

FOR RELEASE FEBRUARY 21, 2007
6:30 PM

CONTACT: Melanie Ross Levin
PHONE: (302) 504-5240

Vision 2015 Steering Committee Chair Marvin N. Schoenhals' Testimony to the Joint Finance Committee

Good afternoon. I am Skip Schoenhals, Chair of the Vision 2015 Steering Committee and Chairman and President of WSFS Financial Corporation. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about funding for our public education system.

As you listen to my remarks, I ask that you consider them in light of recent economic changes in our state. It is clear to me, and to so many members of the business community, that we must do whatever is necessary to position our workforce to thrive in a constantly changing global economy. This means that we must further improve our public education system.

We know that our education system is a factor whenever a company considers expansion or relocation. Businesses look to our schools and our graduates when they make these decisions. To ensure that we offer a workforce that is entrepreneurial, well-equipped, and nimble enough to support a strong economy in the future, and to attract companies that want good public education systems for their employees' children, we simply must build a world-class education system.

Secretary of Education Valerie Woodruff and I—along with more than two dozen other public, private and community leaders throughout Delaware—have been

working together for the last year on a plan that will continue and accelerate the transformation of Delaware's public education system. It will provide even greater opportunities for all our young people to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Vision 2015 is the product of an unprecedented non-partisan, state-wide effort, and stands among the most comprehensive and coherent improvement plans in the nation.

Vision 2015 begins with a statement: "Imagine the best schools in the world for every Delaware student...no exceptions...no excuses." That's a bold premise, but an essential one. We are making progress in our schools today, but we must accelerate that progress. Our children deserve the very best, and Vision 2015 is the path to a world-class education for every Delaware student.

I thank Governor Minner for her recognition of Vision 2015 and her budget recommendations, which align tightly with Vision 2015. We support her recommendations for several key Vision 2015 building blocks within the Department of Education and the University of Delaware, notably virtual learning, quality early childhood education, and expanded professional development resources.

Today, however, I want to reiterate a greater, long-term need. A few months ago, we asked OMB for an investment of \$35 million in FY 08 for multiple Vision 2015 priorities. The initial request was based on months of analysis on what is needed to begin the movement to a world-class public education system for all Delaware students.

We still think these are the right priorities for Delaware children, and we respectfully ask you to consider investing in Vision 2015 if additional funds become available over the coming months.

A significant state investment will be needed to achieve the goals set by Vision 2015 to create a world-class education system. However, we are cognizant of pressures on the state's budget this year, and we will continue to develop an implementation strategy that does not compromise the Vision but reflects today's fiscal realities.

As a businessman, I understand the need to spend prudently. To that end, a critical element of Vision 2015 is our commitment to fiscal responsibility. We propose a thorough analysis of education spending by the beginning of the next budget cycle, to allow us to reallocate dollars to get more resources closer to our students. The private sector is willing to make a substantial investment in a comprehensive, professional cost reallocation study of Delaware's current spending on education.

We also propose that Delaware begin to move toward a simple mechanism for funding schools. This is commonly referred to as a "weighted student funding" system. For Delaware to move in this direction, it must carefully study how such a system could help improve education in Delaware. Therefore, we want to explore with the legislature how best to conduct such a study.

Finally, we believe Delaware needs an easy-to-understand, publicly available tool to track our progress toward becoming the best in the world by 2015. We

propose that the “front page” of the Delaware school report cards be redesigned to show a “performance dashboard” that presents easily understandable information on data such as student achievement, educator and family engagement and satisfaction, and financial status of each school.

I want to underscore that as conversations continue with public leaders about Vision 2015, the business and foundation community will continue to commit significant time, expertise, and financial support to helping Delaware achieve the goals set forth by Vision 2015. In the coming months, Vision 2015 will invest private resources with state and local partners to focus on fiscal responsibility and accountability.

The goals set by Vision 2015 are worth the private and public expense: there is no greater investment we can make than an investment in our children.

Delaware’s future depends on our commitment to education and the economy. The global economy demands that we make dramatic investments in education to prepare our workforce and to expand business opportunities in Delaware.

We have a decision before us, to wait for the next major economic crisis to hit us and then look for a solution, or to invest and build the best system of schools in the world that perhaps will allow us to avoid the impact of such a crisis. This is Delaware’s opportunity, today.

In fact, for the last three years, I have heard one question asked about Delaware’s economic future more than any other. I suspect you have heard it as well. That is What is the next Financial Center Development Act for Delaware?

As we all know, that 1981 act changed Delaware's economic future in a way that few, if any, legislative changes have ever made in the economy of any state. Well, I believe we are looking at the next Financial Center Development Act for Delaware.

Knowledge is the driver of the 21st century global economy. By becoming the first state to make its education system truly world class, Delaware will create opportunities for a new economic growth cycle on par with what the FCDA has done for us over the last thirty years. But it will be better because it will influence multiple sectors of the Delaware economy – not just one industry as the FCDA did -- and it will have the potential to establish Delaware as a leader in the worldwide knowledge economy. However, we must move first, just as we did with FCDA, and we must recognize that sustained investment in educational excellence is our state's best option for economic success. As we know, others copied our FCDA when they saw the success Delaware was having. But by then, Delaware had such a lead that others could not catch up. The same will be true for the first state to establish and maintain a world-class education system.

The good news is that in the Vision 2015 Plan, we are probably ahead of any other state in creating a comprehensive plan that will enable us to become world class on a state-wide basis. But several other states are talking about the subject with intensity. In fact, two weeks ago, we saw a speech by the Governor of a major state not far from here that addressed education improvement in that state. When you read the speech, one could easily conclude that the speech writer was working almost directly from a copy of our Vision 2015 document.

So to keep the same lead that we did with FCDA, we have to take steps now to accelerate our move to a world-class education system.

Those of us who worked together to create Vision 2015 have imagined the Delaware schools as the best schools in the world. We have imagined the transformation of our education system that will greatly strengthen our economy and keep it strong far in the future. We are committed to making these visions come true. We invite you to join us in this important and essential work. The path forward will not be easy. It will require a true state-wide effort and the active and sustained commitment of public and private leaders, as well as educators, community representatives, and Delaware families. We look forward to working with you for years to come, on behalf of Delaware's children and on behalf of Delaware's future.

Thank you again.