

TESTIMONY
SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING
NORTHERN LEBANON SCHOOL DISTRICT
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Parent Representative
Pequea Valley School District

Hello. My name is Monica Frank. I am the mother of Stephen, a 7th grade student at the 21st Century Cyber Charter School. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of my family's experiences.

I'm here today because school choice saved my son. Here is our story.

When my son Stephen was born, I made promises to him and myself. I promised that I would be there for him every step of the way, to encourage, protect, and help him to reach for the stars. But, I've been challenged to keep that promise when making decisions that affect Stephen's education.

When Stephen reached Middle School, a few boys on his football team began teasing him. A few weeks after the teasing began, I found that Stephen was being threatened through Facebook posts. I immediately took these posts to the coaches, who ignored the severity of the situation. His father and I instructed Stephen to delete all school friends from his Facebook account, hoping it would take care of the situation.

My husband and I thought to use the situation as a learning experience, and simply move on. But the boys continued to pick on Stephen once school began. The taunting and teasing worsened, and slowly, my child began changing in front of my eyes. Once we recognized that this was not just a case of being teased but a serious instance of being bullied, we needed to do more. Being an educator in the state of Pennsylvania, I knew about the laws pertaining to education. I knew that our home school district was responsible to provide a free and appropriate education for my child. But, when a child is being bullied day after day and no longer feels safe in his learning environment, his learning is inhibited.

I tried reaching out to the vice principal of our school. He told me that if Stephen ignored the other boys, it would make things easier on him. The guidance counselor grew tired of Stephen's complaints and went so far as to threaten him with detention with the other boys if he continued to discuss what was going on. As things became progressively worse, I asked that my son's class section be changed. I was told this could not be done. So, things went unchanged for a long time.

With the passing of a few months, Stephen stopped eating. When we took him to the doctor, he had lost 40 pounds. It was at that time that his doctor diagnosed him. Due

to being bullied, he had developed an eating disorder. Both his doctor and I wrote letters to the school, this time demanding that Stephen's classes be changed. I became increasingly vigilant. Through many emails and phone calls, I re-stated the law and fought for my son. By the time the school agreed to change his classes, the damage had already been done.

By February of that school year, my vibrant, funny child had no desire to do anything. I was devastated that I had let him down and failed to keep him safe. Then, one night really changed things for us. While Stephen and I were chatting, he said, "Mom, I now understand why kids kill themselves from being bullied." When I heard those words, I felt as if I had been socked in the stomach. I called the school principal the next morning to let him know that we would pull Stephen from the school because he was no longer being provided an appropriate education. He was not being kept safe.

By this time, there were only a few weeks left in the school year. Without another choice, Stephen had to finish 6th grade through the school district's cyber school program. But this was not the best alternative for my son. This school's cyber program provided very little teacher support, no social interaction, and left him in complete isolation throughout the school day. I knew that Stephen needed to interact with his teachers and learn to socialize with his peers again. So, we decided that come fall, he would attend the 21st Century Cyber School.

Fast-forward a year. Stephen now attends 21st Century. He enjoys school again. He is able to complete schoolwork on a schedule that works best for him. He really enjoys the regular interaction with his teachers and classmates in the Virtual Offices and Live Classes. He also attends the school's live PE classes, community outreach events, and field trips. While he once shied away from social situations, 21st Century helped him to again look forward to time with new friends and teachers.

As a result of cyber charter school, Stephen has excelled academically as well. He made distinguished honor roll each quarter because he is again able to focus on his schoolwork.

But most importantly cyber charter school has given me my son back. He is so happy and full of life again. His smile lights up a room. I took that smile for granted until nearly a year passed before I saw it again. While he has emotional scars that still need to heal, I know he is in a much better place.

This situation ultimately became a learning experience for my husband and me. I learned that I have choices, even when the school district tells me I don't. I learned that I need to know the law and become my child's advocate and fight for what I feel is best for him. At 21CCCS, Stephen is receiving a free, safe, appropriate, and high quality education. Sending our child to 21st Century was the best decision we could make for our son and I'm glad we made it.

My family's experience is not unique. Students being bullied is a real issue. Parents need options to help tackle this issue. My child's life is precious and too important not to have options. Please don't support legislation, like SB335, that will ultimately destroy school choice for parents desperately seeking better learning environments for their children. A slash to funding will remove our choice and deny our children the kind of education they deserve. Please help stories like mine to be heard. Help keep school choice. And help to make a difference for our children.

Thank you for your time.