



Pennsylvania FACE - Families' and Children's Equality

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**Testimony House Bills 418, 463 & 1639
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Family Law
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Good Morning: My name is Arthur Lewandowski, and I am an involved and concerned parent. I'm joined today by fellow FACE members, Mr. Larry Shapiro and Mr. Bill Gibbons. FACE (which stands for Family and Children's Equality), is an organization dedicated to the purpose of advocating for children's rights, and promoting access to both parents and their extend families. We'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to share important insights regarding legislative reform concerning child custody law in Pennsylvania.

I live in Bensalem Pa, I work for a global computer hardware and software company and I've been in the high tech industry for over twenty-eight years. However, my role as a parent, a father, a dad, is my most important job. I believe it's the most privileged role I could be tasked to do in this world, because it directly affects the future. Like other speakers on this panel, we keep the role of a parent paramount to anything we do. The passing of reformed legislation is extremely important to us.

I'm a parent who has been 'out' of this domestic relations system for several years. I had many struggles working in the current system because the basic structure of the laws currently in place, inadvertently help to fracture families rather than promote the need for a child's relationship with both parents. Children need **BOTH** parents. My experiences with the existing system made even simple visitation (which had already been clearly spelled out in an agreement) difficult to enforce. I'm asking for a level playing field, from the start, for everyone.

Starting off with the presumption that one parent is 'better' than the other sends the wrong message to the child, and to the other parent. Before anything is even written down, there is an assumption of one parent having more parenting power than the other, and this translates into the day to day care of the child. This is before any agreements are in place. After the agreements are in place, this presumption still lives on, and creates an environment where one person feels entitled to disregard the proven benefits of shared parenting. It allows one parent to believe that their

family (and extended families) are more important than their ex-spouses, and that harmful message is internalized by our children.

So, why don't we help structure a system that works for our children, rather than continue with an inadequate and proven example of a system that needs reformation?. Our laws, courts and institutions should promote joint parenting, not destroy it.

I've made it through despite a flawed system that is consistently inconsistent. It's designed with inequities along the core presumption that one parent is better than the other, one parent is more financially accountable than the 'other', and 'shared' custody is heavily weighted towards one side.

We need legislation which keeps the focus geared on the interest of the child, and helps correctly guide the future decisions of two, often highly emotional, adults. So, if I'm out of the legal system, why am I here talking about this topic? It's because I'm passionate about positive change that WILL affect a child's future. Child custody affects every portion of our society, both good and bad. But, rather than have legal policies which actually fracture a family, why not promote change so that the custody law is a major contributor towards healing a family in trouble? Rather than being a source of contention, make it a system of balance and fairness. Rather than squandering taxpayers' money, let's put the necessary controls in place to foster equal financial accountability and make wise investments for the future of our children.

The current antiquated system is based on prejudice and discrimination which causes needless and costly litigation. For example, one of our members had to spend over fifteen thousand dollars just to litigate a situation that required simple parental and child counseling. Both proposed bills would address these types of issues and avoid unnecessary expenses. Proper legislation can divert wasted money which can then be used to raise our children. We need revised laws that foster dual parenting and promote active involvement.

Think about this for a moment. The children affected by the current system WILL be your neighbors in society. You WILL be involved with the products of this system in some form or fashion. Our dialog, decisions and actions of today determine if we are creating criminals or cardiologists, delinquents or doctors, con-artists or composers of music. In closing, I'd like to thank you for your thoughtful consideration and actions to promote legislation in favor of family and child equality. Reformed legislation will help encourage parents to work together within a legal system that promotes balanced decision-making and positive parenting. Thank you for your attention. I'd be pleased to answer any questions you may have. If there are no questions, I'd like to introduce Mr. Larry Shapiro.

Respectfully,

Art Lewandowski