

School Choice – A Parent’s Perspective

Testimony on:

“Educational Freedom and Opportunity for American Families, Students, and Workers”

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means,

thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Sharon Sedlar, and I am sharing my story because school choice saved my daughter's life. No parent wants to see their child struggling, but that's exactly what happened to me. My story is tragically not unique; countless families across the country struggle to find a school or educational environment that their children need. Thanks to hours of advocacy, countless late nights, endless tears, and many tough budgeting decisions for our family, I was able to address my children's needs. Not all families are so fortunate.

That's what motivates me to fight for school choice and why I founded Pennsylvania Families for Education Choice. What first seemed like an impossible task has quickly become a calling for me. None of this would be possible without the love, support, and belief in the mission of my six daughters and husband, who have listened to my speeches and edited my articles in process, patiently helped me learn how to navigate today's technology and media structure, and even volunteered their own computer skills and have publicly shared their personal education choice stories. This experience has provided me with an opportunity to enter spaces where parents are not always welcomed and speak on behalf of parents who have not been heard. I know of too many stories that mirror my own.

Each of us has our "why." This is mine.

At first, my children attended a private elementary school, then we later switched to district school because we felt it was a better environment. In many ways, I love my public school district and the opportunities it provides to children. My first two daughters greatly benefited, and graduated from, district education. But over the years and with subsequent children, things changed.

In Kindergarten and first grade, our youngest daughter Virginia was energetic, fearless, quick-witted, and smart. But in second grade, we noticed a stark difference in her morning behavior after the first few weeks. What started as dragging her feet in the morning quickly transitioned to stomachaches, nightmares, and nights of lost sleep. A child reading above grade level and excelling in math started to academically stagnate. My husband and I suspected that the issue

was rooted in the relationship (or lack thereof) with her teacher, and our multiple requests for classroom transfer were outright denied. A Student Accommodation Plan (SAP) was presented as our only option.

While the SAP seemed to help somewhat in getting her to school on a daily basis at first, the increase in emotional needs at home was noticeable, especially on weeknights when she knew the school day was to come – sleeping in Mom’s bed, nightmares, fear of going to sleep, and many more tears and physical manifestations of anxiety. The SAP needs increased, and in-district art therapy was provided. Soon the Christmas holiday thankfully came upon us, and Virginia was able to unwind, relax and rejuvenate; sadly, her improvement was short-lived.

Virginia’s symptoms worsened. She felt the need to bring a necklace that contained a folded-up picture of the family in it so she could have us “close” to her heart. I can’t tell you how many times I would be asked to come to school during lunch to talk to Virginia. She would beg to come home, and I would convince her to stay, concerned about her level of absences and potential Magistrate referral. The relationship with the school district administration deteriorated as the SAP was continually violated, and instead of listening to our tear-filled pleas for relief and doing everything they could to help my child through crisis, the school became impatient and insisted that the plan be changed. They told me that it was simple “separation anxiety” and that this was common with a youngest child. I reluctantly and regrettably agreed to a stricter approach, second-guessing my instincts, and feeling defeated as a parent. My agreement to the new strategy only made things worse.

One morning in April before school, after seven months of unbelievably hard work and emotional strain on her part, seven year-old Virginia tearfully told me “I just can’t go Mommy. Please don’t make me go there. I’m sorry, Mommy.” She wouldn’t budge. The range of emotions – fear, sadness, and resignation – on this child’s face was heartbreaking to see. She was crumbling right before my eyes. And this child was apologizing for failing - when we were the ones who miserably failed her. Enough was enough, and I knew at that moment that this was the end of our public district school journey. I pulled Virginia out and enrolled her in a cyber charter school within days.

We were blessed that cyber charter school was an option available to Pennsylvania families and that it worked to save Virginia from an increasingly dark place that too many children may never escape. Even now, years later, Virginia still contends with profound after-effects from her experience. But she continues to improve, and her school of choice allows her the safety and security she has come to desperately need. Far too many children, both in Pennsylvania and nationwide, need something different – whether public, private, or home-based – and cannot access it because of family income.

Virginia's story is just one of the reasons that I founded Pennsylvania Families for Education Choice to fight for these rights. I believe no child should have to suffer in an environment that isn't right for them. Now I fight for all children in my state to have education options. In Pennsylvania, we are blessed that legislators in both parties and Governor Josh Shapiro support some public and private school choice, but that is not the case in all states.

Although district schools are a great fit for many children, one size does not fit all. The current education system fails children every single day – emotionally, physically, psychologically, environmentally, and academically. And this isn't just due to the aftermath of COVID. The Nation's Report Card proves that these problems are widespread, and families desperately need options. Regardless of the reason for which we find our nation's K-12 education system in its current predicament, education choice for the children of today and tomorrow is a necessary pursuit we must all undertake.

Parents are their child's first teacher and are the best qualified to make education decisions for their own children. We are there when they are hurt, scared, discouraged, or distressed. We are also there when they are happy, energetic, fulfilled, secure, and healthy. We know what works for our family and individual children, and we need to be able to fulfill our purpose and mission – to raise happy and healthy eventual adults, future society members and productive citizens. This will come to fruition given the correct circumstances and environment, which parents are best designed to decipher, decide, and provide.

But some states don't provide these pathways – as a matter of fact, they adamantly block them. This is why the help of our Congress is desperately needed – so that children like Virginia are not

left to struggle if their state legislature is committed to the state-based status quo that may be failing them.

Through my work with Pennsylvania Families for Education Choice, I have aided countless families navigating their education options and heard from hundreds of parents whose stories both break my heart and inspire me every day. Parents across our state in many different circumstances do whatever it takes to fight for choices for their children – and some of their fights take years, or perhaps are never really resolved, resulting in a lost opportunity to improve a child’s life. My hope is that one day parents will no longer have to fight to ensure what should be a basic right – to find an education that meets their children’s needs.

While Pennsylvania does have K-12 scholarship tax credit programs, out of 139,000 applications only 63,000 K-12 scholarships were awarded an average scholarship of \$2,534 in the 2021-21 school year. Over 76,000 children were denied due to arbitrary program caps. Passing programs on a federal level, like the Educational Choice for Children Act, will be a critical step toward that child-centered goal. We are grateful to Representative Kelly for being an original co-sponsor, and to all the members who have co-sponsored the bill.

As adults, we can think of a few years as just a short time with lessons learned; but for children, those years mean everything, especially while they’re still developing and learning in so many ways. We have no time to waste in helping them. They depend upon adults to make their path as stumble-free as possible. Parents should not be asked to “hang in there” and watch their child suffer while the education system continues to fail our children and limits their choices to succeed based on financial status or ZIP code.

Children are unique and special. They have preferences and needs, strengths, and weaknesses. With my six daughters, I see this reality up close every day. Parents build our lives around our children, and we freely make a myriad of decisions daily on their behalf. Education should not be an exception.

Children shouldn't be asked to "Make it just one more day", or as is the case in some of Pennsylvania's inner-city schools, to simply "Make it to 30" (meaning physically survive through their 20's). Parents shouldn't have to bribe or force their children to get them to enter the school building. And parents certainly shouldn't have to feel as if they need to ask "permission" to advocate for their child within the district system – it should be a willing partnership.

Education choice has been all about my ability as a parent to make the best decision I can for my children as life changes, our community changes, or their needs change. The availability of choice has made all the difference for us, but many other families don't have the same opportunity. As much educational opportunity as possible should be extended to families across the country. One, uniform option simply does not work for everyone.

Our children's barriers must be demolished *now*. It's time for the adults to step up and put them in the center of the conversation and remake education around students, not systems.

Studies of existing programs show overwhelmingly that parents and families are satisfied, outcomes are good, and public district schools are not harmed. Especially as the country continues to strive to recover from generational learning loss after the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no excuse not to empower every family with the options necessary to make the choices that will change their children's lives – and maybe even save them like my daughter was saved.

It is time to put power and increased resources into parents' hands to serve each unique student's needs most appropriately, particularly given the challenges today's students face. Whether continually growing achievement gaps, increased student distress, or the lasting effects of the pandemic, students need immediate options. Passing policy that will help ensure that those options are not limited to certain states, and that children across our great nation will have the chance to learn, is sorely needed and would be live saving for so many.