

Scotland School

Joint Hearing on Proposed Closure

Eliminated in Governor Rendell's 2009/10 Budget.



Scotland School for Veterans' Children was established in 1895 to provide educational services for children of Pennsylvania's veterans.

The Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees held a joint informational hearing on the Governor's decision to close the Scotland School for Veterans' Children by June 30, 2009.

The Hearing was held from 1-4pm Wednesday, March 11th, in Hearing Room 1 of the North Office Building in Harrisburg. Nearly three-hundred individuals attended.

Comments were received by the Pennsylvania Department of

Military and Veterans Affairs, the Department of Education, the statewide veterans' organizations, and staff, faculty, parents, and alumni from the Scotland School for Veterans' Children.

Established in 1895, the Scotland School for Veterans' Children provides educational services for the children of hundreds of Pennsylvania veterans.

A summary of the testimony from that hearing follows.

Committee Members

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MAJOR GENERAL JESSICA WRIGHT, PA DEPT OF MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

Governor Rendell's FY 2009/10 general budget proposes the elimination of 101 state programs, one of which is Scotland School.

Its long and proud history is worthy of our praise and admiration. In 1895, Civil War-era schools and homes were created for war orphans. Over the years, the name, the mission and the focus of Scotland School have changed. Today, the School provides elementary and secondary education.

Today's students need not be war orphans or even children of veterans. In 1994, the law was changed to permit grandchildren, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters of veterans to be admitted on the same basis as children of veterans. Scotland School has identified 22 students whose veteran sponsor is currently in military service

Operating a residential school to provide elementary and secondary education to relatives of veterans is not a federally-recognized veterans' benefit, unlike state veterans' homes.

In Pennsylvania, free public education is offered by local school districts, and every child at Scotland School has the opportunity to take advantage of a wide range of other educational opportunities.

Based upon enrollment figures, Scotland School is spending more than \$45,000 per year per student for nine months of schooling and residential services.

No other state operates a school like Scotland School, as the Indiana School is scheduled to close in May 2009.

Providing elementary and secondary education to relatives of veterans in a residential setting is not a core function of state government or an entitlement.

DMVA is committed to making the current academic year a success. However, with the current economic considerations, keeping the school operational long-term, is not a viable option.

DEPUTY SECRETARY DIANE CASTELBUONO, PA DEPT OF EDUCATION

Scotland School has annual operating costs of \$13.5 million – more than \$45,000 per student for a nine-month academic year. Some of those costs are associated with the residential nature of the school.

But even if those residential costs are removed, Scotland School spends more than \$28,000 per student for academics – making it by far the highest spending public school in the commonwealth.

By comparison, one of the highest spending school districts in Pennsylvania, the Lower Merion School District in Montgomery County, spends about \$25,000 per pupil – a full \$3,000 less per student. Lower Merion has a deeper, more rigorous curriculum and stronger academic performance for less money.

Last year, the Department placed Scotland School in "warning" status after it failed to meet proficiency targets on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. Scotland's academic performance does not compare favorably to the five other districts in Franklin County or to the home districts of many of Scotland's students.

The Commonwealth has the duty to ensure that taxpayer dollars are invested wisely and economically. It is neither fiscally responsible nor educationally beneficial to continue the operation of a school that costs nearly four times the state average per student yet posts only middling academic results.

The Department of Education wants all students to have access to appropriate, high quality educational services that are provided in the most cost-effective manner possible. The reality is that the Scotland School reaches too few students at too great a cost when alternative educational opportunities are readily available.

The Department is providing the resources and guidance needed to easily integrate into a new school environment, whether that means re-enrolling in their home school district or finding placement through alternative educational opportunities such as charter schools or special admissions schools.

To date, 74 of 270 some students have been placed and/or applied to magnet schools, charters, and residential schools.

MR. MATTHEW BROUILLETTE, CEO/PRESIDENT, COMMONWEALTH FOUNDATION

The Rendell Administration'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 Philadelphia'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.

Today, Pennsylvanians have more educational options than they did ten years ago. There are three options that would more effectively meet the needs of military and veteran's children while reducing the costs to taxpayers:

1. Establish a charter school. - 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 - The EITC could be expanded to allocate funds specifically for the dependents of Pennsylvania's active-duty citizens.
3. Create 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 children and for their kids' education.

LAWRENCE F. JONES, JR., PRESIDENT OF PA COALITION OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools is a representative organization comprised of 120 member schools in Pennsylvania. Collectively, our schools provide educational options for more than 70,000 students. Like many in Pennsylvania, I was made aware via news report of the proposed decision to close the Scotland School.

The report stated that between 70% and 80% of displaced students reside in Philadelphia and would be returning to Philadelphia schools. I was shocked to hear that charter schools were presented as another form of school choice for the parents and students from Scotland. It was clear to me and many charter operators that this contingency plan was seriously flawed.

I believe that Pennsylvania's charter schools provide viable educational options to parents throughout the commonwealth. I also believe that parents of the Scotland School may find excellent alternative schooling in Philadelphia's charter schools. However, none of the Scotland parents can be guaranteed enrollment in a Philadelphia brick & mortar charter school. Although legislation repealing enrollment caps

in charter schools was recently passed in Pennsylvania, the School District of Philadelphia continues to enforce enrollment caps in charter schools. This has resulted in more than 20,000 students on waiting lists for Philadelphia charter schools. By law, any school with more applicants than enrollment spaces (virtually every charter in the city), must utilize a lottery to select students. Further, for a number of reasons, most Scotland students are not good cyber candidates.

At this late date, most schools' waiting lists are significant in each grade. Therefore, the parents of Scotland's students would have limited opportunity to enroll in brick & mortar charter schools if they were to begin the research and application process today.

In closing, the shuttering of any school creates hardship and problems for students, families, and the community. Providing a sound, equitable, comparable, and feasible educational option serves to ease the blow for all concerned. However, due to current laws, regulations, and School District policies, charter schools are not a feasible option for Scotland's parents unless statutory changes are made and creative finances can be realized.

MR. FRANK FRAME, PRESIDENT, SSVF FOUNDATION TRUSTEE

Some say it is too costly, to run Scotland School. Perhaps the question should be, "What is acceptable?" Is \$35,800 acceptable, as this is the stated cost at Valley Forge Military Academy (VFMA) which some have mentioned as an alternative even though this facility would not meet the demands of Scotland's grade third through six grades. Also VFMA is supported by an endowment of \$10,000,000.

If we look at the problem philosophically, as this glass of water many would define the problem as, the glass is one-half empty, i.e. SSVF is too costly, an expense the Commonwealth can no longer afford. Many others would say, "The glass is half full, it provides the children of veterans, many from dysfunctional families an opportunity for a bright future, hope, if you will." I would assert that it is a necessity; the Commonwealth can ill afford to lose!

Those who see the one-half empty glass also insist on comparing the cost of a public education to the cost of Scotland's residential education, a true case of comparing, "apples to oranges." Residential education entails the education of the whole child; academically,

physically and spiritually, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

It has been said by some that foresight of today's politicians' is no greater than the current crisis or the next election. I for one do not believe this. Our great country and Commonwealth have not achieved their greatness for lack of "forward thinkers" and "doers".

Our history is replete with example of those who when "confronted with the right thing to do", "did the right thing!" That is where my faith rested in 1991 and that is where it remains today.

Is justice served by closing this school without exploring alternatives and solutions? Is it reasonable to find placements in four short months.

This institution has enabled many young people to achieve success, when they might not otherwise have had that opportunity. Closing the school without exploring alternatives is a disservice to the military families who depend on the school now, and who would benefit from it in the future.

MS. JEAN VARGAS, PRESIDENT, SSVF EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

The children attending Scotland School see their teachers as part of an extended family. They trust them, know that they are there for them and are grateful for that. They feel safe at Scotland as they don't have to worry about gunshots, 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 arrive at Scotland years below grade level in reading and math; however, they almost always improve their performance within the first year. It's not uncommon for Scotland students to improve two grade levels within one academic year.

Other students who are on grade level or above come to Scotland because they are not being challenged in their home districts. At Scotland, they are challenged, and often involved in the peer tutoring program which gives them a greater sense of responsibility and community.

There is no argument about how much money is involved in operating SSVF. The question is how do

you place a cost on the losses to students and parents if school is closed?

All of the Scotland students are at risk in one way or another. They come from "at-risk" environments - a broken family, a broken neighborhood, a broken community.

The environment at Scotland School is very different from the places which most Scotland students live. Many of them have to deal with drugs and violence on a daily basis right outside their homes. Many live in urban rather than rural neighborhoods.

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 if the school that turned around their lives would cease at the time they take up their responsibilities as citizen soldiers.

MR. ANGELO ADAMS, SSVC ALUMNI, CLASS OF 1996

As a 1996 graduate of Scotland School for Veterans' Children, a 2001 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, and a 2008 graduate of the University of Michigan-Ross School of Business; I am very disheartened to hear of the recent news that Governor Rendell plans to close Scotland School at the end of the year. I am a successful businessman today because of the values that SSVC instilled in me.

I served five years in the US Army including one tour in Iraq with the 82D Airborne Division. With two kids of my own, I always dreamed of sending them Scotland. I cannot believe that the Governor plans to get rid of SSVC when we need it most. The Governor wants to close a school that provides an excellent and safe learning environment for the Veterans' kids.

I understand that the State must have a balanced budget; however, the sacrifice should be a shared one. We should not ask our soldiers to fight for freedom while at the same time take away a benefit that provides a safe, secure, and educational environment to the soldiers' children.

Scotland is utopia for many of the inner city students who attend. Just like many, I came to Scotland with test scores that were subpar. But with the help of my teachers and the dedication for continued excellence, I was able to quickly gain understanding and better my academics. Instead of singling out SSVC for being the only school of its kind, we should be using it as a model for creating other schools across the state and country.

In closing, I would only point to the success of the many graduates of Scotland throughout its history. On average 80% of the students matriculate to Universities. SSVC touts graduates of West Point, UPenn, Columbia, Drexel, Temple, Shippensburg, Millersville, Indiana, West Chester. I could go on and on to include others some of who have become wonderful mothers and fathers; something they never had.

The majority, if not the totality, are first generation college graduates, who garnered their future at Scotland. I know firsthand that they would tell you that if not for Scotland, they would not be the success they are today.

DR. HERBERT TURNER, III, SSVC ALUMNI, CLASS OF 1979

SSVC altered my life trajectory by offering my mother an alternative to the public school education I would have received based on the West Philadelphia neighborhood in which we lived. More importantly, SSVC has altered the life trajectory of hundreds of SSVC alumni.

The SSVC Foundation began administering this 42 question survey in late December 2008 to the graduating classes of 1992-97, representing 163 alumni. The survey looked at a range of questions including: employment, income, tax contributions, preparedness for college/work, worship, family structure, and criminal justice contact. Today I will focus on income, taxes, and college attainment.

Most alumni in the sample live in Pennsylvania (82%), 97% are African-American, and, on average, are 32 years of age. In 2007, almost all were working a full-time job at 40 hours a week (89%) which they've held, on average, for five years. The plurality earned a gross income of between \$51,000 - \$75,000 and close to two-thirds paid at least \$1000 and almost half paying \$1,000 - \$2,999 in state taxes.

A majority of alumni report pursuing and completing higher education (76%, n=29).

Admittedly, this is lower than the 90% often reported for Scotland graduating classes. This is because the 76% considers not only whether alumni pursue higher education, but also whether they complete it. Thus, the 76% is more informative, and more powerful, in that it begins to document outcomes for SSVC alumni who pursue higher education. More than half of SSVC alumni have completed a Bachelors or Masters degree (54%).

When asked how SSVC prepared them for life, another SSVC alumnus responded:

"I have two older siblings that did not go to SSVC and did not go to college, and the three of us who went to SSVC all graduated from college. I just think SSVC prepared us better than public schools and the expectation of higher education was greater."

MS. TAMIKA WHITNEY, REPRESENTATIVE, SSVV PARENTS' ASSOCIATION

I reside in West Philadelphia. Two of my children currently attend Scotland School for Veterans' Children ("SSVC"). Their attendance is sponsored by their father's service as an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard. My young daughters are flourishing at SSVC as are other students.

On February 2, 2009, many parents and guardians of SSVC students received, in a letter that was sent by express mail, notification on behalf of the Governor's office that, SSVC was not included in the 2009-10 budget and would close June 30, 2009. The letter indicated the cost of educating 288 students was excessive and compared residential education with traditional public education. It was a harsh and insensitive blow to the parents, students, and staff. It was essentially an eviction notice from the state of Pennsylvania. We were left with little or no options available to find the academic environment that may best accommodate our children.

The deadline to apply for Special Admission and magnet schools in Philadelphia had passed. Charter schools select their children by lottery and most have waiting lists as applications were submitted prior to

February 2, 2009. Some parents and students were left feeling hopeless with no options.

When considering the cost, consider the less directly measurable benefits. SSVC is filling a void during the most precious developmental stages of our children's lives and establishing stability that may not have come any other way than through SSVC.

For some families SSVC was not the first choice and for others it was their only choice. The children that have attended SSVC are from different social, economic and academic backgrounds. A commonality that they share is that they are from a family where a family member gave their committed service to our country.

SSVC has proven its ability to effectively assist in the education and upbringing of leaders and achievers. They are college graduates, servicemen and women, doctors, lawyers, tax payers, living and working in some of your very own communities. The cost of SSVC is a small percentage of a life-long investment that will continue to be re-invested.

MR. PAUL HASTINGS, CHAIRMAN, STATE VETERANS COMMISSION

The Veterans' Commission was not consulted by anyone in the administration to request input on the potential closure of the Scotland School for Veterans' Children. As the Chairman, I received notification the afternoon before the Governor was to announce the elimination of funding for SSVC in his budget address.

My initial reaction was what arrangements have been made to place the students currently enrolled at the school? This notification of potential closure came as a complete shock and surprise. Sending a child to Scotland School is a privilege Pennsylvania's veterans have earned by placing themselves in harm's way for the protection of the citizens of the Commonwealth and the country.

Military deployments have increased significantly in recent years, and there will be a continuing need for a strong and adequately staffed military. Consequently, there is a growing need for the Scotland School.

There are costs to taxpayers and to society for higher dropout rates, a lessened tendency to further one's education beyond high school and, in extreme cases, the

temptation to engage in crime and the resulting entanglement in the criminal justice system. These factors would offset a significant portion of the small savings that would be realized from closing the school.

Even in the best case, giving families only seven months to make other arrangements before the beginning of the next school year places a hardship on them and is extremely unfair. Many families will not be able to make acceptable arrangements in such a short time.

At the state Veterans' Commission meeting of February 6, 2009, the Veterans' Commission voted on a motion opposing the removal of funding for the Scotland School for Veterans' Children. The motion was adopted unanimously.

In 2007, a Defense Solutions study found that that "A decision to modify, retain, or to close Scotland School should rest on more than a simple analysis of potential savings. We urge the General Assembly to consider what is best for the children." I fully concur with that statement.

MR. LARRY HOLMAN, PRESIDENT, PA WAR COUNCIL

As a resident of Philadelphia, I am particularly concerned about this issue because many of the resident students of SSVV are from the city. Additionally, veterans have indicated their utter dismay.

The initial concern is the loss of a veterans benefit. While I sympathize with Governor Rendell in his efforts to balance the budget in these economic times, it does not seem fair to do it at the expense of veterans and their families, who have sacrificed mightily for our country and our Commonwealth.

Another concern is the lack of consultation before the fact with the veteran community. I would have appreciated the opportunity to participate in a careful study of options.

If all the stakeholders (parents, students, faculty, administration, DMVA leadership, veteran community leadership, state budget officials, etc.) were to gather together and brainstorm this problem under creative facilitation, could a better solution be reached?

The rationale for the proposed closing appears to be driven purely by budget considerations. Of course,

every budget ends up being a compromise between competing interests. Can we be certain that funds formerly appropriated for SSVV will be used any more wisely elsewhere in the budget?

PA's veteran community has already demonstrated its willingness to assist the budget. At the February War Veterans Council meeting, the membership withdrew support for two of its legislative goals and approved reducing the frequency of their meetings from monthly to quarterly to reduce travel costs.

The PA War Council also voted to support the Mellow Amendment to SB 57 which calls on a one-year LBFC study on the proposed closure of Scotland and the Scranton School for the Deaf.

In conclusion, let us please keep our priorities straight and send the correct messages to those impressionable youngsters, of whom Secretary of State Clinton may say, "It takes a village to raise." Timely resolution of this issue is critical as the uncertainty, anxiety, and false hope thus engendered may result in great damage to SSVV by the loss of some staff and students.

SUMMARY

Each of the individuals offering comment before the Senate and House Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees provided a different perspective on the Scotland School closing.

In general, the Committees expressed concern with balancing the state budget on the backs of veteran children, the closure notification process which resulted in students being told prior to their parents, and the Administration's limited student placements plans for the 2009/10 academic year.

After receiving all of the testimony, Senator Lisa Baker, chair of the Senate Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committee, expressed her support for Senator Bob Mellow's (D-22) resolution to suspend the closing of Scotland School for Veterans' Children until a thorough legislative study and review can be conducted.

"The students and families have been given little or no opportunity to plan for their future," Baker said. "It is very unsettling that families are being forced to make

decisions now, with no real assurances that their children's needs will be met."

Baker said that those interested in offering their input on the governor's plan can go to her website www.senatorbaker.com or send an email to scotland@pasen.gov

Established in 1895, the Scotland School for Veterans' Children provides educational services for the children of hundreds of Pennsylvania veterans. It is located in Greene Township, Franklin County.

