

The Flawed Facts of School Choice

It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to address each of you today. I know I may be stating the obvious, but times are certainly challenging for our community public school districts. I am specifically here to represent the majority of the traditional community public school districts from across the commonwealth. These school districts are the small and rural schools serving students in the largest geographic region of PA. Rural and small schools continue to consistently improve academic achievement. I am proud to be a rural school superintendent who works to serve our students in conjunction with some of the most talented professionals available.

This past Sunday in church, while listening to special music, a quote was shared that I found most appropriate to guide my comments today. The quote is attributed to Dr. Peter Marshall, Preacher and Author from the 1930s and 1940s. He stated, "Give us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for, because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything." It is clear to me, that it is time for all educators to stand up for the most important constituency group of all, our children. Education in this country and commonwealth was built for the public good; the intent was to provide all children with the knowledge and skills necessary to be contributing members of society. When considering any policy change, it is important to challenge conventional thought, understand the facts of the research, and consider the impact to all. Therefore, I would like to examine the impact of current school choice policy through the lens of the Penns Valley Area School District, a rural community school district of average wealth, a fine representative sample of the majority of the traditional community public schools that many of you represent.

I think it is time to challenge the ongoing rhetoric that;

1. our traditional public schools are failures,
2. school choice is the solution to a failed system,
3. school choice reduces costs.

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Demographic Overview

Penns Valley Area School District is located in Centre County, Pennsylvania. We are in close proximity to the Main Campus of the Pennsylvania State University and located within bussing range of not fewer than four brick and mortar charter schools. Last year, of our 1500 students there were between 81 and 88 Penns Valley resident students who chose to select charter or cyber charter schools. In 2009-10 with a \$23 million budget our district had charter tuition expenditures in excess of \$1,033,000 and over \$150,000 in additional associated transportation costs. With school choice enrollment distribution of one to two students per section per grade, (Gr.1 – 1, Gr.2 – 6, Gr.3 – 3, Gr.4 – 3, Gr.5 – 5, Gr.6 – 12, Gr.7 – 5, Gr.8 – 9, Gr.9 – 10, Gr.10 – 6, Gr.11 – 5, Gr.12 – 5) Penns Valley has not been able to reduce staffing or other administrative costs to compensate for the tuition charge.

Flawed Fact #1 - Traditional Public Schools are Failures

I certainly accept that there are failing schools and districts across the commonwealth. However, too often these comments become broad generalizations and paint all community public school districts as failures. These comments have become accepted as factual and unfortunately have impacted policy change across this commonwealth. I am proud to share that our rural, traditional, community public school district is not failing – in fact it has consistently improved PSSA performance, in all schools, subgroups and grade spans. Let there be no doubt, we have our challenges. Our district has both an economically disadvantaged subgroup and special education subgroup which is where PSSA creates the greatest challenge for all districts. Although the data has not been officially released by PDE, I can inform you that Penns Valley has once again made AYP in all schools, subgroups, and grade spans. If success is measured as many believe by PSSA scores, our students are certainly not failures, nor are our community members, parents, teachers, administrators, or board members. I chose to compare our PSSA proficiency rates to each and every school choice option selected by our students. The

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results concluded that we outperformed all eleven options apart from one. The only choice option that produced slightly higher proficiency rates is the choice option that markets to select students. This choice option targets enrollment for students interested in world language who tend to generally be higher performing students. Keep in mind that our community public school system welcomes and accepts all students and continues to exceed the performance of nearly all choice options. I challenge all of you to keep this in mind when making policy decisions that impact our community based traditional public school systems. It is disturbing to me to have families make their decisions to leave the community school system based on flawed assumptions created by marketing campaigns or the perception that choice is somehow elitist. The facts are clear; we can no longer say that our traditional community public school districts are failing. I encourage you to review the data in a 2009 Stanford University Study titled: Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States.

Flawed Fact #2 - School Choice is the Solution to a Failed System

Some assume that school choice facilitates competition and that competition in turn improves the overall educational product. I want us all to pause and carefully consider this thought. In the community public school system, districts freely share ideas and resources between each other. We collaborate as a community of learners to challenge each other to improve our practice. There is little animosity; instead a strong willingness exists to share ideas that we have found to be successful in benefit of student learning. We share professional development ideas, visit each other's schools, provide trainings between school districts, and share in our failures and solutions. In the competitive environment that exists with school choice options, the philosophy differs. We compete for students and are challenged to maintain enrollment and revenue by keeping our most productive ideas a secret. We work against each other and there is a tendency to lower our standards to maintain enrolled students. As an example, Penns Valley Area School District requires each of its students to pass 28 credits and demonstrate proficiency on assessments in mathematics, language arts, science and social studies. This standard is

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significantly higher than the minimum Chapter 4 requirements, often times yielding a loss of students to other choice options with lower expectations.

My review of the intent of the PA Charter School Law is that the only criterion that the commonwealth has met is that we have expanded choice options. So if the main purpose was to improve pupil learning, the facts indicate otherwise.

Flawed Fact #3 - School Choice Reduces Costs

There is a belief that privatized educational options can produce a quality product with reduced costs. The truth, however, is that choice options have increased the costs to the local tax payers in many school districts. Penns Valley is a prime example of this flawed line of thinking. The loss of one to two students per section per grade has not allowed our district the opportunity to reduce costs for anything to include: books, buildings, teachers, or administrators. Therefore, all tuition costs used to fund choice options are increases to our expenditures with no off-setting reduction. Next year, this will cost the tax payers of Penns Valley Area School District approximately 5 mills of local real estate tax. This represents nearly 12% of the total real estate tax paid to the district while only serving 5.4% of the students. In times of economic decline and further restrictions of Act 1, our school district has no choice but to make significant cuts. These program cuts, often valued by the community and our students, provide the impetus for students to enroll in school choice options consequently exacerbating our tuition costs. While we are forced to eliminate funding for trips to Gettysburg and Washington D.C., one of regional charter schools sends students to Costa Rica.

I implore you to consider my comments carefully, hold our community school districts accountable, provide us support and move beyond the rhetoric to develop policy based on facts. I ask that you vehemently protect one of the true jewels as established by our founding fathers--our system of community based public education for all. So, I conclude with the same quote that I began, "Give us clear vision that we may know

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where to stand and what to stand for, because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything.”