

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

April 19, 2021

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 more than 5,000 children enrolled at 160+ 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
- **98% of CSFP scholarship recipients graduate high school on time**
- **70% of CSFP alumni in the high school Class of 2019 enrolled in college**
- 73% of CSFP families lost a job or experienced reduced income due to COVID-19 last year
- 99% of CSFP partner schools are open for in-person learning.

I am writing to encourage the members of this committee to draft and support legislation to increase the cap on the EITC and OSTC tax credit programs, thereby adding more scholarships and other financial support for under-resourced Pennsylvania families.

I especially write on behalf of Philadelphia families, those who CSFP supports, who were impacted particularly hard by the pandemic last year. 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 last spring and to return in the Fall of 2020. We awarded 1,600 scholarships totaling more than \$1,000,000 over the past year. While many CSFP families are in the process of economic recovery, some still suffer from job loss or reduced wages, as evidenced by the 7% of families who received emergency funds but could not return to their schools this fall due to tuition unaffordability. The lasting impact of the pandemic continues for under-resourced families in Philadelphia and throughout the Commonwealth. It is my wish that CSFP could provide enough scholarship support to keep students in the schools their families chose for them. Additional financial support is needed to make this wish a reality.

I am also writing on behalf of the thousands of families who do not win CSFP's annual lottery scholarship. Each year, anywhere between 6,000 and 10,000 students apply to the CSFP scholarship lottery for an opportunity to attend a quality, safe school. This year, as always, thousands of Philadelphia scholarship applicants will not receive a CSFP scholarship, as we are financially limited to the selection of 2,000 new students annually. The majority of applicants are families whose children attend School District of Philadelphia schools, where students have not attended school in person consistently for more than a year. Pre-K through second grade students have returned for some in-person classroom learning, along with some students with special needs; but the return to school has been slow and still does not include most district students. At the beginning of the school year, it was estimated that 18,000 district students did not have reliable internet to participate in virtual learning. Parents are contemplating how to deal with learning loss for their children. School district data show that student academic performance has declined due to COVID. Students of color and economically disadvantaged students are disproportionately impacted by COVID.¹ The families who applied to the CSFP lottery wanted an opportunity to attend a quality, safe CSFP partner school, 99% of which are safely operating in person.

Demand for an increase to the EITC/OSTC cap exists in the donor community as well. Each year CSFP partner corporations that participate in the EITC/OSTC programs share that they are "maxed out"; that they would give more to scholarship support if the program limits were increased. Each year there are also potential new CSFP corporate partners that apply to the program but are declined. Increasing the cap would enable corporate partners to have a deeper impact on educational outcomes for under-resourced students.

I recognize that we are in a time of a health and economic emergency, and the state is focused on COVID recovery. This is an important direction, and one that must be the priority. But children from under-resourced families are being left behind academically, and this cannot be ignored. The long-term potential impact is frightening. CSFP and other scholarship organizations stand ready to meet the demand of our families and applicants, but need additional funding to make it happen. Partner corporations stand ready to provide more

¹ <https://www.inquirer.com/education/a/pennsylvania-education-students-pandemic-learning-loss-20210408.html>

support if the funding caps are raised. Please join us in making this connection happen for the benefit of Pennsylvania students.