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HARRISBURG

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Senate Bill 1 – Fact Sheet

Fiction “Every student can go elsewhere with the voucher bill.”

Fact If it becomes law, SB1 will provide vouchers to 51,000 students in the Philadelphia School District in its first year. By year three, the school district estimates that up to 80% of public school students (about 120,000) could be eligible for a voucher. This is more than double the current capacity of local private, parochial, and charter schools. They simply don't have room for this many additional students.

Fiction “All students will be treated equally and have equal access to voucher schools.”
(Part 1 - State)

Fact The Pennsylvania Code states that “All persons residing in this Commonwealth between the ages of 6 and 21 years are entitled to a free and full education in the Commonwealth's public schools.” Senate Bill 1, however, does nothing to extend this entitlement to cover non-public schools. Instead, SB1 explicitly allows non-public schools to establish and follow their own eligibility criteria for new students:

[H]owever, an applicant may be required to meet established eligibility criteria for participation in magnet schools or in schools with specialized academic missions.

- SB1 §2502-B, Definitions: "Participating nonpublic school." (2)

Since SB1 provides no mandate for non-public schools to follow existing state law and accept any & all applicants, there is no reason to believe they will suddenly open up their acceptance standards for new students.

Fiction "All students will be treated equally and have equal access to voucher schools."
(Part 2 – Federal)

Fact One of the criteria in SB1 is that "...the nonpublic school is in full compliance with all Federal and State laws." (SB1 §2502-B, Definitions: "Participating nonpublic school." (3))

This sounds good; however, there is no enforcement provision in SB1. Additionally, there is no mandate for compliance with Federal law when federal funding is not being used. Many private and parochial schools, for example accept no federal dollars in the first place.

Fiction "School vouchers will help struggling students succeed."

Fact SB1 offers school vouchers based on parental income only. It does not include any calculation of an individual student's educational need and has no mandate for priority placement of struggling students.

Fiction "Non-public schools are higher performing than public schools."

Fact State law does not currently require private or parochial schools to take part in the PSSA exam and SB1 does not mandate that schools participate in the exam as a condition of taking school vouchers. Without this requirement, there is no way for parents to compare how well students at these schools perform on standardized tests, compared to public school students.

Fiction "Non-public schools are safer than public schools."

Fact State law requires public school districts to record and disseminate information on behavioral incidents at public schools. This law does not apply to private, parochial, and charter schools so it is very difficult for parents to get accurate

records of behavioral incidents at non-public schools. SB1 does nothing to address this lack of information and does not mandate that non-public schools report these incidents.

Fiction "My child cannot be removed from their voucher school."

Fact There's five separate sections of State Code that deal with the policies and procedures a public school district has to develop and follow when it comes to suspending and / or expelling a child from a public school. Those sections of code are silent when it comes to non-public schools. Your child can easily be removed from a voucher school because SB1 has no mandate that non-public schools follow the same discipline procedures as the public school system.

Fiction "The Opportunity Scholarship will cover all my costs."

Fact As long as everyone's tuition is the same, SB1 is silent on how much a non-public school can charge. Non-public schools have a financial incentive to raise their tuition above the value of the voucher. If a school currently charges \$4000 per year and the voucher is for \$8000, the school can raise its tuition to \$12,000, capture the full value of the voucher and still take the same \$4000 out of the parents. As long as tuition is equally raised for everyone, the non-public school hasn't violated any laws. The way SB1 is written now, non-public schools can suck up public tax dollars through the voucher program and still exclude parents with limited means just by raising their tuition even higher.

Fiction "The Opportunity Scholarship is a fixed amount."

Fiction SB1 includes no language on how much the voucher should be. The voucher is actually calculated based on how much basic education funding is appropriated in the annual state budget. Governor Corbett has made it clear that he isn't committed to the level of funding we saw in the Rendell years. He has proposed slashing \$1 billion from general education funding this year (about a 10% cut per school district) and there's every reason to expect similar cuts in the future. These cuts will reverberate at the local level and lead to equivalent cuts in the opportunity scholarships.

Fiction

“The public school system can’t be fixed.”

Fact

The Philadelphia School District has shown significant improvements in school safety and test scores over the last decade:

- Between 2005 and 2009 the number of ‘serious incidents’ has gone down by 21%.
- In the past 8 years, students performing at or better than grade level in math and reading have more than doubled.
- The overall graduation rate in district schools is 63%, the highest level in years.

- School District of Philadelphia testimony before the House Democratic Policy Committee, 2-22-2011.

There is more improvement to be made; but these gains coincide with the commitment to increased general education funding seen under Governor Rendell. SB1 undercuts these gains in our public school system because it doesn’t create a new funding source for vouchers. SB1 requires school districts to make direct payment out of their own budgets and takes away money that could be used to continue improving our public schools.