

Giving Parents a Choice, Giving Children a Chance

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Introduction

As most of us are painfully aware, we are losing a generation of children. Philadelphia's high dropout rate has significant consequences for the city and its neighborhoods. Studies show that 75 percent of all Pennsylvania inmates are high school dropouts. In a recent Pew Charitable Trust study, 77 percent of Philadelphia's public school parents surveyed have seriously considered sending their child to a Catholic, charter or private school but could not because of financial barriers.

Over the past ten years, the landscape for educational options in Philadelphia has changed dramatically. Over 160,000 children attend public "district" schools, 40,000 attend public charter schools and 30,000 attend private schools.

The Problem: Empty Seats in Safe Neighborhood Schools

Charter schools are beginning to offer excellent choices for parents in Philadelphia, but spaces in these schools

are extremely limited and accessible only by lottery. Meanwhile, there are thousands of empty seats in safe, neighborhood private schools with committed teachers. A wealth of quality, low-tuition private schools (over 200) exist in Philadelphia and are successfully educating urban children. These schools serve as anchors in their communities and have been serving a predominantly low-income population for decades. Most of these schools are oases of academic excellence in the inner city.

What matters most to parents is that their children attend schools where they are successful, safe and engaged. If the community they live in doesn't provide that basic combination, parents will do anything to give their children the opportunity for a better education.

The Solution: CSFP Scholarships

At Children's Scholarship Fund of Philadelphia (CSFP), we've learned that with a relatively small amount of financial assistance, low-income families will choose the right school for their children. Parents are committed to their children's success and will make significant financial sacrifices for their children's education.

Research confirms that quality, K-8 education is critical to long-term academic success. Studies also show that a student who finishes 8th grade in a private school is twice as likely to graduate from high school and attend and graduate from college.

What does this tell us? We can have a profound impact on Philadelphia's schoolchildren if we give parents a choice. Parents will make the right decisions for their children, make appropriate sacrifices and will produce the outcomes we all desire. Over 90 percent of children in the schools served by CSFP scholarships are graduating from high school on time and going to college. Most of these kids are from the same zip codes as children who are graduating district schools at a rate of 57 percent. What if all income-eligible parents were able to receive a scholarship for their child to attend the best school they could find?

Underperforming public schools, in time, may be converted to quality schools. However, we have an obligation to children who can't wait for those changes. Better schools exist. They are just "down the street." All these children require is the financial assistance to attend them.

Private school outcomes are compelling. The demand is enormous. Many schools have empty seats. We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to do more for our children by getting them into schools that currently exist, where students are safe and learning.

CSFP was founded as part of a national program in 1998. Children's Scholarship Fund (CSF) is the only national K-8th grade scholarship organization in the country. Since its inception, CSF has served more than 111,000 needy

children. This year alone, CSF is helping 30,000 children in 35 partner programs across the country by providing more than \$28 million in direct scholarship support.

Here in Philadelphia, CSFP has raised more than \$20,000,000 over the past ten years to support four-year scholarships for low-income children. The Pennsylvania Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) has been a significant factor in our ability to raise funds and increase the number of children we serve. Companies are looking for ways to be charitable in the most cost-effective manner. The EITC affords them the opportunity to give up to \$300,000 per year for two years and to receive a 90 percent tax credit.

CSFP is able to attract corporate EITC donations because every dollar donated is matched by 33 cents from the national CSF. This leverage is significantly increased by the co-contribution of the CSFP families, who must contribute a minimum of \$500 toward each child's tuition. The schools also underwrite some portion of tuition, so the overall leverage of a corporate gift exceeds 14:1. The average tuition at these schools is approximately \$2,800 per year, so a gift of \$1,500 is effectively doubled, providing a full year of tuition funding for a CSFP student.

The business community has overwhelmingly responded. To date, over 3,600 companies have pledged in excess of \$350 million to fund low-income scholarships. During 2007–08, 44,000 children across Pennsylvania benefited

from EITC scholarships. The EITC has accomplished what many in Pennsylvania have been advocating for years: getting the business community more involved in education. The EITC enables companies to support local nonprofit charities, [at minimal cost](#), instead of sending their tax dollars to Harrisburg. It's that simple.

CSFP scholarships make educational choice possible for thousands of families. Today, CSFP supports 3,000 students in more than 200 tuition-based schools. All CSFP scholarships are awarded by random lottery, and the parent chooses the school. This allows the scholarships to move with families if they choose to change schools. Once a family wins the lottery, up to three children in that family can receive a scholarship—a policy that helps to stabilize the family and give all kids access to a better education, not just one child.

Tracking Success and Looking to the Future

CSFP has measured student outcomes for the past five years and will continue to track our “graduates” through high school. Each survey year has demonstrated that CSFP scholarship students were performing at or above grade levels in math, writing and reading on standardized tests. School attendance rates were in excess of 96 percent throughout this period.

Philadelphia's future depends on our children, and saving

our most vulnerable kids requires immediate solutions. CSFP, in conjunction with the Pennsylvania EITC, is proud to have provided immediate, effective educational options for thousands of low-income children. Meeting the educational needs of inner-city kids can be as simple as giving them access to good neighborhood schools that already exist. Education scholarships made possible by the partnership of businesses with private charities like CSFP can open these schools' doors, providing a lifeline to kids and empowering parents to find the right fit for each child.

Evie McNiff is the founder and board president of the Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia. CSFP has awarded 8,000 K–8th grade low-income scholarships over the last 10 years. Evie serves on the boards of CHILD (Churchill Institute on Leadership and Development) and the Philadelphia School Partnership and is an advisor to the *Philadelphia Social Innovations Journal*. She holds a BA from Yale University.