



December 8, 2011

Sen. Vincent J. Hughes
545 Capitol Building
Senate Box 203007
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Sen. Hughes:

Thank you for your letter of December 7. As a graduate of Pennsylvania's public schools, I sincerely appreciate your interest in improving them, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the matter with you, and it seems to me we disagree a lot less than you think.

Specifically, your letter asks me to apologize to students, teachers, and employees for using the term "hellholes" to describe schools in which a violent incident occurs every 17 minutes. To be honest, Senator, I borrowed that term from a student named Anthony Herbert who escaped from one of those schools. Here is what Anthony told us:

Walking through the hallway for the first time, I really felt sorry for myself because, man, I got stuck in this hellhole.

I'm walking through the hallways, trash cans and barrels are on fire, people are fighting and yelling, and there was really no order around. And it was just crazy. Teachers are telling students, "Get in the class, get in the class!" and she was completely ignored. The respect level was below zero. Security guards are grabbing people, throwing them in classrooms. Classrooms behind bars, which was really extraordinary.

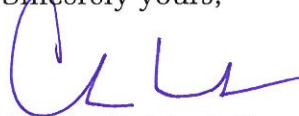
With all due respect, Senator, I find it hard to disagree with Anthony's choice of words. Moreover, I did not use his term to attack students or any other people who are trying to make the best of schools like the one he described. I used it to convince the adults who preside over the system in which those students are trapped, namely you and your colleagues, that it's time we tried something different. The solutions of the last decade—more time and much more money—have clearly failed when a violent incident occurs every 17 minutes and less than 40 percent of students are proficient in math and reading.

Your letter also indicates I had said the "only purpose" of the schools under discussion "was to prepare students 'for future jail stays and welfare.'" I did not say that, and what I did say is quite similar to text on your own website. A page I've enclosed from SenatorHughes.com says that students who don't succeed in school are likely to go on welfare and/or to jail. I agree with you: Our public schools are supposed to help students lead productive, independent lives, and when they don't succeed, it's terribly costly not just to them, but to taxpayers statewide.

Again, Senator, thank you for allowing me to explain further the Commonwealth Foundation's suggestions to bring about dramatic improvement in schools in which a violent incident occurs every 17 minutes. At this point, it would be premature for me to apologize to the students in these schools. So far, I have merely told the truth about the system to which our current laws condemn them. But I will owe them an apology if my colleagues and I are unsuccessful in convincing yours to throw them a long-overdue lifeline.

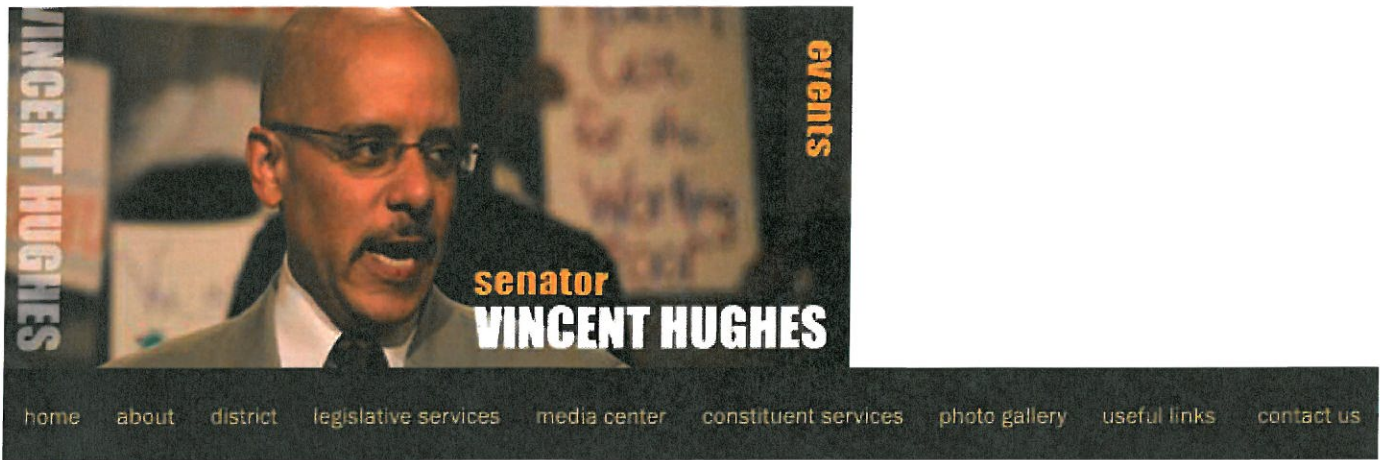
I would welcome the opportunity to continue this conversation with you in person or by phone.

Sincerely yours,



Charles F. Mitchell
Vice President & COO

Enclosure



dropout prevention



Three years ago, I, along with my colleagues in the Senate Philadelphia Delegation provided the School District of Philadelphia with \$2 million in state grant funds to bolster school dropout prevention efforts.

Specifically, the Department of Education monies were targeting two strategic priorities. The first addressed dropout recovery in seven of the largest neighborhood high schools that suffer from high dropout rates. This group is comprised of Bartram, Frankford, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Gratz, Overbrook, and University City high schools.

A middle grades dropout prevention plan represented the second priority. It involved instituting the Middle Grades Acceleration Program (MGAP) in all 11 regions of the city to offer added assistance to at-risk middle grades students and the teachers who are dedicated to addressing their needs.

It was my hope that this grant would act as a catalyst to draw additional dollars to help in the fight against the growing number of our youth dropping out of school. Failure was not an option back then, and it is not an option now.

In a time where the nation's economy has done a complete nosedive, plunging us into the most difficult economic times since the Great Depression and with our global economic competitors breathing down our necks, it is imperative that we prepare and educate those individuals who will determine the future success of this nation to the fullest extent - our children and young people.

The Education crisis that could severely hinder our nation's economic future and our future competitiveness in the global arena is the high rate of high school dropout across the nation.

The level of high school dropouts throughout the U.S. has hit catastrophic numbers. According to America's Promise Alliance, headed up by former U.S. secretary of State Colin Powell and his wife Alma, nearly one in three U.S. high school students fails to graduate. In total, approximately 1.2 million students drop out each year - averaging 7,000 every school day or one every 26 seconds. Among minority students, the problem is even more severe with nearly 50 percent of African American and Hispanic students not completing high school on time.

In April 2009, the Alliance released the report *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap*. The report stated that the average graduation rate of the 50 largest cities is well below the national average of 71%, and there remains an 18 percentage point urban suburban gap. *Cities in Crisis 2009* finds that only about half (53%) of all young people in the nation's 50 largest cities are graduating from high school on time.

According to 2008 statistics from the School District of Philadelphia, about half of city students who start ninth grade leave before graduation. The district also estimated that 47 percent of its students dropped out in 2008.

According to a recent report from The School Reform Commission:

- ▶ Just 39 percent of city dropouts were employed, compared to 58 percent of high school graduates, 70

percent of those with some college and 82 percent of those with a four-year degree or higher.

- ▶ Nearly 49 percent of city residents who were dropouts received at least one government-assistance cash-transfer payment, compared to just 29 percent among high school graduates and 14 percent among college graduates.
- ▶ Statewide, the majority of 18-to-60-year-olds in prisons and jails are dropouts. An estimated 5.1 percent of the state's dropouts are incarcerated, compared to 1.6 percent of high school graduates and 0.2 percent of those with college degrees.
- ▶ High school dropouts in the city make a combined annual tax payment (including federal and state income taxes, city wage tax, Social Security payroll taxes, federal retirement contributions, local property taxes and state sales taxes) of \$4,250, compared to \$10,320, the mean combined tax payment of all city residents.
- ▶ On average, for every \$1 in taxes paid by a high school dropout in the city, high school graduates pay \$2.19 and college graduates pay \$4.04.

I recently met with Dr. Arlene Ackerman, the new CEO of the Philadelphia School District, to discuss her plans to address this issue. I have also met with several business leaders throughout the region to gain their perspective and their willingness to engage on this issue.

What is clear is that even in these most difficult times, we must tackle this issue, and we must be bold and prepared to do it collectively. The success of these young people and the success of our region depend on our commitment.

As we work to solve the state's budget crisis, we are also looking for ways to push the high school dropout agenda. Any suggestions that you may have would be greatly appreciated. [Click here](#) to connect to the Solutions Link.