

Gillingham Charter School rallies for school choice

POTTSVILLE — A rally for school choice at Gillingham Charter School on Monday celebrated the idea that students and their parents should have a choice in educational options.

The rally and the activities around it were part of marking National School Choice Week, which was from Jan. 20 to Jan. 26. Due to inclement weather, Gillingham moved the event from Jan. 23 to Monday. It was held in the gymnasium of the former St. Joseph School.

The students walked from Gillingham to the gym that was decorated for the rally. Founded in 2011, Gillingham offers tuition-free public education to about 250 students from kindergarten through grade 12.

The atmosphere in the gym was positive, with students energetic about supporting and promoting school choice based on their own experiences at the school.

NSCW is held every January and began in 2011, with Gillingham celebrating the week since its beginning. The NSCW website, www.schoolchoiceweek.com, explains that during the week, schools, homeschool groups, organizations and individuals plan tens of thousands of independent events. These celebratory events raise public awareness of the different K-12 education options available to children and families while also spotlighting the benefits of school choice. NSCW recognizes all K-12 options, including traditional public schools, public charter schools, public magnet schools, private schools, online academies and homeschooling.

NSCW is now the world's largest annual celebration of opportunity in education. Over the past nine years, more than 131,000 NSCW events have been planned across the country and around the world. NSCW is a nonpartisan, nonpolitical, independent public awareness effort and is not associated with any legislative lobbying or advocacy. This year there are more than 40,000 NSCW events being held in the country.

Gillingham Director of Culture/Student Coach Cassandra "Cassie" Shive was busy getting everything ready for the rally, during which she was the master of ceremonies.

"We'll have students, parents and teachers as speakers telling their own opinions about school choice," Shive said before the rally. "We have our cheer team who learned the National School Choice dance and will teach it to everyone who's here. In addition to that, we have students doing individual musical performances that they just did at their winter recital. All the classes listed their top three reasons why they love their school and school choice and the class representatives will be sharing that, as well. We have a lot planned."

Shive was asked why she believes school choice is so important.

"Obviously, I think school choice is incredibly important because we want students to achieve and grow and have any opportunity that they are able to so they can flourish in a place where they feel comfortable, so why not let them choose where they go to school," Shive said. "I only got to choose once I went to college, and I wish I had more options when I was younger. Even though I did well in a traditional setting, I may have done better or had other opportunities elsewhere."

The rally began with Gillingham CEO and Director of Education Nicolle Hutchinson speaking about getting behind the school choice movement.

“Every year we do this and we join over eight million students in the United States, and you’re part of that eight million. Isn’t that awesome?” Hutchinson said, receiving a loud cheer from the students.

“There have been charter schools in the United States for over 20 years in what I would call an experiment,” Hutchinson said. “We are part of a wonderful, necessary experiment in two big ways. First, we are the only brick-and-mortar charter in all of Schuylkill County. The second part of our experiment is we are the only charter public school in Schuylkill County, in Pennsylvania, in the United States of America, and possibly worldwide that offers a free public Charlotte Mason relational education. We’re the only ones. So this is a huge experiment and you are part of it. Those are two reasons why I appreciate school choice. I have learned. I will continue to say for the rest of my life that it is an honor to work and learn alongside everyone at Gillingham. You took a risk by joining Gillingham and by sticking it out during some really rocky times over the years.”

The “Charlotte Mason” reference is based on an education method that the whole person is educated, not only the mind. Mason stated that, “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.”

“Your ability to talk and to think and to ask questions and to notice things is not common in today’s students. Your teachers are doing a fantastic job by teaching you how to think and how to speak and join in that great conversation,” Hutchinson said, asking the students for applause to the teachers.

After Hutchinson finished, Shive introduced Pottsville City Controller William Messaros, who attended to present a proclamation on behalf of Mayor James T. Muldowney, who could not attend. Messaros read the proclamation declaring Jan. 20 to 26 as “Pottsville School Choice Week.”

Shive read a proclamation from the Schuylkill County commissioners on the importance of school choice in the county.

Tenth-grader Anastasia Brossman was introduced to speak on being part of school choice. She had prepared comments but decided to “speak from my heart.”

“I am really blessed to be at Gillingham because I am able to be with all of you amazing people and have an education that I never got to have,” Brossman said. “Gillingham really does mean the world to me. I am proud of the school for the teachers and students. I’m so thankful that I got to choose my school and I think we need to be thankful that we can.”

In addition to other students, there were teachers who spoke, including Marci Howell, who is the middle and upper school math teacher, Title I teacher and assessment coordinator, along with a parent of a student, Elijah Howell.

“I homeschooled for 10 years and using a lot of Charlotte Mason methodology,” Howell said. “It was a good fit for Elijah to make that transition from homeschooling to Gillingham. I like that it’s a small school and the class sizes are small. I like it that it’s K-12. I love that the teachers really know the students. You can’t really blend in with the crowd here. We know you. The teachers know the students, know your strengths, know your challenges, and we work really hard to meet those things. I love, love, love, love that foreign language starts early. I love that every student plays an instrument.”

Toward the end of the rally, the cheer team performed a dance routine and then led all the students in the dance.

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