

Good Afternoon Members of the State Board:

My name is Mark Napoleon and I'm here to testify on behalf of the NJ Interdistrict Public School Choice Association as the Superintendent of Sterling High School - an Interdistrict Choice High School.

The Association has submitted written testimony as to two items that need to be addressed. Our Board Chairman and Executive Directors have been working with the Department for over a year regarding the necessary regulatory changes. A written request was sent to the former Commissioner last February and many conversations have taken place, so it was a great disappointment to see that our concerns were never addressed and unfortunately most of the employees that the association had worked with are no longer at the Department.

It is absolutely necessary that the Board address the Tier 1 and Tier 2 designations that have been misinterpreted by unwritten policy. Currently, students attending Choice Elementary Schools cannot follow their classmates to a Choice High School because of a policy determination that the student must go back to their home district for one year in order to apply to the Choice High School. Once a student qualifies for Interdistrict School Choice, that student should be able to follow the program thru graduation and the definition of graduation should be high school.

In addition, we are looking for a legal opinion regarding the allowance of tuition students in non-participating Choice High School programs. If a school has specialized programs for Choice students, those programs cannot accept tuition students but there really isn't a reason why a student is denied enrollment in the general population in that same school if that student/parent is willing to pay tuition. This problem is a direct result of the budgetary caps placed on the program denying students the right of public school choice.

As Superintendent of Sterling High School, I have supervised the implementation of five successful School Choice Programs that include Allied Health and Health Sciences, TV Production, Child Development, Multi Media/Graphic Design, and NJROTC. Our School Choice Program students come from Camden, Winslow, Gloucester Township, Runnemede, Lawnside and many other towns in Camden County. We are asking the state board to lift the caps on the number of students allowed to participate in these rigorous programs.

Shanilya Johnson, a 2016 Sterling High School graduate, is now attending Loyola University in Maryland on a Presidential Scholarship. In order to attend Sterling High School's NJROTC School Choice Program, she took two public busses and rode her bike two-miles from her home in Camden, NJ each day. Shanilya was a National Honor Society member, became highly involved in the NJROTC Program, and displayed incredible dedication in achieving her goals each day.

Shanilya Johnson's story is not uncommon. There are several School Choice Students currently attending Sterling High School with similar stories. They come to us with the hope of participating in quality programs with unprecedented opportunities to change their lives. I hear the stories from parents who desperately want their child to attend Sterling High School.

In many cases, it is less expensive to fund a School Choice Student than to send a child to their home district. Lifting the caps on School Choice numbers would be a win for everyone involved.

I want to thank the State Board for the opportunity to speak today and I look forward to working with the state in improving educational opportunities for all students.