

Mr. Chairman:

I am here to express my full support for creating the REACH Scholarship Program in Pennsylvania.

The REACH Scholarship is legislation I helped write with Rep. Tony Payton and his staff. The REACH Scholarship is a merit-based program that would provide a full scholarship, covering tuition and fees, to all high school students, regardless of their economic background, gender, race and/or religious affiliation. Every public, private, and parochial school student who meets the base criteria would be eligible for the REACH Scholarship. All high school students in Pennsylvania who achieve a 3.0 GPA and have at least 90% attendance would be eligible for the REACH Scholarship. Clearly, the REACH Scholarship is not a "give away" program. Rather, it is a merit-based system that would reward those students who work hard, play by the rules, and simply want to further their higher education.

There are many reasons to support the REACH Scholarship. But I believe there are three major ones:

First, Pennsylvania's families need us to make college more affordable. Second, it is in our best interests to do so. Third, the REACH Scholarship is a practical and achievable solution.

With respect to the first point, Pennsylvania's families desperately need help paying for college. Our state currently has one of the most expensive state school systems in the nation. The cost of attendance at our state colleges is increasing far greater than the rate of inflation. In a 10-year period between 1987 and 1997, tuition at Pennsylvania's public colleges and universities increased by 132%. Average family income certainly did not increase by the same rate during this same period. In this decade, college tuition has continued to rise far greater than the rate of inflation. Higher education has simply become unaffordable for many families in Pennsylvania.

This is not right. As Americans, we believe in meritocracy, the idea that you can go as far as your God-given talent and work ethic will take you. We cannot allow bright and hard-working students to become shut out of higher education because they lack the financial resources, especially in a 21<sup>st</sup> century in which a higher education is necessary now more than ever.

With respect to the second point, it is in the best interests of all Pennsylvanians that the REACH Scholarship is enacted. Studies have consistently proved that one's level of education is directly related to income. More Pennsylvanians with a college education means more Pennsylvanians with better paying jobs, which means more tax revenue for our state.

Furthermore, the high cost of college tuition is a major contributing factor to students leaving the state to attend college elsewhere. When these students graduate they often become employed outside of the state as well. Then they lay roots there and do not return. This is our future tax base that is leaving. By giving Pennsylvania's best and brightest an

incentive to stay in the Commonwealth both during and after college, the REACH Scholarship will create a stronger tax base of young professionals, which will encourage economic growth and combat the demographic crisis that threatens the state's financial future.

With respect to the third and final point, the REACH Scholarship is a practical and achievable solution. As Speaker O'Brien put it at our press conference announcing the legislation, the REACH Scholarship "is not a 'pie in the sky' idea. It is an idea that makes sense." While the REACH Scholarship may be new for us, many other states have started similar programs. Georgia was the first to take similar action, enacting their HOPE Scholarship in 1993. Since then, more than 750,000 Georgians have attended college tuition-free. Importantly, numerous academic studies have linked the success of the HOPE Scholarship to the state's robust economic growth since 1993. Since then, Florida, New Mexico, West Virginia, and others have followed Georgia's lead in creating a statewide, merit based scholarship program. The REACH Scholarship would add Pennsylvania to this list.

In closing, the REACH Scholarship is both the right thing to do, and the best investment we could make in our state's future. Thank you.

Brendan F. Boyle