



UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH CONGREGATIONS OF AMERICA

**Testimony of the Orthodox Union:  
Achieving Better Opportunities via Education (ABOVE)  
Pennsylvania General Assembly | House of Representatives | Education Committee  
Harrisburg, PA | August 3, 2011**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

Statement of Interest

The Orthodox Union, the nation's largest Orthodox Jewish umbrella organization, representing hundreds of congregations nationwide and more communities here in the Commonwealth than any other Orthodox group, including Allentown, greater Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and here in Harrisburg, is pleased to offer this testimony in support of education reform that works.

The Jewish people, as the "People of the Book" have been extraordinarily dedicated to educating children since time immemorial. In the words of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, "In ancient times the Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheatres. Jews built schools. And because of that, alone among ancient civilizations, Judaism survived." There were Jewish schools operating under the Roman spear, the Nazi boot and the Communist baton.

Because of this history, it should come as no surprise that we are unflinching supporters of quality education. Just to be clear: we support quality public education and we support quality nonpublic education. This is one reason we have supported the Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program. It does not pit public and nonpublic school communities one against the other. In an era of shrinking budgets, EITC helps everyone. Public schools -- as well as nonpublic ones - raise millions of dollars in contributions from the business community.

Support, Maintain & Expand EITC

That is why Pennsylvania's EITC program, once revolutionary, is now a nationally mimicked model. EITC has served as a model for other states because EITC scholarships help moderate and middle-income families that struggle financially to send their child to the school best suited for them. It is why it and its sister programs across the country enjoy bi-partisan, bi-cameral support in this and other legislatures and why governors of both parties have supported these programs in their inception and expansion.

Here in Harrisburg, the local Jewish day school finds the EITC program a financial lifeline in helping parents and families in need each year. Half the student body at Pittsburgh's Hillel Academy is eligible for EITC scholarships. In fact, EITC is the largest funding source for many Pennsylvania Jewish day schools and preschools - some 50 Jewish education programs overall.



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***Any education reform undertaken must first support this already proven model and strengthen it.***

That is why we at the Orthodox Union supported HB 1330, which, with a near unanimous vote in this chamber would have expanded EITC to \$200 million annually. It is also why, after two years of underfunding EITC by \$15 million, we are grateful this year's budget fully funded EITC at its current level of \$75 million as well as increasing the income limit, which allows more middle income families to benefit. Jewish day schools across Pennsylvania have been able to open their doors to more children and keep more children in school even in trying economic times thanks to EITC. They will, thanks to you, aid even more families and students this year.

### Enact a Voucher Program

We also – as you can see in the appended op-eds – strongly supported, and continue to strongly support, SB.1, which in addition to strengthening and expanding EITC, would have created a low income voucher program. While many in our own community would not meet the income cap on a voucher, the Orthodox Union strongly supports such a program. We do so out of principle and we do so for those of all communities who are in need of a better education. As well, with lower income families eligible for a voucher, more families of moderate and middle income would be able to utilize the EITC.

While we supported both HB 1330 and SB.1 we understand the need to find some compromise between these two bills and we urge the House and Senate to find such a compromise in the fall.

***We believe a statewide voucher program should be enacted, even if implemented on a pilot basis.***

### Support & Increase Public School Choice & Public Charter School Opportunities

The Orthodox Union also supports public school choice, both in and out of district and we support charter schools. I personally had the opportunity to visit a charter in West Philadelphia earlier in the year. My experiences at Boys' Latin were so moving I wrote an op-ed on it in the Philadelphia Inquirer and it too is attached to this testimony.

We note that charter schools may be direct competition for some of our community's own schools. Again, our agenda is quality education for all. Therefore, we are inclined, on principle, to support charter schools because they have proven an effective means of ensuring quality public education.

***Any education reform should support and strengthen new and existing charter schools.***

### Enact Personal Tax Incentives for Public & NonPublic School Parents



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As well, we believe there are several other areas that should be considered when looking to ensure each child in every community has access to the very best education available to them.

First and foremost, we urge the Legislature to look at other tax code incentives, be they credits or deductions, to assist parents in educating their children. These could include personal tax credits or deductions for educational expenses, including tuition at a nonpublic school, but also for parents of public school students, tutoring, test prep and other extracurricular or remedial expenses. Illinois, Louisiana and Minnesota each have some version of this.

Ensure Equal Access to Ancillary Programs for Health, Safety, Technology and Energy Efficiency

We also believe that the Legislature must ensure that all programs that could benefit a school or a child are open equally, without prejudice or penalty, to any school and every child. These include energy efficiency and safety/security funds, nursing and other health and mental health services and educational technology.

These programs help make our schools and the neighborhoods they are located in healthier and safer. As well, it means more dollars can be directed at educating students, not paying bills.

Conclusion

Harrisburg's local Jewish Day School is the Silver Academy. Rabbi Eliezer Silver was the founding rabbi of the Orthodox congregation here, Keshet Israel. He was also a great leader, and among other accomplishments, led a March on Washington during World War II to demand government action to help Europe's Jews.

After the war, he traveled across Europe, entering orphanages, convents, refugee camps and more in search of Jewish children still in hiding. That concern, that care, for every child is his legacy. We hope that it will be your legacy as well.

The Orthodox Union is ready to work with you, with the Senate and with the Corbett Administration to make it so.

Thank you.

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**Appendix: Orthodox Union Op-eds in Support of Education Reform**



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Howie Beigelman | AS I SEE IT

# Education reform helps Pennsylvania families

Ask Andrea Lieber about her school community and she'll say much the same as those who run similar schools across the commonwealth: "They're such good people, but they struggle to make ends meet. These aren't rich folks. Some are poor. Some are middle-class families."



Lieber is president of the Silver Academy, a central Pennsylvania's only Jewish day school located on Front Street in Harrisburg. Her middle schoolers all graduate, attend an accredited or licensed high school and to her knowledge, all graduate four years later and head to college. In some ways, Harrisburg is unique and in some ways, it is emblematic of issues families and educators are facing statewide. That is why Senate Bill 1, the Opportunity Scholarship & Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act, is so crucial to communities statewide, including Harrisburg.

For the families attending the Silver Academy, it's a struggle to keep up with the mortgage, car payments and the myriad other bills. Add on tuition and it gets even tougher.

That's why, according to Lieber, 98 percent of her families are on scholarship. In the recent downturn, the school has seen scholarship requests and their scholarship budget soar — by 20 percent in the last two

years. Standard charitable giving would likely never be able to cover that deficit. But that's why the EITC program has been a godsend.

Through the EITC program, the local Jewish federation has raised much-needed funds for scholarships since the program's inception in 2001. By law, there's an income cutoff for those scholarships, ensuring they are used only by middle- and moderate-income families. Even so, one quarter of the Silver Academy students utilize EITC scholarships.

EITC took a \$15 million hit two years ago and last year was maintained at that level. That makes it harder for a school such as Silver Academy to help every family that needs it.

A bill such as SB 1, which does two things, is crucial.

First, it builds on success. The EITC program, one of the first in the nation, has been copied, imitated and mimicked across the continent. Why? Because it works. Under EITC, millions of dollars have been raised for public (yes, it helps public schools, too) and private education without diverting money from the state's education coffers.

That's also why it has garnered support from Democrats and Republicans. In the most recent election, Gov. Corbett and his opponent, Dan Onorato, touted their support for it.

So SB 1 builds on this success by increas-

ing the funding of EITC to \$100 million. That's crucial. It's taking what works and helping it to work better and for more families in need.

SB 1 also focuses on failing school districts and the primarily low-income families who live there. It would provide opportunity scholarships to low-income children in a failing district to attend a better school, including some here in Harrisburg.

How sad that today we still struggle to make sure children aren't denied an education. Because denying education really means denying opportunity. How sad that middle-class families also struggle to provide their children with better education and opportunity.

Lieber reminds me the Silver Academy was named for Rabbi David Silver, whose father was the founding rabbi of Keshet Israel, a local congregation. After World War II, the elder Rabbi Silver traveled to war-torn Europe and searched town by town for orphaned Jewish children. The school tries to emulate that care and concern for every — any — child.

It is that care for all, those within our community and outside it, that causes us at the Orthodox Union to support SB 1, which works to make education better for all.

We hope Pennsylvania's policymakers will act in that same spirit and enact SB 1.

**Howie Beigelman** is deputy director of public policy for the Orthodox Union.

**HOWIE BEIGELMAN**

## Help struggling students

*S.B. 1 would help lower-income kids get a better education*

**A**sk Daniel Kraut about the parents of his 232 students and he'll say "They're great people, but they are struggling to make ends meet. They aren't rich. Some are poor. Some are middle-class families."

Mr. Kraut is CEO of the Hillel Academy in Squirrel Hill, one of several local Jewish day schools. Despite the challenges some of his families face, 100 percent of Hillel's seniors graduate in four years and all go on to college or other postsecondary education.

This is why Pennsylvania Senate Bill 1, the Opportunity Scholarship and Educational Improvement Tax Credit Act, is so crucial to communities across the state, including here in Pittsburgh.

Mr. Kraut's families, like many across the commonwealth, struggle to keep up with the mortgage, car payments and myriad other bills. Add on tuition at the Hillel Academy, and it's tough.

According to Mr. Kraut, 80 percent of his families are on scholarship. And due to the economic downturn, scholarship requests at Hillel have soared 20 percent over the past two years. Standard charitable giving probably would never be able to

cover tuition scholarships for all these young people.

This is why the EITC program, which gives businesses sizable tax credits for donating to private or religious schools, has been a godsend.

Together, all the Jewish day schools in Pittsburgh and the community's Jewish Federation have raised much-needed funds for scholarships since the program began providing tax incentives in 2001.

By law, scholarships can't go to anyone who is wealthy — there's an income cutoff. Yet at Hillel, over half the students qualify for EITC tax-credit scholarships.

Budget cuts in recent years have made it more difficult,

though. EITC took a \$15 million hit two years ago and last year was maintained at that level.

S.B. 1 would do two crucial things.

First, it would build on success. Pennsylvania's EITC program, one of the first in the nation, has been copied and mimicked across the continent. Why? Because it works. Millions of dollars have been raised for public and private education without diverting money from the state education budget.

No wonder it has garnered

support from Democrats and Republicans. Both Gov. Tom Corbett and his opponent in the gubernatorial election, Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato, have touted their support for the program.

S.B. 1 would take what works and help make it work better by increasing the funding for the EITC to \$100 million.

S.B. 1 also would focus on failing school districts and the primarily low-income families who live in them. It would provide Opportunity Scholarships (vouchers) so that low-income children in failing districts could attend better schools.

How sad that the civil rights struggle of the 21st century here in the United States is to ensure that poor children aren't denied an education and thus, denied opportunity. How sad that middle-class families also struggle to provide their children with good schooling.

We at the Orthodox Union are proud to support S.B. 1. We hope Pennsylvania's policy makers will as well.

*Howie Beigelman is deputy director of public policy for the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America (www.ou.org).*



# Support Those Programs That Get Real Results

HOWIE BEIGELMAN

Everyone knows the Orthodox community supports school reform for "parochial" reasons — the strain on our household budgets from multiple tuitions at Jewish day school.

But Orthodox support is about far more. It's about Jewish values. The poor and near poor in our society are trapped in failing schools. That's not right or fair.

That was also the message of 900 students — many from minority communities or from failing school districts — with whom I and others, including students from Kohet Yeshiva High School in Merion Station, joined in Harrisburg last week to lobby for school choice.

Our community proudly remembers marching with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and rightly boasts of standing up for the needy and oppressed. But the civil rights issue of today is education, the most burning social justice question of our time.

Ensuring that every child, regardless of ZIP code or parent's income, has access to a quality education shouldn't be controversial. And it no longer is. In our hyper-partisan era, education reform has

high-profile liberals and conservatives in agreement with an eye toward change.

The Orthodox Union supports school reform and choice in all forms — charters, public choice and government funding (in constitutionally permissible ways) of private, even parochial, schools, including scholarships, tax credits and vouchers.

This support is based on deeply Jewish values: education and social justice. Lord Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi, writes: "Our citadels are schools, our passion, education, and our greatest heroes, teachers." The prophets long ago beat in to our national psyche the Torah's charge to act justly and help the poor. Forcing children into failing schools is anathema to Jews who care about *tikkun olam*.

Moreover, the Jewish community's experiences prove that government funding can support critical needs through non-profit or private providers. Tax dollars fund Jewish federation-affiliated day-care programs, senior facilities, food pantries and more. Why shouldn't government also support all secular K-12 education?

Some say that choice violates the U.S. Constitution. Thirty-nine state constitu-

tions, including Pennsylvania's, have a religious "no aid" provision. However, most aid programs are crafted to stand up to scrutiny under those provisions, including Pennsylvania's Education Improvement Tax Credit program that raises millions for Jewish education.

And the federal courts have ruled that neutrally crafted choice programs that include religious schools are within the boundaries of vigorous First Amendment protections promoting religious liberty.

So the question isn't a now long-settled legal one, but a policy one: Is school choice and reform good policy? Some suggest the results are unproven. But the research is in; these reforms work.

We who care about Jewish education, days schools and continuity will likely support constitutionally permitted choice. But all who care about creating a fairer, more equal society must advocate for education reforms that have results. ♦

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**Howie Beigelman** is the Orthodox Union's Deputy Director of Public Policy, responsible for the group's state government affairs nationally.

# Quality schools for all must be a priority

A solid education for everyone is essential if we are to uphold civilization.

## Howie Beigelman

is the deputy director of public policy for the New York-based Orthodox Union, an advocacy and support group for the Jewish community

**E**ducation in America is the civil rights issue of the 21st century. While we can respectfully debate the solutions, we should all agree on one thing: Every child deserves the opportunity to attend a great school.

The Orthodox Union is ready to advocate for that reality through school choice and reform that increases access to quality education options for all Pennsylvania students.

It's no surprise that the Orthodox Union is committed to quality education, or that we staunchly support reform efforts. The Jewish people risked much throughout history for education, even establishing schools under the watchful eyes of Nazi storm troopers and Communist secret police. As Sir Jonathan Sacks, Britain's chief rabbi,

said in his maiden speech to the House of Lords: "To defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilization you need schools."

Better Pennsylvania schools will come about by increasing and expanding the earned-income tax credit program that has benefited thousands of students across the commonwealth and by enacting opportunity scholarships, now before the Senate. What food stamps are to nutrition, Section 8 to housing, and Head Start to pre-K, the scholarships would be to K-12 education: providing needed funds to help those in need.

Other options include increasing aid to students in all schools — for books, technology, special services, transportation — so all children are in the best environment for them. And it may mean increasing the number of charter schools.

What we cannot — may not — do is nothing. Today we are not providing every student the chance at a great education. That's more than a pity.

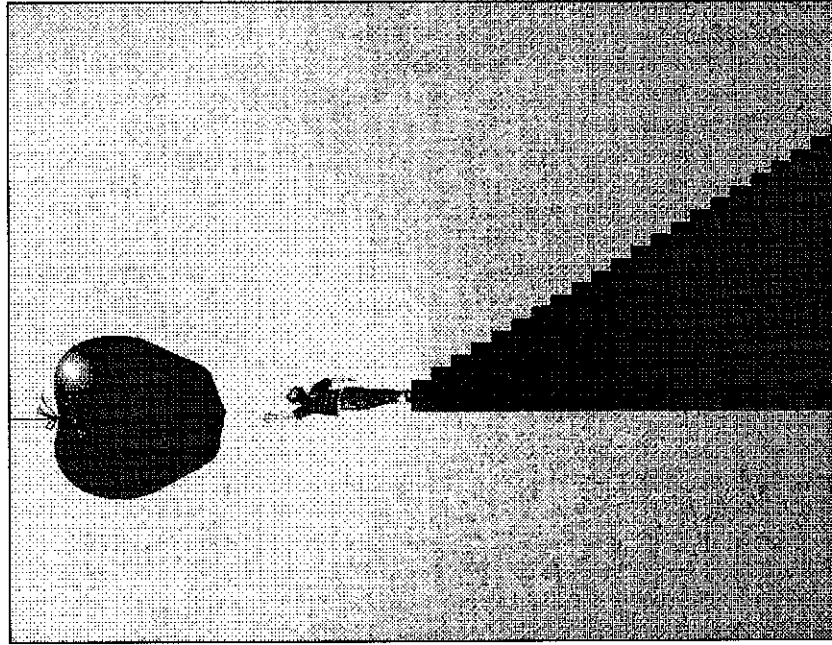
It's a shame.

The situation in West Philadelphia is a perfect illustration of why we need to give all families more options. As part of a visit organized by Students First for religious leaders, we were able to see firsthand three different high schools and better understand how each provides for families in the community.

Our tour encompassed just 15 blocks, with stops at a parochial, a traditional public, and a public charter school: West Philadelphia Catholic, West Philadelphia High, and Boys' Latin.

After such a tour one notices, first, that the usual bogymen of urban education — bad teachers and a lack of resources — were nowhere to be found.

Teachers in every classroom at all three schools were working hard and putting their resources to good use. Each of the schools had some of the latest in educational technology needed to help students gain the skills they'll need to



DEAN ROHREK

compete for 21st-century jobs, such as smart boards and laptops. West Philly High even had a state-of-the-art U.S. Air Force flight simulator for its Junior ROTC program.

Yet, the learning environments at these three schools seemed so different. "Every man is the architect of his own future" is the motto of Boys' Latin. The students who attend

some higher education. The atmosphere at West Philly High, on the other hand, was less hopeful. Teachers keep their doors locked during class periods, and violence has occurred on the campus.

The three schools may be within walking distance of one another and serve families from the same community, but they might as well be worlds apart. As we know, West Catholic must charge tuition and Boys' Latin has a limited enrollment, about one-half the size of West Philadelphia High. So despite living in a community with multiple school options, most students have access only to West Philadelphia.

One mother and father we met that day described the challenges they face and the sacrifices they made trying to find safe, quality schools for their children, including bus-ing them across the city. Parents shouldn't have to struggle so hard to find good schools for their children.

We will all be held to account when the success or failure of our actions or inaction becomes clear in a generation. Policymakers, educators, parents, and all concerned citizens must partner to ensure that a child's education no longer depends on his or her zip code, and certainly that it doesn't differ vastly within just 15 blocks.

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