

TESTIMONY PRESENTED BEFORE THE
JOINT SENATE AND HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
PERTAINING TO
SCOTLAND SCHOOL FOR VETERANS' CHILDREN

Jean Hartman Vargas

March 11, 2009

Good afternoon. My name is Jean Hartman Vargas. I am an elementary reading specialist at Scotland School for Veterans' Children and President of the SSVV Education Association. I wish to thank the members of the joint committee for the opportunity to appear before you in order to share my thoughts as to why Scotland School should remain open.

In my capacity as a reading specialist, I see every student in grades 3 through 6. This is my eleventh year at Scotland. Before that I taught two years overseas, six years at Carson Long Institute, and one year at Big Spring middle school for a total of 20 years. Obviously I've had a wide range of experiences in education, and I can say that Scotland makes a bigger difference in the lives of children than any other place I've taught.

On my very first day working at Scotland I went to lunch duty, and a student I had never met ran up to me and hugged me, then ran off. This had never happened to me before! I was amazed – and little did I know that things like that would become commonplace in my workday at Scotland. The children see us as part of their extended family. They trust us and know that we are here for them, and they are grateful for that. They feel safe here. They don't have to worry about gunshots, or getting beaten up, or being approached by the drug dealer on the corner. Every one of them will tell you that they are here to get a better education.

Many come to us years below grade level in reading and math. They almost always improve by leaps and bounds within the first year. I had one third grade student recently who was reading at a first grade level when he came to us, and was on grade level by the end of the year. It's not uncommon for our students to jump two grade levels like that in one year. By the time he reached fourth grade, he scored Proficient on the PSSA.

Other students who are on grade level or above come to us because they are not being challenged in their schools at home. We are able to challenge those students, and many of them become involved in the peer tutoring program which gives them a greater sense of responsibility and community.

In the past several weeks since we learned that funding for Scotland School was to be eliminated, the publicly disseminated information rationalizing that decision has dealt mainly with the dollars and cents cost of the school. There is no argument about how much money is involved in operating SSVC, and although I believe that the comparisons made between those dollars and the average amount spent on students in regular public schools is unfair, I will set that issue aside for the moment.

Rather, as a teacher, I would like to speak to you about the human cost associated with closing our school. I would like you to know our students and their families.

All of our students are at risk in one way or another. They come to us from environments that put them at risk. For some of them it is a broken family. For others a broken neighborhood through which they are afraid to walk just to get to school. Still others simply find no success in a traditional school setting and because they qualify for admission, have found their way to Scotland School. For many of our families, though, it is a combination of all these circumstances.

Our students come to us, not because their parents are looking for a residential prep school experience, but rather because we provide them – without exaggeration – a lifeline.

One of my students who comes immediately to mind is Linzell Swinson. His mother was shot and killed by his father, his father is in jail, and he and his older brother and younger sister are being raised by their maternal grandparents, both of whom were retired, but had to return to the workforce in order to support them. All three children are at Scotland. Linzell came to us in third grade as a struggling reader; now he's in fifth grade and is one of my best and most motivated readers. I was in his classroom when the children got the news that our school was closing. His first reaction was total dismay. He said, "I can't go back to that place!" He and the others in the class were completely unable to understand why this was happening to them. We tried to explain economics to them. Linzell asked if we could have a yard sale to raise money. Another student

said hopefully, "My dad has 200 dollars." By the end of the day the students were channeling their pain into letter-writing.

Then there are two siblings – a brother and sister. Their family has requested that we not include their names. The girl is a junior and her brother is in 8th grade. They come from a rural county and a family of 8 children. Their five younger siblings are all in foster care and are not doing well. If this school closes they will go back to their parents, but the other children will have to remain in foster care. However, because their father is seriously ill, having even them come home is going to create an even greater financial burden on the struggling family. Although they are very shy, they both have developed many friendships at Scotland and both excel academically. The girl is Battalion Commander of JROTC – a position normally only held by seniors – and holds the rank of Cadet Lt. Colonel, which is the highest JROTC rank attainable, one that demands dedication, discipline, and top-notch leadership skills. This is quite an accomplishment for a little girl who came to us in fourth grade – who never smiled and rarely talked to anyone.

They both had hopes that their siblings can come to Scotland so that they can be together in a place where people really care about them.

Both Linzell and the other young man wrote letters that I have appended to this testimony.

One of the arguments often put forth for closing the school is that we are no longer an orphans' school. Please don't misunderstand me. We have many wonderful caring parents at Scotland School, many of whom are here supporting us today. But we can't ignore those other children who haven't been so lucky. There are a lot of different ways to be an orphan, and what is the difference between the experience of an orphan and that of a child who has been abandoned because parents are in jail, addicted to drugs, etc.? The latter probably have more difficulties because they have the shame of what their parents are and the fear that they will end up the same way.

Another thing they like to point out is that many of our students are not all directly children of veterans - some are sponsored by grandparents or aunts and uncles who are vets, as is the case with Linzell Swinson whose grandfather is a veteran. What they don't say is that very often these are the only people who are actually raising them.

Case in point: Gloria Ravenel is the aunt and guardian of one of our seniors. She has been responsible for him since he was six years old. She sent him to Scotland School when he was 15. She said that she could see him going in a direction she didn't want. She does not regret her decision to send him to us because she has seen such a turnaround in him. Although he will graduate this

spring, she doesn't want to see the school close because it offers a chance to other children just like her nephew.

The environment at Scotland School is so different from the places our students live. The largest portion of them come from urban settings. Many of them have to deal with drugs and violence on a daily basis right outside their homes. Our quiet, rural campus provides an immediate and welcomed contrast for them. It is an oasis – a wonderful place to be brought up.

That's what we do, you understand. We don't just teach children – we bring them up by providing a loving, caring family for them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. All of us spend time after school working with our students. Many of us do double duty as coaches. Our house parents offer a stable home base in an atmosphere tempered with structure and discipline. We don't just teach children – we build tomorrow's citizens. How can we equate that with dollars and cents?

I could tell you about another of our families. Brenda Wingfield became the sole guardian of her grandson after her daughter died. Three generations of the men in her family – her father, her brother, her son and her son-in-law were Navy veterans, so when she found out about Scotland School, it was an answer to her prayers. She said that it only took six months to see the change in her grandson and that he is learning to be a good citizen. She wonders what will become of him if he

is sent back to the streets of Philadelphia, and she worries that he will end up in the penal system like so many other young men.

Right now, the only answer we have for her and all the other families at Scotland School is no answer. And that's a shame, because it doesn't take much research to figure out that the cost of running Scotland School is a bargain compared to the costs of medical assistance, food stamps, aid to needy families, subsidized housing, high dropout rates and the criminal justice system.

The proud history of Scotland School stretches back to the darkest days of the Civil War when then Governor Andrew Curtin made a promise to Pennsylvanians at the time of their enlistment. He told them that should they fall in battle, the state would take responsibility for their children. He said that "justice, humanity and patriotism" demanded that the state take up this obligation.

Since 1895, sending a child to Scotland School has been a privilege Pennsylvania's veterans have earned by placing themselves in harm's way for the protections of the citizens of this Commonwealth. Even as the fate of Scotland School hangs in the balance, Pennsylvania's sons and daughters are risking their lives in combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan, and serving honorably in other parts of the world. This spring, some of the members of the 2009 graduating class of Scotland School will join them.

What an irony it will be if – for the first time since 1864 – these young men and women will go off to war without the promise of this haven for their own children should they need it. What an irony it will be that the school that turned around their lives and the lives of so many other veterans’ children would cease to be at almost the same moment that they take up their responsibilities as citizen soldiers.

Please do not break faith with our students, their families and our state’s veterans.

Please restore the funding for the Scotland School for Veterans’ Children.

Thank you for your time and attention.

To Whom It May Concern:

Hi! My name is Linzell Swinson. I am in the 5th grade at Scotland School for Veteran's Children. We heard that you are shutting us down. We were all crying! We were asking, "Why us?" Then I thought it is not just about me. It is also about the adults. You're taking away their jobs. This is why America is having problems. There will be 200 more people without jobs. They went through all of this to be unemployed? They have something in them that make you laugh and be happy. For instance, Ms. Becky is funny. Mrs. Mouer is nice and there are more teachers that I can mention, but that is not why I am writing.

I am writing because of us children. Where are we going to go? Somewhere where the killing rate is high? Somewhere the school can't afford textbooks and computers? Somewhere where your teacher will try to hit you and then lie to your family? I don't want to go back to that. Do you want me to go back to that? I hope not.

We children are the future. When you tear this family apart, you are tearing yours apart as well as ours. One day one of us might just be in the Army. You might just think out of 288 students 7 students have people in the military. That's just not right! Out of 288 students, there are 288 students have had someone in the military.

For instance, my Grandpop who is still alive fought in Vietnam. Obama says "Change that we can believe in!" I thought that this country would change healthcare for children's healthcare. It didn't change yet. Well, it doesn't feel like it. I can't believe 288 students are being laid off from this school. Please don't make Obama look like a liar.

This school isn't like Philadelphia. This school does the following things

- Safety
- A home away from home
- A warm place to stay
- A family
- Good education
- Small classes
- Clean environment
- Better specials like art
- I can play an instrument

- Food
- Tutors
- Encouragement
- Sport programs
- Clothes
- Doctors and dentists
- Good night's sleep
- Good teachers

You can see why I like this school.

Let me tell you a story about a little kid. At the age of 6, his mom was trying to get money for the landlord. So she could not get it, and they had to move. Money was hard to get since his Dad left. So this mom was left with two boys and two little girls. She was struggling to get money. Then she got help from her friend. Then one day her friend went to the phone and was told that the kids' mom was shot and killed. They thought "Where will he go?" That day he went to his Grandpop's house. The next week he went to a funeral. He saw his mom in the casket and cried all week. The two boys went to a new school. They got called racist names. His Grandpop did not like the school. So he found a new school. He said it was called Scotland School for Veteran's Children. He thought it was a bad school. He went there to meet the staff. They were all very nice and happy. Then we met some of the students. They were nice too. Then we said "This is the school I want to go to. This is not a bad place, but a great place." This boy is me. Linzell Swinson. Now you see what this school has done for me? If you close it, all that I have said about that school in Philadelphia, well I don't want to go back there. Do you want me to go back to that school? I hope not. I want to stay here where people care about me. Do you know what will happen to me if you close Scotland? Please don't close my school...my home.

Linzell Swinson
5th grade

My name is XXXXXXXXXXXX. I am the proud son of XXXXXXXXXXXX, a retired man out of the military. My parents never had a lot of money but they always managed to make sure I got the best I could get. That is why they sent me to Scotland they knew that I could get a better education here.

When I was sent to Scotland I was in third and now I am in eighth grade. From the time I came until now I have been through a lot. The one thing I did know was that I could always go to the teachers, houseparents, and students for help. In third grade, I made honor roll for the first time. I can thank the teachers because they spent their own time to make sure I succeeded. In fourth grade, my family came to even tougher times. In that time I came even closer to my teachers, houseparents, and other students. At times when I needed them they were there. Students helped me with my spelling. Teachers continued to push me forward in my education. Houseparents treated me as their own. They went out and bought me shoes, took me to get haircuts, and took me to their house. My fifth grade year was the worst of all my years. Thankfully my teachers, houseparents from the year before and that year, along with the students once more helped me through it. My friends picked me up when I was down. My teachers took their time to help me and went out and bought me things when I needed it or just to show they cared. The houseparents still treated me as a son. The next year I had about the same things happening as the year before. My seventh grade year was a little better still with all the help from houseparents past and present, teachers past and present, and all the students. Now is my eighth-grade year this year was going very well until February 3, 2009. This was when we as students and the staff found out that Scotland would be closing. When we were told this, crying erupted. This is because S.S.V.C. is not just a school, it is a home. We were also crying because the people here aren't just staff and students we are all family. On June forth, when school ends I can guarantee you that everyone will be crying. We are family! Don't make this family break up.