

May 21, 2009

Gaming Oversight Committee
Irvis Office Building, Room 317
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Comments in Support of HB 1317

Dear Committee Members:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you on this important matter.

Because college affordability is of the utmost importance to the future of the Commonwealth, I urge you to join me in supporting HB 1317. The high cost of college is a silent crisis in our nation. College has become a difficult financial decision for low income and working families. Even dual income families are struggling with this important decision.

It is as clear as day to the hard working families of Pennsylvania and the rest of the country. The cost of attending college for an in-state resident in Pennsylvania is one of the highest in the nation. The cost of tuition is increasing far quicker than the rate of inflation. In the ten year period from 1987 to 1997, Pennsylvania college tuitions increased by 132%. College has simply become unaffordable for families in Pennsylvania.

As we debate the pros and cons of HB 1317, I urge my colleagues to keep in mind that this bill is first and foremost a college affordability measure. While parents throughout the Commonwealth continue to scrape by and sacrifice to ensure their children are not left out of a future of economic security, the cost of college continues to rise. As tuition bills rise, students are turning to second and third jobs instead of devoting themselves to their education. This is no small matter. The prosperity of our Commonwealth relies on the successful collegiate education of our students.

While we have beaten the drum of college as a necessity for survival in an increasingly global and competitive economy, we have allowed college to become an unattainable dream for thousands of our students. Add to this, that those students lucky enough to graduate are leaving school with crushing levels of debt, and what you have is a recipe for disaster that will have a long-lasting negative impact on Pennsylvania's economy.

Not only is college affordability a worthy goal, it is a necessity to the economic survival of the Commonwealth, especially given the fact that nearly 90% of jobs in the next ten years will require some level of college education. It is our responsibility to act now.

If case you were not aware, last year I introduced legislation that would create Reliable Educational Assistance for College Hopefuls, referred to as REACH. The bill calls for a statewide merit-based scholarship program for all students in Pennsylvania who maintain

at least a 3.0 grade-point average and a 90 percent attendance record. The program would ensure those students would receive a scholarship covering all tuition and fees to any university in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. The bill also provides the opportunity for students to attend any school in Pennsylvania with a scholarship that is equivalent to the average cost of attending a state school. Those students who were REACH scholars would have to state in-state for four years following graduation. This measure would go a long way to tackling the brain drain problem in the Commonwealth. Our cost projections for the REACH program are 87 million for the first year, and 350 million at full enrollment four years later. REACH was reintroduced this session by myself and Rep. Brendan Boyle as HB 467.

HB 467 and HB 1317 are looking to accomplish the same thing---they both seek the same overall goal of making college more affordable to the families of Pennsylvania. The only difference is merit-based versus need-based. In all the debate about HB 1317, the focus has been on the legalization of video poker as a means for paying for the proposal. I humbly submit to you that we should legalize video poker as a means of helping working Pennsylvanians afford college. Because the issue of college of affordability is so compelling we must act now.

The evidence is clear that college affordability is of the utmost importance to our families. The time for debate on this issue has past. There should be no debate on the need to make college more affordable for our children and their families. There should be no debate that a population of students with higher education levels ensures Pennsylvania will have the ability to be competitive in the global marketplace. There should be no debate that HB 1317 is a measure worth supporting. We need to support this bill for our children and for the future of the Commonwealth.

In addition to supporting HB 1317, I will be introducing an amendment to ensure that while we make college more affordable for Pennsylvanians, we also take care to commit our students to making the Commonwealth the beneficiary of their tuition assistance by having them commit to a 4-year residency requirement in exchange for tuition support.

This amendment will tackle the brain drain problem and maximize the positive economic benefit of the tuition relief act. Please join me in supporting HB 1317. Let us commit to doing our part in support of families, our Commonwealth and our common future.

/tpj/
Tony Payton, Jr.