

## **Lifeline Scholarships Can Forge a Brighter Future for Kids**

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As Pennsylvania lawmakers and Gov. Josh Shapiro enter the final days of state budget negotiations, education funding is high on the list of issues. A transformative new program, Lifeline Scholarships, is reportedly part of those debates. The Lifeline program would fund private school scholarships for children who are assigned to the lowest-performing 15% of public schools in the state. Stories from the parents and students who really understand the scholarships' potential impact should be front and center for lawmakers.

A changed educational environment can completely alter the trajectory of a child's life. Chris and Nicole Summers live in Farrell, a small city in western Pennsylvania, and they've seen firsthand what a new school can do. They both graduated from Farrell Area School District, and that's where they sent their son Khole. Concerned about the quality of the schooling their son was getting, they made the difficult decision to transfer him to a private school, Kennedy Catholic High School,[MT1] a few weeks into his junior year.

Khole expected the transition to be hard, but it wasn't, according to Nicole. "The transition was really good for him because everyone was very welcoming," she said. "He's a people person, and he already knew some of the students. That made the adjustment easy for him."

Nicole says that the change has been beneficial for Khole academically, too. “I was hesitant at first, but I finally made the move for the betterment of my child,” she said. “It’s a better learning atmosphere – more focused on academics. This move will help Khole with his future goals. And it helps that the administration and staff provide such a positive and welcoming environment.”

Nicole encouraged Khole to sign up for dual-enrollment classes at Penn State Shenango this fall. She thinks that the move will make a difference for him as he prepares for college next year. In addition to earning credits, Khole will benefit from the experience of taking classes on a college campus, which will help prepare him for the rigors of college study.

Lifeline Scholarships would be extraordinarily helpful for families in similar situations. “A Lifeline Scholarship would be tremendous,” said Nicole. “Moving from a public school where tuition wasn’t a factor to a private school with tuition is an adjustment. But it’s for our son’s benefit – he’s excelling at Kennedy. Getting a scholarship to this school where he’s thriving would be really helpful.”

Unfortunately, it’s probably too late for the Summers family. The current Lifeline proposal is limited to students still attending public school or entering kindergarten. Parents who have already gotten their kids out of these low-achieving public schools wouldn’t be eligible. Still, the scholarships would potentially free up other forms of financial aid, which could help these families.

The Lifeline Scholarship proposal has its flaws. Eligibility is restricted to students assigned to a “low-achieving school,” defined as schools in the bottom 15% based on state test results. This means that many kids who could benefit from switching schools will be left out. And since the scholarships can only be used for private school expenses, families who want a more individualized educational path are also excluded.

But with Lifeline Scholarships, Pennsylvania would be taking a step closer to funding students instead of systems. This is the future of education: people from across the political spectrum are realizing that the current “one-size-fits-all” education system doesn’t work for a lot of kids.

Though Khole probably won’t benefit directly from Lifeline Scholarships, Nicole and Chris Summers hope that lawmakers and Gov. Shapiro will adopt the program. “We’ve seen the impact a new school has had on our son,” said Chris. “We think all parents should have the ability to make a similar choice for their children.”

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