

Just the Facts about Senate Bill 1

Senate Bill 1 has spawned an outpouring of hyperbole, hysteria and outright dishonesty from supporters of the status quo. Opponents will attempt to kill this bill by pursuing a destructive "just say no" strategy as they endeavor to defend the indefensible. In a recent statewide television show, a top PSBA official's answer to children trapped in a failing school is to move to a good school district, which is simply not an option for many struggling parents.

Thousands of needy and working families are trapped and, despite billions of dollars in new resources, our academic achievement as a Commonwealth has flat-lined. When you cannot win the merits of a much-needed debate, you change the focus, which is what PSBA and their allies in the education establishment are attempting to do. PSBA's "Top Ten" myths about school choice, along with other oft-repeated myths, are rebutted, below:

Myth 1: Vouchers divert resources from public education but do not adequately reduce costs. School districts have fixed costs that cannot be reduced.

Fact: Opponents fail to think outside the box. They assume that the "system" will stay exactly as it is after Senate Bill 1 is implemented. New competition will lead to new schools and new options never thought of by those bent on preserving the public school monopoly. Similar programs in other states have not led to one published "obituary" for public schools.

Public education has sustained a 40 percent INCREASE in spending in the past eight years, with no correlating trajectory of academic performance. Additional resources are not the answer. The current level of spending on public education is not sustainable and taxpayers are demanding systemic reform.

School boards must have the courage to undertake bold reforms to cut costs, which may include closing school buildings and laying off teachers. In the last decade, while student enrollment has declined, the education establishment has added over 30,000 new government jobs to their payrolls. In addition to legislation that would

permit school districts to furlough staff for economic reasons, the Senate Education Committee is working on several other mandate relief bills to help school districts cut costs. Working with the General Assembly to help improve school district efficiency and reduce costs should be PSBA's focus, not whipping up hysteria over legislation whose initial focus is very narrow -- just 144 schools in 23 school districts. For too long, the focus has been on what is best for the "system," but Senate Bill 1 puts the focus where it belongs -- on children, parents and taxpayers.

Myth 2: Parental satisfaction is not an adequate measure of student or school success or accountability.

Fact: Educators seem to believe only they can determine whether children are learning, but this is not true. Many parents are very involved in their child's education, reviewing homework and teaching or re-teaching lessons at home. They do not have to possess a PhD to know whether their child is learning. Parents who care instinctively know whether their child is learning and thriving in their school environment, because they know their child best. Thousands of parents across the Commonwealth are desperate to help their child find a better school, but they can't. They are trapped by their income and their zip code. Many working families struggle to afford choices for their children. While the public education establishment revels in its monopoly status, one size does not fit all and parents should be empowered to vote with their feet.

As new assessment tools such as the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System (PVAAS) come online soon, parents will have even more tools at their disposal to objectively evaluate their children's public schools.

Myth 3: Evidence that students who utilize vouchers automatically make better strides in private or parochial schools is inconclusive.

Fact: Studies have shown that throughout the country, where families are offered a choice, student achievement and graduation rates soar in BOTH sending and receiving school districts.

Competition is good for our Commonwealth and for public education, which has operated as a monopoly for too long. Also, it is important to note that the choice program in Senate Bill 1 will not cause all students to automatically leave all districts----the legislation initially focuses on the neediest students in the worst performing schools. Senate Bill 1 will not trigger a massive reshuffling of student populations. Good students in good schools will no doubt remain, if satisfied and given the choice.

The experience of other states is instructive:

- ✓ In Wisconsin, students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program for four years demonstrated significantly higher learning gains in math (11 percent) and reading (6 percent) than their conventional public school peers.
- ✓ In Ohio, children in the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program showed a 7 percent increase in reading scores and a 15 percent increase in math scores over their conventional school peers.
- ✓ In Florida, the scores of children of color in scholarship programs are higher than comparable scores for children of color in any other state.
- ✓ Achievement grows - Not only do scholarship programs such as the one we support result in proven student achievement, but such scholarship programs result in improved public schools as well.
- ✓ Graduation rates are higher - Students benefitting from school choice in Milwaukee, WI and Washington, DC are posting significantly higher graduation rates than conventional public schools. (SOURCE: American Federation for Children.) Data gathered since 2003 showed student participants in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program had graduation rates 18 percent higher than in Milwaukee public schools. **The Milwaukee Program costs taxpayers \$6,442 per student, while the Milwaukee Public Schools are spending \$15,034 per student.** Reflecting similar success rates, graduation rates

for Washington, DC voucher recipients were 21 points higher than for non-participants.

The Center for Education Reform has statistics showing the success rates of other regions with school choice programs, including Milwaukee, Cleveland and Washington, DC.

Nine of the ten "gold standard" evaluations of voucher programs reported statistically significant gains in achievement for all or some voucher recipients. In 18 out of 19 academically rigorous studies, vouchers had a positive impact on public school districts. There has *never been a single study* demonstrating that vouchers harmed either voucher students or public schools.

Myth 4: Private and parochial schools are NOT open to every child. There is no "parental choice" when the choice is really up to the nonpublic school.

Fact: Private schools that accept voucher students may not discriminate on the basis of achievement, status as a handicapped person, race, color, or any other basis that is illegal under state or federal law.

Thousands of seats are currently available to students who are trapped in persistently failing schools. Free markets work. A huge demand will result in increased supply once the opportunity scholarship program is implemented. In 1997 when the General Assembly passed the law authorizing charter schools, no one could imagine that we would now have a thriving cyber charter choice for parents to utilize, many of which are experiencing long waiting lists.

Myth 5: Parents have choices now, via charters, home school-, or private and parochial schools.

Fact: In reality, only parents with high incomes have choices now. The poor are trapped and the middle class is struggling. Parents may be unhappy with their neighborhood school---and even feel it is unsafe--- but unless they have money to move to a better district or to enroll their child in a private school, they are literally

stuck. They are forbidden to transfer to another public school outside their district boundaries and could even be prosecuted for doing so. It is a supreme irony that PSBA and their allies attempting to defend the indefensible are touting charters, magnet schools and Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) scholarships as great examples of choice now, when they adamantly opposed -- and continue to oppose -- these very innovations when they were created. The education establishment embraces these concepts only when they serve their purpose of preserving their longstanding, rigid monopoly.

Myth 6: Vouchers eliminate accountability to taxpayers.

Fact: Impugning nonpublic schools has become a sad consequence of Senate Bill 1. Opponents allege that nonpublic schools will succumb to "fraudulent, unethical and illegal behavior" and "misuse funds." School choice opponents also tout public schools as the only way to provide accountability in education ----- which is a thinly veiled form of elitism and bigotry. Private schools undergo numerous accreditations and evaluations and administer student achievement tests frequently. And ultimately, the final arbiter of excellence is the parent, who can withdraw his or her child at any time, if they are dissatisfied with academics, the learning environment, school spending, or other factors. Competition and parent accountability will improve all of our schools.

Myth 7: Pennsylvanians do not support tuition vouchers.

Fact: It is important to critically analyze polling questions, methods and sponsors. Poll questions are often cleverly worded to affect the outcome. Moreover, the poll cited by PSBA was performed before the introduction of Senate Bill 1 and, by asking individuals only whether they support vouchers for private school education, does not reflect the full range of educational options that would be available to parents under Senate Bill 1. On the other hand, when pollsters have asked, "Do you believe parents have the right to choose the best school for their child?" respondents overwhelmingly supported choice (Pennlive poll).

In addition, Pulse Opinion Research conducted a poll for the Commonwealth Foundation, surveying 500 likely voters in Pennsylvania on November 1, 2010. When asked if they would support or oppose tax-credit scholarship funds to help parents pay the costs of the school of their choice, 46 percent said they support; 30 percent said they oppose. When asked if they would support education vouchers, which help parents pay the cost of the school of their choice, 50 percent supported and 30 percent opposed; 20 percent were unsure. When asked, "Would you prefer that all students in public schools be eligible for vouchers or scholarship funds, or should they just be given to low-income families in poorly performing schools?" 67 percent said they should go to all students in all public schools –which is even broader than Senate Bill 1 allows!

Myth 8: Nonpublic schools lack transparency.

Fact: The SAT scores and college acceptance rates of private and parochial schools clearly demonstrate these schools' performance, and nonpublic school students' scores are often far superior to their public school counterparts. In addition, parents can vote with their feet if they are unhappy with a private or parochial school. Opponents should stop demonizing nonpublic schools.

Myth 9: Nonpublic schools do not hold students to the same rigorous academic standards as public schools.

Fact: Public schools should stop impugning nonpublic schools. Nonpublic school students' SAT scores and college acceptance rates reveal these schools' rigorous standards. Moreover, nonpublic schools also use other methods of standardized testing that reflect achievement over time. Again, parent empowerment and accountability is the hallmark of the opportunity scholarship program contained in Senate Bill 1.

Myth 10: Creating a separate education system does not address the inadequacies of the existing system.

Fact: Senate Bill 1 does not create a separate education system. It creates a broader spectrum of choices. This is not a battle between public versus private schools. In Florida, which operates under a similar system, between 3 and 6 percent of students took advantage of choice. This bill hardly creates a "separate system." Only 144 schools (represented by 23 school districts) would be impacted in the first two years, and only those families at 130 percent of poverty level (approximately \$28,600 for a family of four).

While opponents say the answer is to just fix the public schools, the teachers' unions and their allies, PSBA, have been reciting this same mantra for decades, and most vociferously 16 years ago, when the last voucher plan was debated. They pleaded for more time and more money to fix schools. We have given them both, to no avail.

In the eight years of the Rendell Administration, state education spending increased by 40 percent, bringing the total education spending in Pennsylvania to \$26 billion a year, yet achievement has flat-lined. Notably -and almost counter-intuitively-- some of the school districts who spend the most are also the lowest-performing. We have repeatedly asked how the public education establishment will fix our persistently failing schools, and they have no answer other than, "Give us more money and more time."

Nine of the ten "gold standard" evaluations of voucher programs reported statistically significant gains in achievement for all or some voucher recipients. In 18 out of 19 academically rigorous studies, vouchers had a positive impact on public school districts. There has *never been a single study* demonstrating that vouchers harmed either voucher students or public schools.

Tending to their own needs as adults -- versus focusing on children -- has resulted in the addition of more than 30,000 new government jobs in the public education monopoly while Pennsylvania's student enrollment has declined. A system of vouchers for needy children in poorly performing schools does not leave children

behind or mean we are “abandoning” the current system. The truth is, the current system is leaving thousands of children behind. In Harrisburg, only 20 percent of kids in some grades are proficient in math and reading, which is disgraceful. Our current tax dollars are buying expensive failure. Why not at least try to save some children, if not all--instead of saying, "We can't help everyone so let's not help anybody."? This is an emergency; our kids are in a burning building and we need to get them out.

OTHER COMMONLY HEARD ARGUMENTS

Myth: Senate Bill 1 will lead to higher property taxes.

Fact: In a system that spends \$26 billion on public education, money can be found to rescue the neediest children in the most under-performing schools. We are already buying expensive failure; let's buy targeted success. In the long run, competition and parental accountability will drive down property taxes and the costs of public education, which is why the teachers' unions and PSBA so adamantly oppose this legislation. They cling to a monopoly that has driven up local taxes and consumes 40% of the Commonwealth's budget.

Also in the pipeline are several bills to relieve school districts of some burdensome, costly mandates, so they can operate more efficiently. The Senate expects to act on mandate relief in the near future.

Opponents also fail to note that it costs less to educate a child in a private school than a public school. While Harrisburg School District, for example, is paying an average of \$17,000 to educate a child each year, a student can attend a private or parochial school for about \$4,000. The entire Commonwealth will also incur far greater costs if kids never become taxpayers who hold down family-sustaining jobs. They may end up in prison, which costs more than \$30,000 a year per inmate, or on public assistance.

Myth: Senate Bill 1 is unconstitutional.

Fact: Senate Bill 1 has been carefully crafted to meet all state and federal constitutional requirements. Constitutional lawyers have carefully reviewed Senate Bill 1 and advised the bill's drafters on its constitutionality. The United States Supreme Court has held that the government can assist a student in receiving a religious school education if the money is given to the parent, not directly to the school, and the financial assistance makes its way to the religious school only through the true, independent choice of the parent. Non-public school students already receive services through public funding for transportation and textbooks. Senate Bill 1 also includes a public-to-public option, which is critical to its constitutionality. Ultimately, the courts, not the Legislature or the education establishment, will determine the constitutionality of Senate Bill 1.

Myth: Senate Bill 1 will require school districts to transport students to districts throughout the state.

Fact: Current law requires school districts that transport their own students to transport their children to nonpublic schools as long as those schools are within a ten-mile radius of their resident school district. This bill would also require school districts that transport their own students to provide transportation for their resident students to attend other public schools as well—but only within the current ten-mile radius. If the student attends a school outside the ten-mile radius, he or she would have to find alternate transportation, as under the existing law. Current state transportation subsidies will apply.

Myth : The costs of the plan are unknown.

Fact: The plan has a three-year phase-in. In the end, this is merely taxpayer money being returned to the taxpayer so that each taxpayer can decide how to best spend it for their child's education, in the way they see fit. Taxpayers are pouring billions every year into failing schools, seeing no results for their hard-earned tax dollars. Moreover, greater societal costs arise from having an uneducated work

force. The proposed three-year phase-in also allows state revenues to rebound over time, as the economy grows, to absorb costs within the current public education budget. Over time, this plan will save tax dollars, because public education has always been more costly than private or parochial education. Competition will improve all schools and ultimately result in lower costs and less pressure on local property taxes.

Myth: Student athletes will team-hop.

Fact: The PIAA forbids this kind of behavior and can formulate rules to respond to any abuses. An amendment will be offered in the Senate Education Committee to prohibit athletic recruiting in the context of the public-to-public and public-to-nonpublic transfers.

Myth: Parents are to blame for students who fail.

Fact: Parents know intuitively that education is their child's ticket out of poverty, and they know when their child is not getting educated. They are pleading for options. To say, as PSBA has, "If you want to go to a good school, move to a good school district," is offensive and callous toward the daunting economic challenges facing many caring families. Educators cannot shirk all responsibility for educational failures. They are quick to take credit for academic achievement and quick to blame parents for failure. The status quo is unacceptable. Senate Bill 1 frees children and families trapped in failure and provides more options to struggling working class families.

Freeing parents and kids from persistently failing schools is a fundamental civil right that cannot be denied.

Myth: Senate Bill 1 forgets the middle class.

Fact: Senate Bill 1 would expand tax credits to businesses for scholarships to middle-income families. Funds for the Educational Improvement Tax Credit, or EITC, will be raised from \$75 million to \$100 million. Scholarships funded

through the EITC are available to families with incomes up to \$60,000 plus \$12,000 per child. In addition, giving vouchers to those with the lowest income will free up more dollars for EITC scholarships, further benefitting the middle class. About 44,000 students currently benefit from the EITC with an average grant of \$1,100. The current average income of an EITC recipient is approximately \$29,000. A robust voucher program for our neediest families will substantially free up considerable EITC scholarship money for working families who deserve to exercise choice.