

Written testimony of Sharon Sedlar

October 3, 2023

My name is Sharon Sedlar, and I currently live right on the border of the City of Pittsburgh area in a small borough called Brentwood, encompassing 1.25 square miles with 10,000 residents. Our district educates approximately 1,200 students. This is in great contrast to my hometown community of Brookline within the City of Pittsburgh and its 58 square miles, with a 300,000 population, and 25,000 students. My brother and I benefited from private education in our K-8 years, but in high school, he chose district education at Brashear High School in Beechview (City of Pittsburgh district), while I attended Seton-La-Salle High School in Mt. Lebanon. And it was not because we could afford it (living in a single mother household), but rather due to the generosity of the parish community. My mother felt that Catholic education was an important component in our childhood, and it was.

Fast-forward to today, where my most important job is mom to six amazing girls – four in college, one in high school, and one in middle school. Over the last 25 years, I have sought out various childcare and educational options for my children. My own children have been enrolled in district, private, district cyber, and cyber charter based on many factors, among them: changes in education offerings or the school environment, school board decisions and policy, ability to provide my children with academic offerings consistent with their aptitudes, logistical family constructs, and supports for various 504 and IEPs due to medical and psychological difficulties. My personal experience has taught me that no single option has ever been able to serve every single child in my own household.

I have always been deeply involved in district board functions, fundraising, technology plans, etc., and have spoken with thousands of families throughout my “mom career.” I have spoken with hundreds more specifically in the education and advocacy landscape since I began my public advocacy in K-12 education. *The inflexibility of the Pennsylvania education system and continuous lack of options to support demonstrated and unique need is harming our children, our families, and our Commonwealth.*

Because of some of the machinations during COVID and subsequent efforts, I have become involved in the education landscape, founding a non-profit called PA Families for Education Choice. What started as a single voice to save my children’s choices in education that best suits them has become a calling in which I hope will assist to enable solutions for students and provide information and support to families across Pennsylvania– after all, this is the educational future of my grandchildren we’re talking about, among others. What we do today will hopefully help to shape and improve education for generations to come.

I genuinely believe that those involved in these on-going education discussions are doing the best that they think they can for Pennsylvania’s children. They believe in what they are doing as much as I believe in what I am doing. And those in Harrisburg are committed to advance positive education change based on perspectives, experiences, and stories from those whom they represent in their own districts. But just like one education option cannot serve all six children in my personal household adequately, each legislator will have difficulty - try as hard as they might - in hearing stories from every family, every circumstance, every need, and because of that, will not be able to envision every potential solution. The

life stories and experiences are too varied for any one person or educational model to adequately represent every single one.

There are many people who cannot see the need for options in education because *they don't need to see it*. But just because certain circumstances haven't touched your household, just because you haven't needed choice, just because you haven't heard every single story, does not mean the need for education options doesn't exist.

Families seeking education options do so because something is not working for their child. The families whose child may exhibit symptoms - even before the cause or need for remedy is truly known - as a sign that something is wrong: physical tells such as inability to sleep, stomachaches, headaches, or simply refusing to attend school; or acting out defiantly or violently; or simply collapsing every day when getting home from school, desperately needing release and with barely enough energy left to make it through the remaining hours in the day. Only to get up and do it all over again, day after day. For some children, this is torturous.

We all agree that every child deserves a quality and fully funded education. Who determines quality and how? Is it about one test, given on one day, in a particular grade? Or is it about the whole child – their ability to succeed “academically, socially, and civically” per the Education Clause of the Pennsylvania Constitution? And in the fair funding lawsuit, the decision rendered specifically stated that reform does not need to be “entirely financial...The options for reform are virtually limitless. The only requirement...is that **every** student receives a **meaningful opportunity** to succeed academically, socially and civically, which requires **all** students have access to a comprehensive, effective and contemporary system of public education.” The parents rightfully are the ones best equipped to determine the environment for educational success for their own child, and it is the Commonwealth's duty to provide *access*.

I submit that it is the system itself that needs substantial overhaul from an ideology, funding, and implementation side, and I am happy to see current actions within our Capitol designed to survey and transform Pennsylvania's education system in the long term.

But while we are evaluating what is to be done and how to do it - which arguably could take years - what of the children relegated to remain in adverse education environments? Many would say that all students have options currently, and it is true: charters, private, homeschool, virtual, co-ops, hybrids, and other incarnations of education supply models are readily available. Some options are procured at family expense, some by way of tax credit funding, and some fully funded via public education.

One such option in Pennsylvania is charter school. Currently, we have 180 charter schools serving about 160,000 students (approximately 10% of total K-12 students). The reasons for attending charter school vary widely, and our July of 2022 polling of Pennsylvania parents revealed that academics, family values, safety, poor district school experience, and special education needs were the top five reasons. Parents are seeking “different” for their children and enroll in charter schools that they feel better suit their child – that is, if there are even any charter schools or seats available within them in their area.

According to research released in 2020, “87% of Pa. districts have no brick-and-mortar charter schools and cyber charters are the only tuition-free option available to many families.” How is this considered to be an adequate education system, when children are forced to attend school in their area based on their address alone because they have no other options? What about the family with a child challenged, or

even harmed, who needs immediate action? What if they cannot afford the private option or stay home with their child? Why are we creating division and walls that place obstacles in the way of these families and children?

Proof of the importance of education options, including charter schools, can be easily found through many sources and websites. Stories that detail the beneficial and profound effect charter schools have had on their children's lives – like my own daughters.

A common theme in the education choice debate is accountability. Some say that accountability is judged by a test score. I would submit that accountability is due to the parents, caregivers, and family members – the ones who know the child best – rather than any district or state official. Parents work diligently to provide children with what they need. Quality of life, emotional or psychological health, and other factors for these children are critical to their development and affect their academic performance. This cannot be accurately gauged on a standardized test. Why not increase the prospects for children's lives and futures by offering them alternatives? While some children may encounter difficulties which may include a harmful school environment, bullying experiences, or unsafe buildings and dangerous routes to school, some children just need "different". Especially for those in need of options, refuge should be available – all children could *and should* be thriving.

Pennsylvania is losing population at an alarming rate, and while worsened by complications of COVID, this decline started long before. We are losing our families and our future largely to more southern states and, not surprisingly, to states with more family friendly policies and open education system offerings. Governor Shapiro has repeatedly said, "It's not an either/or. It's both/and." He is right. We *can* fund options and district education at the same time. We can help those most in need now – this very legislative session.

Focus on the children and give them options – not years from now when the gears have all been turned, the money has been distributed and budgeted, and some finally trickles down to the classroom. Our children have finite time to be educated. To be children. The time is now to respect parents as their own child's best advocates and allow them to choose the best educational pathways for their children - and for the Commonwealth to fulfill its responsibility to offer increased access to those options.