



Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg



www.csagh.org/hcs



WEST SHORE
CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

www.csagh.org/wsca

PA Senate Education Committee Hearing April 12, 2021

Testimony by Philip G. Puleo, MBA, Superintendent
Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg

It is an understatement to say that educating students in the midst of the COVID pandemic has been the most challenging experience in the tenure of most educators, in the educational experience of most students, and in the routines of most families. However, it is with our community's faith in a loving God, our faculty and staff's commitment to providing quality in-person education to our students, and the cooperation and support of students, parents, and financial supporters, that the Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg (CSAGH) and its two schools, Harrisburg Christian School (HCS) and West Shore Christian Academy (WSCA), have met that challenge with commitment, innovation, and flexibility.

CSAGH Schools Respond to COVID Pandemic

On March 13, 2020 when Governor Wolf ordered all K-12 schools to close for in-person education, CSAGH schools moved quickly to provide educational continuity to its students. After three days of teacher training and planning, CSAGH schools pivoted to virtual education consisting of both real-time and recorded instruction, daily assignments, and opportunities for interaction with their teachers and classmates. Whether students had suitable technology or not, school staff found ways to ensure that students had access to educational materials and parents and guardians worked hard to partner with teachers for the best possible educational outcomes for their child(ren). While virtual education is not as ideal as in-person instruction, in my opinion, I am proud that we were able to provide quality, continuous education through a challenging time while preparing our students to progress to their next grade level.

Heading into AY20-21, CSAGH was committed to provide in-person education to its students for two reasons: 1) We sincerely believed that the traditional model of students and teachers interacting in person with each other is most conducive to educational progress for most students; and 2) A survey of our enrolled families revealed their strong desire for students to return to the classroom. We also knew that providing a flexible learning option was necessary for when students were unable to be on campus or uncomfortable in our classrooms because of COVID-19.

We believed that we could accommodate students' needs in a reasonable and responsible way by focusing on three key areas: (1) the health and safety of our students and staff, (2) the academic progress and preparation of our students, and (3) the social and emotional well-being of our students.

In order to return for in-person education we had to provide a flexible learning option for when students were unable or uncomfortable being on campus. To do that we installed web cams in every classroom and utilized Microsoft Teams to create our “Windows into the Classroom” Flexible Learning Option (FLO), allowing students to access their classroom from home. We have been able to provide every student with access to their teacher, their course content, and their classmates, even when needing to be off campus.

Following state mitigation guidelines and implementing our “Windows into the Classroom” Flexible Learning Option (FLO), our students returned to campus on August 18 where they have been to this day. Along the way, we have experienced some cases of COVID and have even had to close in-person education for short periods of time. But through it all, our community has remained resolved to provide in-person education with a flexible learning option while caring for student and staff health and safety, academic progress, and social-emotional well-being.

I would be remised if I did not share with you specific stories about students whose education was preserved through our efforts for in-person education with a flexible learning option.

- Cherish is a 10th grade student who had open heart surgery as an 8th grader whose surgeon recommended that she not return to in-person education. Rather Cherish remained connected to her teacher and her classmates as she continued her education daily through her “Window into the Classroom”.
- Journey is a Kindergartener from the Harrisburg School District whose parents have been able to offer their daughter an in-person education as a result in-person education and Opportunity Scholarships offered by Harrisburg Christian School.
- Hannah is a 12th grade learning support student who’s on pace to graduate because her senior year was in-person and not virtual.
- And I simply can’t count the number of students who told me they were glad to be on-campus and in-person and would have been “depressed” if they couldn’t come to school.

COVID Pandemic’s Impact on Student Learning

I join you today not only to share how CSAGH managed to continue in-person education safely and successfully but also to remind you that your support for students, regardless of what school they choose to attend, will be essential moving forward. What we face, and what is little spoken of in the news, has been the greatest academic catastrophe of our lifetime. The academic loss suffered by students, especially our most academically and financially vulnerable, has been dramatic and will not be fully realized for a while. Equipping parents – rather than bureaucrats – to make educational decisions for their children will help ensure all children get the help they need.

Allow me to cite [one study](#) from fall 2020 in which the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) of Stanford University, reported the estimated learning loss of 19 states (PA was not included in the study but is not exempt from its ramifications). CREDO calculated a “COVID Slide,” the erosion of learning that typically happened from the end of one school year to the beginning of the next as a result of three months of educational disruption from March through June of 2020. In their [press release](#) CREDO stated: “The learning loss estimates were translated into lost days of learning, based on a typical 180- day school year. Across the 19 states, the average estimates of how much students lost in the Spring of 2020 ranged from 57 to 183 days of learning in Reading and from 136 to 232 days of learning in Math.” Dr. Margaret Raymond, Director of CREDO at Stanford

University, stated, "In the absence of any actual assessments, these results serve as scientifically grounded estimates of what happened to students since March. It will take extended broad-based support from all corners to address the current deficits and the ripples they cause into the future".

The McKinsey and Company, in their March 1 article, "[Teacher Survey: Learning Loss is Global -- and Significant](#)", put it more bluntly about the ineffectiveness of virtual learning only when they wrote, "The grades were especially harsh from teachers in Japan and the United States, where nearly 60 percent rated the effectiveness of remote learning at between one and three out of ten. That barely beats skipping school altogether."

Funding Students Instead of Systems

It's never been clearer that one size doesn't fit all in education. That's why it's essential we re-think how we fund education in Pennsylvania. By funding students instead of systems, we can empower parents to choose the education that works best for their children. Every child deserves an excellent education. For some, the local district school provides what they need. But many children need other options.

As we look ahead, I would encourage you come together in unified support for students and families by supporting the following:

- **Increase the Caps on EITC/OSTC Scholarships** – Not only continue to fund the EITC/OSTC Scholarship Programs but increase the caps on funding. Half of our schools' need-based financial assistance is awarded through these programs and much more would be available if the state would raise the caps on these important tax credits. CSAGH schools alone could use over three quarters of a million dollars in additional scholarships for those in financial need. A great way to ensure that those who need these scholarships have them available to them is to include an "escalator" mechanism to the program that ensures increase in funding based upon the previous year's utilization. There are individuals and organizations who want to help provide the desired education of students, and your ongoing, unwavering support of EITC/OSTC is essential in unleashing that generosity.
- **Provide Education Grants Directly to Families** – In the midst of the pandemic, many parents felt ill-prepared to take a direct role in their child's education while also balancing their work responsibilities. In addition, many families felt financially constrained to provide the needed resources to support their child's education. Educational grants such as Educational Savings Accounts or Educational Opportunity Accounts would provide families with resources for eligible educational expenses including tutoring, counseling, computer hardware or software, curriculum, supplies, services for students with special needs, and private school tuition to help their child succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Education in a pandemic is not desirable but it is possible. When communities of educators and parents are supported by our government leaders, students succeed. We must take steps now to restore any regressions of learning loss and prepare for the next time something attempts to disrupt our children's education. Together we can do this. Together every student in the Commonwealth can succeed.

Philip G. Puleo, MBA, Superintendent, Christian School Association of Greater Harrisburg (CSAGH), a unified, private Christian School District operating Harrisburg Christian School District (Linglestown) and West Shore Christian Academy (Shiremanstown). CSAGH's mission is to partner with families to provide Christ-centered education that sharpens minds, deepens faith, and develops gifts preparing students to impact the world for Christ. CSAGH is accredited by Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CESS) and the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). ACSI has over 140 schools and over 21,000 students in Pennsylvania.