

**Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars Comments on
Proposed Closing of the Scotland School for Veterans Children
as Part of Governor Rendell's FY 2009-10 Budget**

*Written testimony for the joint hearing of the
PA House and PA Senate Veterans Affairs Committees
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To members of the Pennsylvania House and Senate Committees on Veterans Affairs:

The Department of PA Veterans of Foreign Wars consists of 115,000 combat veterans of all ages ... from World War II through the current War on Terror. In addition to fighting hard to protect freedom, the VFW has always been on the front lines to protect the interests of veterans and their families. After their military service, our members continue servicing their state and nation because they know that freedom should give people from all walks of life opportunities to improve their lives.

The VFW wants today's Scotland School students, and future students, to have great opportunity to become more than they might otherwise be.

SSVC provides students with a better chance to succeed in school, which will help them to develop personal responsibility, respect the rights of others, enjoy a safe atmosphere and learn team-building skills—all of which helps students create and take advantage of future opportunities.

The VFW wants the State to keep Scotland School for Veterans Children open to continue giving a special group of Pennsylvania's youth a foundation for future success.

While creating a budget requires focusing only on numbers, you cannot apply the same thought process to fully measure the impact that Scotland School has on students—whether you're dealing with current students, past graduates and future students. You cannot measure opportunity and hope in dollars.

Please consider the many positive qualities of life and learning at Scotland School as outstanding dividends for the State's investment of budget dollars. We truly believe that the return on this investment is as good as any other State program.

While we recognize the need to contain costs and to operate within a budget, the decision of whether to keep the school open should be focused on how well Scotland School delivers on its mission. To measure mission success you have to look at the students.

Signs of mission success are everywhere. Every year, the VFW invites representatives from the SSVC come to our State Convention to report on activities and programs at the school. The school officials always bring students along to tell our members how they enjoy going to the school. I am not stretching the truth when I say that the students are always commended for their maturity, enthusiasm and bright outlook on their futures. Tears often flow when you listen to their reports about the difficulties they overcame and why they are thankful for the school.

This school provides a safe haven in which these youth can live, learn and mature. The classes and staff motivate and support them to achieve more than might otherwise be possible. The extracurricular activities teach them important social skills. The sports programs improve their physical condition and help them achieve personal and team goals. This multi-faceted approach to preparing youth for positive futures has generated positive results.

The fact is that many of SSVC's students come from areas that cannot provide this type of structure, opportunity and growth. Students leave prepared to be productive, responsible citizens who want to make a difference.

Hope and opportunity are alive and well at the school. At a time when politicians are trying to instill a sense of hope in all Americans, today's students and future enrollees at Scotland School should not have their hope taken away.

So we encourage you to allow hope and opportunity to drive your decision-making on this issue, not just dollars. We have to ask from where these students are going to get such a large and positive influence in their lives if they cannot attend Scotland School.

If the state can afford to spend hundreds of millions of dollars building new or expanded sports facilities and millions more every year on discretionary spending projects, how can we cut one dollar from veterans programs?

The War on Terror is creating new veterans each day. What message is the State sending to our brave and honorable PA Guard personnel and others serving on active duty status if we slash benefits for their families while they risk their lives to protect our freedom? Remember, it's not just the soldier who serves. Entire military families, from spouses and children down through extended family members, endure great sacrifices and hardship to support their loved ones in a military uniform. Providing Scotland School as a benefit to these extended families is indeed a way to honor the service and sacrifice made by veterans and their loved ones.

How can we tell veterans that the State no longer sees this school as a priority when kids from their immediate or extended families benefit so much from Scotland School? What message does it send to our brave PA Guard personnel and other Pennsylvanians serving on active duty status if we slash benefits for them and their families while they risk their lives and are away from home?

We've already asked troops today are in combat zones, those already back from this war and veterans from all wars to make life-changing sacrifices. Let's continue this benefit, which allows them to share a life-changing opportunity with their families. There are plenty of other places to reduce State spending in ways that don't send a negative message to veterans and their families.

We ask the Governor and Legislature not to cut programs that benefit veterans and their families. We also ask that veterans and their families are not put in the position of accepting cuts to some benefit programs to protect against the potential of change in status of other programs. Military veterans who have served Pennsylvania and America—and those serving in harm's way today—deserve the absolute best Pennsylvania can offer—even during difficult times—which may require state officials and lawmakers to give veterans and their families special consideration.

Combining the number of Pennsylvanians serving in combat zones today, with those who served earlier in this war and with veterans from earlier wars and their families, yields a large segment of the State's population. This decision will impact more than just the current students at the school.

Let's remember that hope is the seed from which courage, commitment and change grow. It is our youth who need and benefit from hope the most. Please keep Scotland School open as a source of hope for many youth. Doing so will lead to many opportunities for these students and graduates to have an immeasurable impact on their local communities, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the United States of America and the entire world.

Thank you.