection was closed? That's gonna be a lot of red tape to cut through. You can't say "No" to the PASS legislation, and at the same time acceptant of the district's "school selection" system. I'd argue that this legislation would force public schools to take a 'hard look at their own system. It would cause them to "up their game". All of these changes and 'good trouble' will only be beneficial to our kids.

We must start thinking of our children as a whole. We must all work together cohesively to give every single child at least a fighting chance to succeed. That success equals the longevity of our country.

My daughter did get in CAPA. Not because she auditioned. But because there was no proper training for the schools' admission counselors. When they did receive the students who made the cut, they were quite overwhelmed. The admissions counselor stated, "I was handed a huge spread sheet with hundreds and hundreds of numbers for names! I'm certain the student's name before or after your child's was the one to be chosen." Of course, she still honored her entry into the school. My child was the only one to get in without auditioning. Think about it? What about that other student? Are they at a low performing neighborhood school now? I always think about that

In conclusion, the take aways from my story is education is very important. I believe if every child receives a good education America only benefits. More productivity, less crime, better mental health, less drug use, and so much more personal purpose. There's a lot of work ahead of us to achieve this. And it all starts with passing the PASS scholarship legislation.

Thank you....

09-12-2023

Good afternoon,

My name is Shannon Mitchell, and I am a mother of three children.

Morgan, who is eleven years old and a student at St. Katherine of Siena in 6th grade.

Caleb who is nine years old and a student at Thomas Home in 3rd grade. Caleb is on the spectrum.

Brianna who is seven years old and a student at Thomas Holme in 1st grade. Briana is very high on the spectrum.

When Caleb was five years old, we tried to enroll him at John Hancock School on Morrell Ave 19114, which is a blue-ribbon school for children on the spectrum. We were told he could not attend John Hancock as we were not in their zone (even though we have the same zip code 19114).

We consider St. Katherine of Siena, but we were told that they could not help Caleb as they don't have the resources needed. Caleb was enrolled at Thomas Holme. His studies are behind. His speech is delayed and according to speech therapist at Thomas Holme, this is due to his tonsils being too large. So, we took Caleb to several doctors: pediatrician, his behavior doctor (Dr. Perry) at Nemours Dupont and Ears, Nose, & Throat doctors (2) and all have said the same. His tonsils are fine and has nothing to do with his speech.

I have made a video on my phone so you can hear his speech.

Brianna is very high on spectrum: non-verbal, flight risk, high anxiety, picky eater, and not fully potty-trained. Her class last year had approximately 6 children with a teacher and two aides. We have requested many times for a one-on-one, which means aide/therapist would only handle Brianna at all times. Unfortunately, we have been turned down multiple times. We tried to hire on our own with our

private insurance with the city (my husband is a Philadelphia Police Officer) and have been turned down every time.

With the help of her behavior doctor (Dr. Perry) at Nemours Dupont and her staff we finally received medical assistance which is needed to hire one-on-one.

Over the summer we had 2 therapists coming out Monday-Thursday to work with Brianna.

Brianna is now up to 17 words (when she was in school, she was only saying 5 words at most) and

Brianna is partially potty trained. This is because of the extra help she has received over the summer.

Please note I want to make it crystal clear that the teachers who have had Caleb & Brianna have done the best they could with what little help and support they have received.

I feel as a mother of two autistic children I should have been allowed to send them both to John Hancock. I believe with all my heart that would not be so far behind if they started out at a blue-ribbon school like John Hancock.

Our fear is that will be pushed through the public school system and will not be able to provide or take care of themselves once they have graduated. We live with my parents and still don't have enough help. My mom always says it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it takes more than that when a child is on the spectrum.

Thank you for allowing me to express my concerns and hope you can fix this broken system that parents of special needs children need to navigate.

Shannon & Martin Mitchell

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