

**Pennsylvania State Senate
Education Committee
Public hearing on student opportunities for success
September 11, 2023
Written Testimony submitted by:
Mrs. Besie Katz, Head of School Politz Hebrew Academy (Philadelphia, PA)**

Senator Argall, Senator Williams, and honorable members of the Senate Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today and share another perspective about educational opportunity for students in Pennsylvania. My name is Besie Katz, and am the Head of School at Politz Hebrew Academy in Philadelphia. We are a K-8 school located in the Rhawnhurst area in the northeast.

We are a Jewish day school and I'd like to share with you who our students are. We have ESL learners who themselves have immigrated to Philadelphia from other countries. We have a population that is nearly all Free or Reduced Lunch eligible. We have students with learning differences who we have been able to serve by stretching our resources and because of the goodwill and hard work of our teachers. We have families who have moved from out of state to the Philadelphia area purely because of access to Jewish day schools like ours.

It is an absolute honor to be able to offer all of these children this education, and we believe that all students should have opportunities that align with their needs and that position them for success in life.

We are endlessly grateful for Pennsylvania's commitment to student success, namely through the availability of the EITC and OSTC programs. These programs are what make our special school accessible to students who probably just do not fit somewhere else. These programs are part of the vision of an educational landscape that really levels the playing field for students with financial need to be in the classroom that best suits them. These are also programs that make education a partnership, between the commonwealth, our districts, and our citizens who are incentivized to not only support their local public schools but also to invest in the array of educational institutions in their own locales.

When envisioning an even stronger educational landscape, I join others here who are advancing broad programs that help children attend the school that is right for them. A program similar to the PASS scholarship could absolutely change the lives of our children, whether my kids in my life or yours or my neighbor's. A program that does not harm our public schools, helps other educational institutions keep their doors open, and most importantly helps children is certainly one that we should continue talking about.

When envisioning strong schools, I also think about challenges that we all face, public and nonpublic schools alike. We're dealing with mental health needs, with school safety, with a

teacher shortage, and a changing world economy to name a few. Creative avenues to address these are imperative, and I'd like to share just one. Senator Ryan Aument sponsored a bipartisan bill a few months ago that proposes the Pennsylvania STEM Partnership Program. Public school teachers would be compensated for their time teaching STEM subjects at a nonpublic school, outside of their district time and responsibilities. This program raises up STEM education across the commonwealth since we need Pennsylvania to be a competitive in the our STEM saturated economy, it offers an opportunity for public school teachers to earn more money doing what they do best – teaching Pennsylvania's students, and it addresses the teacher shortage in nonpublic schools.

We are witnessing a crisis in education right now, and we are grateful to our elected officials in Harrisburg who we know are committed to finding the way out. Layering successful current programs like EITC and creative and innovative solutions like broader scholarship opportunities, STEM partnerships, and more, could ultimately bring a resolution to our crisis.

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