

**Statement of Susan Gobreski
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**Testimony before The House of Representatives
Gaming Oversight Committee**

**Harrisburg, PA
Thursday, May 21, 2009**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee about this very important piece of legislation. My name is Susan Gobreski, and I am the executive director of Education Voters of Pennsylvania. My organization is dedicated to informing the public about the importance of ensuring access to high-quality education from Pre-K to higher education, both for individuals and for communities.

It is our education that makes us strong, it is an education that lifts us up. An education for a child is why so many parents move to communities with higher taxes – they know that taxes are only bad if you don't get something of value for them—they will pay for a good education. An education is why some parents get a second job to put their kids through college, why young people go into extraordinary debt at the age of 19 – to get an education. All because people understand the power of an education to build a future for yourself and for your family. People pay for what they value. But an education isn't just valuable to the person who is educated. People take that education and become pillars of their communities – they start businesses, and provide services, and pay taxes on higher wages which means better services and stronger community systems and they earn enough to have time to coach soccer or volunteer in school. In short – they are important to the community – there is a ripple effect to having an educated population and increasing the number of people who have a college degree. Employers look for communities with an educated population and good schools. Education is critical to a strong economy.

With the economy in the tank, a college education becomes increasingly important to the economic well-being of families across the commonwealth, and to the Commonwealth itself and therefore, I urge you to pass the Tuition Relief Act.

The Tuition Relief Act in February proposal has been intensely debated. In fact, as I read the newspaper articles and op/ed pieces that have been published across Pennsylvania, it often seems as though the major point of the bill – to facilitate a college education for people who belong in college is not at the center of the discussion. I would like to emphasize to this Committee that we must not lose sight of the fact that, if passed, the Tuition Relief Act will permanently transform the possibilities and the future for qualified students. In fact, it will transform Pennsylvania itself and position us to emerge from this recession much stronger than we are now.

As my organization also works to promote quality PreK -12, I see an obvious link between the extraordinary progress we have made in that sector and the goals of the Tuition Relief Act. One of the most important roles of this state legislature should be to increase the quality of k-12 education so that more students graduate from high school, and do so ready for college – again – because we know that education is valuable. And it is a currency in adult life. Therefore, if we can facilitate a college education for qualified students whose only obstacle is the ability to put together the financial resources, then we can complete. It's a simple fact—if students know that good performance in grade school will pay off with access to an affordable college education, they are more likely to work harder, and their parents are more likely to be engaged.

All over the Commonwealth, support is growing for the tuition relief act. Many people see the Tuition Relief Act as a bridge to opportunity; a bridge to a better life. For others who planned on attending college but were resigned to the fact that to do so they would need to take out inordinate amounts of loans; this Act is a huge relief that will allow them to graduate free of burdensome debt and more capable of buying a home and giving back to their communities and the state. This is also a plan to empower people who need to find a new career, to take control of their own employment future and to strengthen the communities in which they live.

According to the latest Quinnipiac polling data, the public supports the Tuition Relief Act by a margin of close to 2:1. In fact, **62% percent of Pennsylvania's voting public support the Tuition Relief Act** and there is support for the Act from **across the political spectrum**.

In addition to the polling data, grassroots support has been growing. In fact:

- Over 1,120 people have signed petitions supporting the Tuition Relief Act;
- 10,800 unique individuals have visited the Tuition Relief website sponsored by my organization;
- an independent Facebook page called "I Support Tuition Relief," which was started by a Pennsylvania high school student, has recently sprung-up and already has over 300 members and more are joining everyday;
- and more than a thousand people have attended tuition relief events that have been held across the Commonwealth.

The Act is also supported by numerous organizations and education associations, including:

- My organization, Education Voters PA,
- Pennsylvania Parent Teacher Association (with 85,000 members),
- Pennsylvania Association of Adult and Continuing Education (with 1,000 members),

- Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education,
- Pennsylvania Future Business Leaders of America (with 13,588 members)
- PA Student Council Association (with 7,000 members)
- Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, and
- The National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education

As compelling as this show of support is, it does not fully capture what the Tuition Relief Act means to so many Pennsylvanians. Many supporters have been kind enough to share their feelings with us via comments on petitions and through personal communications. I would like to share with you some of their thoughts in their own words.

-- From a mom who lost out on her chance to attend college because the cost was too high and other life circumstances:

“I could not believe my eyes when I read what this petition was for. At a young age life changes prevented me from continuing my education. It has been my dream to attend and benefit from college. Once I became a single parent and the cost of living and college increased so much, I knew that I wouldn't be able to afford it. If this could mean that so many people like me could pursue a better life without taking food from our families' mouths then my prayers will have been answered. God bless.”

-- From an instructor who works with adult students:

“I teach ESL to several groups of adults in Berwick. According to my discussions with the students, their greatest stumbling block to post-secondary education is tuition fees. Many of them have children, work over-time and/or two jobs just to survive on a meager existence. Therefore, they do not dare to dream of a college education. The tuition relief act would alleviate their concerns over affordability & they could set goals for a more satisfying career & a brighter future.”

--A high school senior facing the prospects of moving to the next stage in his life:

“As I gain knowledge on America's economic situation, it starts to feel like we're set up to fail. The reality of having to move to the next stage of life is unavoidable. It's both frightening and exhilarating at the same time. I believe every person should have the opportunity to further their education. At the same time, they should not be forced into debt as a result of achieving a higher education. This is why I support the tuition relief act.”

--From a mother of three:

“I am a single mom of 3 teenage girls in need of all the grants or funding available to further educate them. Education today is a must for the generation to come. From what I see in order to get a good solid paying job in the upcoming future a college education is needed. Myself in particular can not afford to pay for any of my daughters college therefore it will be their sole responsibility. That burden along with trying to find a job is a heavy one for any young person trying to make a start. We need tuition relief.”

As is evident in these quotations and hundreds of others we have received, this legislation has the potential to be life-changing and it has wide-ranging support. Real working Pennsylvanians stand to benefit--Pennsylvanians who have worked hard everyday with the goal of bettering their own lives and the lives of those who come after them. The key to them being able to accomplish that goal is access to college. Up until now attending college has not been a reality for many of these Pennsylvanians and therefore they have not been able to fully accomplish their goals. The Tuition Relief Act will change that. The public wants tuition relief and I ask you to please join us in supporting this critically important Act.