

TESTIMONY ON GIRARD COLLEGE

HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

March 20, 1998

Good morning. My name is Heidi Goldsmith. I am Founder and Executive Director of the International Center for Residential Education, the Washington, DC-based non-profit organization founded to improve the quality and increase the availability of residential education for at-risk children and youth. The Center assists communities in opening new residential schools for at-risk young people, identifies and shares "best practices" among existing residential schools in the U.S. and those overseas. It conducts a wide variety of public education activities for federal and state policymakers, educators, social welfare professionals, and the general public, so that they will understand the potential and the reality of this option for some of our most at-risk young people. I have been working with legislators in the Commonwealth on the proposed Residential Education Act, and through this involvement have previously testified twice, to a committee of this House and to the Urban Education Commission.

Pennsylvania is currently the national leader in residential education. There is more residential education in this Commonwealth than in any other state: There are the two privately-funded flagship programs, Girard College and the Milton Hershey School. The Scotland School for Veterans' Children is one of only two state-funded residential education programs in the country for youth who are not physically or emotionally disabled. There are also four Job Corps Centers, for young people ages 16 - 24. All the children at these schools come from economically and/or socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

This morning I will attempt to give you some perspective and some of my observations on Girard College itself. In my experience, the staff has consistently been eager to learn how to improve the College, and are always open to new ideas.

- I have been involved with the College since September 1994, when I gave a keynote address to the Trust members, College alumni, staff, and students working on the new Strategic Plan for the College. As part of the Strategic Plan, they wanted to glean effective principles and program elements from other programs to improve the College's effectiveness with students.
- Girard College participated in the nation's first study of existing residential education programs, which the Center conducted in 1995.
- I consulted to the Residential Life Committee of the College in 1995, again as part of the Strategic Planning process, about adding such elements as more community celebrations, rites of passage, and increasing student leadership opportunities.
- Staff and students from the College were involved in the first national conference to involve the major residential education programs for at-risk youth in the country. The Conference focused on Peer Mediation in a Residential Education setting. Girard's program is now being emulated throughout the country.
- The College has been very open to hosting people from communities who want to open new residential education schools.
- It has opened its gates also to policymakers, who are examining how residential schools

such as Girard help at-risk young people who, without such schools, are unlikely to go far in life. This past November we brought 20 Congressional staff on the Education and Human Services Committees to visit Girard College and three other residential education programs in the Commonwealth. The participants were and remain impressed with the commitment of the staff to the students, staff and students' candor, and the clear sense of mission all involved with the College have.

What is the purpose of a residential school? What is the value-added of attending a residential school? There is a dichotomy in the U.S. It is OK for children from wealthy, supportive families to be sent to boarding schools in New England. Yet people are skeptical about sending children from troubled, abusive homes and neighborhoods to boarding schools.

Key elements of good residential schools are:

Safety, physical and emotional

Education

Community

Self-esteem

Structure

These elements are all present at Girard. In addition, the students gain other opportunities which are likely to be unavailable to them in their home settings: Extra-curricular activities, positive peer culture (as opposed to gangs), and bonding with adults, especially male role models. And the excitement of their horizons being opened, their excitement of "Y'know what I'm gonna be?! " It takes about two years - everywhere in the world - for the child to finally "get it", that the locus of control is in their hands. It's the most exciting thing to see - their eyes light up, and their motivation skyrockets. Girard staff and students have seen this again and again.

As are all schools, even the very well-endowed MHS, Girard is doing extensive self-examination of its program. It is readying the students and the College for the 21st century. Some examples of these efforts are: Installing new computers, implementing a Peer Mediation program, building a new dorm for elementary students, looking at how demographic changes necessitate modifications to various aspects of the school to best meet the needs of the current students. Other efforts include increasing parental involvement, and improving student connection to the College after graduation. Let's look at the outcomes! Over 90 % of the graduates go on to college!.

I see Girard College as a literal and figurative Oasis in the middle of downtown Philadelphia. Leave the run-down neighborhood, the ghetto, that borders the College, and one enters through the gates into a peaceful, well-landscaped setting with neo-classical architecture and students walking around purposefully with books under their arms.

What I look at first whenever I visit a residential school is: How do the students walk?

It is healthy and responsible for the Legislature periodically to look at the Commonwealth's assets, such as the College. You may in fact find some adjustments to be beneficial, which, with its consistent openness are likely to be embraced by the College. Overall, I believe that as you examine the College you will agree with me that it is a tremendous asset to the City of Philadelphia, to the Commonwealth, and to the nation, and should be valued as such.