



August 4, 2020

TESTIMONY OF GARY NIELS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Chairman Sonney, Chairman Roebuck, Members of the House Education Committee:

I am the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Independent Schools. PAIS has been in existence since 1949. Among other functions we are one of three associations sanctioned by the State Department of Education (PADOE) to accredit schools. In our case PAIS accredits over 100 independent schools in PA and in DE with a total student enrollment in our membership of about 40,000 students.

PAIS is grateful that you have invited me to speak to the Committee today and that you have given our association this opportunity.

PAIS has within its membership Quaker, Catholic, Jewish, Non-sectarian, Montessori, Special Needs, Residential and Day schools. Within our membership, PAIS has a few schools which are known worldwide, with considerable resources and remarkable facilities. However, most of our schools are relatively small with modest resources. As you know, independent schools exist in the educational marketplace and our greatest challenge is the cost of tuition as families self-fund their children's education. Our two largest expenses that drive tuition are teacher salaries and benefits and student financial aid. Independent private schools want to pay our teachers a competitive wage and we want our schools to be socioeconomically diverse. Unlike the generalizations of our schools as solely bastions of wealth, independent schools must work very hard to raise money to ensure that we can offer an education option to a diverse student population.

I know this first-hand because I headed a Pittsburgh independent school for 16 years. Over one third of our students received financial aid. Many of our schools have as many as 50-60% of their students receiving some form of financial aid. One of the greatest contributors to a diverse student population is the EITC and OSTC programs. I would be remiss if I did not thank the PA legislature for allocating these tax dollars for students. The program brings to our schools an ability to provide education to students who would otherwise not enjoy the benefit of an independent school education.

I am here today to offer a few brief insights into the challenge that COVID-19 has posed to our schools:

First, our schools have worked feverishly throughout the summer to do all that they can to offer safe environments for students and employees. They have closely followed the recommendations of CDC; they have read the recommendations of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, even though private schools are not mandated to abide by those recommendations, those recommendations have been helpful as guiding instructions. Nonetheless, our schools are working to reduce risk the best that we can, but know that we may not eliminate it.

One of the many wild cards that makes many school heads deeply ambivalent about physically opening is not only the prospect of a student or teacher contracting the virus, but also the prospect of a lawsuit. Our schools understand their responsibilities to their families, students and employees, so they do not understand why the legislature has been unable to provide immunity for schools in terms of COVID-19.

Secondly, as the clock ticks toward opening day, our school leaders are concerned about having adequate supplies of PPE to keep their students and faculty safe. So many of our schools are desperate for more funding. The recent allocation of funds through the School Safety and Security Committee Awards was helpful to many of our schools, but still inadequate. We recognize the recent back and forth over the interpretation of the guidance over the CARES Act. We support any and all help that can be provided to Title 1 schools. However, many of our schools were disappointed that the needs of both Title 1 schools and all other schools could not be provided through the ESSER Fund.

Thirdly, our school heads and principals have worked furiously over the summer to develop elaborate plans to keep students safe. A major aspect of these plans is staggered start and end times to the school day, thus preventing a surge of people coming onto and off campus at the same time. What schools are troubled by is the inability or unwillingness of local public school districts or their contracted bus companies to provide bus service that can accommodate these plans. This unfortunate reality obliterates a critical strategy to implement school safety. Perhaps even more importantly is the fact that some of our schools are hearing mixed reports about whether bus companies will even provide service to our schools if the public school district that they reside in goes to all virtual learning.

Finally, when the Governor announced the immediate closure of all schools across the Commonwealth, our 15 Boarding Schools were panicked. Since they enroll students from all over the United States and the world, there was no way that they could cease operations, especially since many of their students were unable to travel home. Over the coming days and eventually weeks, PAIS searched every notification from the PADOE and the Governor's Office for clarification but there was no recognition that the Commonwealth contains residential schools for students in grades 9 through 12 or in one case, a boarding school with K-12 students. We took some comfort in our own contrived but reasonable explanation that our boarding schools were providing essential services to students who could not return home.

In conclusion, our schools revel in their independence from state interference, a key feature that makes us distinct, we also want our governmental leaders to know that we exist and need better clarity on when declarations pertain to us. We know that in at least New York State and Connecticut that the state independent school associations participated in the discussions and deliberations about guidelines for the opening of schools. The opportunity given to me today is a step in the right direction.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gary V. Lewis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "G".