

# SCOTLAND SCHOOL FOR VETERANS CHILDREN

## Testimony of Mathew J. Brouillette

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### **PENNSYLVANIA SENATE & HOUSE VETERANS AFFAIRS & EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS COMMITTEES JOINT HEARING**

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Thank you for this opportunity to share the Commonwealth Foundation's thoughts on the proposed closing of the Scotland School for Veterans Children.

I am Matthew Brouillette, president and CEO of the Commonwealth Foundation, a public policy education and research institute located here in Harrisburg. But I also come before you as a former teacher, school board member, and education policy analyst who is very interested in all children having as many opportunities for educational success as possible.

Today, with the potential for a man-bites-dog story, I am here to explain why we believe Gov. Rendell's proposal to shut down the Scotland School makes good economic and educational sense for both the taxpayers and children.

We all know what a rarity the Scotland School is among public schools in the United States. Its mission of helping the descendants of war veterans is laudable. But the school is no longer serving its original purpose, and it is a stretch to suggest otherwise.

Today, Scotland appears to have largely become a haven for students to escape the troubled Philadelphia School District. But this says more about the failure of Philly's public school system than about the merits of maintaining an expensive boarding school for a few hundred children. At \$45,000 per student, Scotland costs taxpayers several times the state average of approximately \$13,000 per pupil.

So it is understandable why the parents of these children oppose Gov. Rendell's proposal. They care too much about their children to put them back into a system that they believe would fail them. With dropout rates averaging 37% in the Philadelphia School District, it's hard to blame parents.

Scotland School parents are fortunate to be able to exercise an educational choice for their children that most parents are denied in Pennsylvania—but at \$45,000 per student, per year, it is a financially unsustainable one. However, the answer is not to force these children back into unsafe and poor-performing schools, but to give Scotland parents and other parents across Pennsylvania what they deserve—greater educational options for their children.

Today, because of Pennsylvania's charter school law and the Educational Improvement Tax Credit program, children have more educational options than they did ten years ago—but there are not nearly enough. So I would like to provide you with three options we

believe would more effectively meet the needs of military and veteran's children while reducing the costs to taxpayers:

1. **Establish a charter school in Philadelphia to serve Scotland students.** There are currently 127 charter schools in Pennsylvania, including 11 cyber schools. These charter schools are part of the public school system; however, parents have a greater say in the schools' operations and taxpayers would spend far less to educate each student. A Scotland-type charter school could continue serving the majority of current students at a fraction of the cost to taxpayers, while also providing even more parents with educational options for their children.
2. **Expand Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC).** The EITC could be expanded to allocate funds specifically for the dependants of Pennsylvania's active-duty citizens. This program allows businesses to take a tax credit for their contributions to scholarships for students. The credit is currently capped at \$45 million for K-12 scholarships, and \$8 million for Pre-K scholarships.
3. **Create a state-funded scholarship program.** Instead of directly funding institutions or school districts, Pennsylvania should fund children and allow parents to choose the best school for their kids' education. Existing scholarship programs typically cost a fraction of the per-pupil cost for traditional public schools, and would represent a significant savings over the current per-pupil cost at the Scotland School.

In conclusion, while we appreciate the concerns and personal interests expressed by those opposed to Gov. Rendell's proposal to close the Scotland School, we cannot find the economic or educational justification for maintaining this publicly funded school. However, giving Scotland School families the means to send their children to the school of their choice will help provide both a more affordable and a higher quality education for these students.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.