

100 South Broad Street, Suite 1200 | Philadelphia, PA 19110

(p) 215.670.8411 | (f) 215.670.5899 | csfphiladelphia.org



Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia

Keisha Jordan, Executive Director

Written Testimony to the PA Senate Education Committee – SB 1230

October 5, 2020

My name is Keisha Jordan, and I am the Executive Director of Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia. CSFP is a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide children from under-resourced Philadelphia families with financial access to quality, safe, K-8th grade, tuition-based schools, thereby increasing their long-term economic and social success. CSFP grants need-based scholarships to children from under-resourced Philadelphia families, all of which are awarded by random lottery. CSFP currently serves over 5,300 children enrolled at 170 Philadelphia area private and parochial schools. A few facts about CSFP:

- CSFP has awarded 28,500 scholarships since 2001, and is the largest provider of K-8th grade scholarships in Pennsylvania
- Nearly 10,000 Philadelphia families apply for CSFP scholarships annually
- The average household income for a CSFP family of four is \$36,000, and 71% of CSFP students qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program
- 86% of CSFP students live in the lowest-performing Philadelphia School District catchment zones
- 95% of CSFP scholarship recipients graduate high school on time
- **73% of CSFP families lost a job or experienced reduced income due to COVID-19 this year**

CSFP families, like so many under-resourced families in our state, were hit hard by the pandemic. Whether affected by job loss, reduced hours, being forced to quit a job because children were at home, or illness, many CSFP families had to choose among food, shelter, or paying the balance of their child's private school tuition.

CSFP stepped in and launched an emergency tuition fund to help families keep their children in school this spring. Hundreds of families quickly applied. **Last month we again accepted fall applications for this fund to help the 73% of CSFP families still experiencing financial hardship, and received more than 1,400 applications representing nearly one-third of CSFP students.** The dollars needed to help all of these families will likely exceed the balance of our

emergency fund. And, the amount of tuition each family owes often exceeds the \$1,000 per student CSFP is offering, leaving thousands of dollars still owed by CSFP families.

CSFP families could utilize a Back on Track ESA to meet their tuition obligations at the school they chose for their child. At CSFP we found that many families chose to re-enroll their children in their tuition-based school, but are unsure how they will make payments this year. **They enrolled on hope, with faith that help will arrive this school year.** This says a lot about a family's choice in education, and how much it means to them. And with more than 80% of CSFP partner schools opening in-person at least partially this fall, this choice also enabled many parents to return to work after several months of children being home from school. Their hope for help can become a reality if this committee moves Senate Bill 1230 forward.

The purpose of Back on Track ESAs is to help students get *Back on Track* after educational harms caused by COVID-19 closures. Tuition support is a primary need, but it isn't the only need for CSFP and other families in Pennsylvania. All students, in PA and across the country, lost several months of learning and building social skills. **Kids are still experiencing learning loss;** I can confirm this as a parent as I observe my children in virtual school, even in one of the best districts in our state. Back on Track ESAs would help families access academic support programs, tutors, instructional materials, computers, books, counseling (because we know that the CDC warns about the mental health impact of COVID-19 on children¹) and services for students with disabilities.

Parents with financial means have access to these resources. They already booked tutors, hired teachers for learning pods, purchased chrome books for every student in the family, and purchased all the materials they need. They will continue to do so this school year. **Families who are struggling with income loss due to COVID, especially those who were already under-resourced before the pandemic, deserve the same for their children.** Back on Track ESAs will prioritize families whose income is at 185% of the federal poverty line; families who need it most. These are families who may not have had computers or an internet connection in the spring, or maybe even now in the fall, to participate fully in remote learning. **We know that as of September an estimated 18,000 Philadelphia students still did not have internet access.² A July 2020 survey of CSFP families indicated that more than 700 families did not have a computer for their child to use if schools opened virtually for the fall, or would only have a computer if the school supplied it.** There is a serious disparity in how families can support their children academically during the pandemic. Back on Track Educational Savings Accounts are the equalizer that can bring all Pennsylvania children the opportunity to learn and grow this school year.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/for-parents.html>

² <https://www.inquirer.com/education/philadelphia-school-district-internet-comcast-school-board-school-closings-20200917.html>

I would like to conclude by sharing an example of a CSFP family that would benefit from a Back on Track Educational Scholarship Account. ***Tamar is a Parent Ambassador (CSFP parent leader) at The Waldorf School in Philadelphia, where her daughter, Tamara, is a thriving seventh grader. Tamar is also a hair stylist who was unable to work once COVID hit and forced business closures. Then, tragically, a kitchen fire severely damaged their home. Tamar's hair studio was based in her home, so she has not been able to work in that space indefinitely. Prior to the fire, Tamar had a tenant at her home paying rent, but the tenant was displaced as well, which meant Tamar had no income and could not make tuition payments in the spring. Tamar applied for and received CSFP emergency funds, which allowed her to keep Tamara enrolled at The Waldorf School for the 2019-20 school year. Tamar is still not fully back on her feet, and again applied for help through the CSFP COVID-19 Emergency Fund for the 2020-21 school year.***

I hope CSFP can help Tamara stay in school, but our funds are limited. Tamara deserves to stay in the school where she is successful, and to have all the resources she needs to get *Back on Track* and have a great school year. I ask the Senate Education Committee to take a step towards making that happen.