

Submitted



**PRESENTATION TO THE NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE'S
SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
ASSEMBLY WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE**

**JOINT HEARING ON THE EXECUTIVE BUDGET 2015-16 TAX PROPOSALS
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2015**

A. BISON BACKGROUND

Founded in 1995, the BISON Fund is a charitably funded tuition assistance program for low-income elementary and middle school children to attend the school of their choice. BISON's mission is to provide low-income parents a full range of school options for their children's education. Families awarded a BISON scholarship are able to enroll their child in a school in any of the eight counties of Western New York. Scholarships are awarded by an annual lottery awarded solely on need. A sound means-tested program structure allows for those most in need to receive more assistance.

BISON was founded by three dedicated and visionary leaders and continues to be governed by a dedicated board of prominent Western New Yorkers with extensive experience in law, government, and business and who remain committed to advancing BISON's mission.

B. SUPPORT & PASS EDUCATION INVESTMENT TAX CREDIT LEGISLATION

In an enormous step forward for New York State education, the Governor has included the Education Tax Credit in his Executive Budget. If passed, the Education Tax Credit would provide expanded educational scholarship opportunities for students and innovative programming opportunities for public schools. This proposal is important to help children in Buffalo and throughout western New York to have access to a quality education that best meets their needs.

The Governor's bill is very balanced as it would provide children with greater scholarship opportunities and children in public schools with enhanced programming opportunities as it provides a greater incentive for charitable donations to support education.

As you know, last year the Diocese of Buffalo had to close ten Catholic schools because low-income and working-families are struggling to provide this educational opportunity for their children. They, along with all schoolchildren deserve our attention and your representation in Albany by passing this legislation into law.

The BISON Children's Scholarship Fund raises charitable donations annually to provide scholarships each year to nearly 2,000 economically-disadvantaged children who reside in any of the eight counties of western New York. Approval of the Education Investment Tax Credit in the final state budget will enable BISON to reach these and many more students in high-needs communities desperate for access to a quality education.

To ensure the tax credit is part of the final budget, we urge lawmakers to work to make the Education Tax Credit a priority and negotiate it as part the final state budget. We need this help to become a reality for thousands of families in Western New York who want a better education for their children but are unable to afford it.

C. CURRENT PUBLIC EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The Buffalo Public School system is currently under duress with 80% of district schools considered to be low performing. The graduation rate for high school continues to hover around 50%. There needs to be a solution now for parents who want better and don't have the means to do it. Instead of being stuck in chronically under-performing schools –parents need to have a real choice to select the school that will be the most successful at fulfilling their child's needs. All kids learn differently, and the one-size-fits-all model is not realistic. We know there is already quality education in the suburbs and we hope that with the efforts of Say Yes and others, the same quality education will be available in the City of Buffalo someday. That day has not yet arrived and thus, the BISON mission continues.

D. BISON IMPACT

BISON believes that children should have access to the widest array of educational opportunities as possible regardless of income. By offering partial tuition assistance to economically disadvantaged families, we are empowering parents, often for the first time, with the ability to choose the school which best meets their child's needs.

The most effective way to break the cycle of poverty, and alleviate unemployment and crime is through education. That's why it is so important for children to begin their academic instruction in successful schools. Elementary school lays the foundation for all future educational – and ultimately life – success. BISON scholarships provide educational opportunity to low-income families, changing the course of thousands of children's lives while investing in Western New York's future.

Since 1995, the BISON Children's Scholarship Fund has given over 24,000 scholarships with a private investment of more than \$19 million dollars, impacting over 16,000 students from low-income families in Western New York. BISON benefits:

- BISON graduates continue to succeed beyond 8th grade, with more than 95% graduating from high school (compared to just above 50% in Buffalo Public Schools) and more than 80% continuing on to college.
- BISON is the only K-8 scholarship organization in Western New York (and Upstate New York), and is the fifth largest program (out of 27 national programs that partners with the New York City-based Children's Scholarship Fund).
- BISON scholarships stabilize enrollments at schools that provide a safe and academically sound environment.
- They empower parents, providing them with a larger stake in their child's education.
- BISON supports parental choice and education reform efforts – both private and public – in order to give all children a quality education.

"We knew there was a perfect school out there for us, but financially, it was out of our reach. The BISON Fund has put that school within our reach, and has allowed us to make a choice about our children's education." – BISON Parent

"I would just like to thank the BISON Scholarship Fund. They have helped me tremendously as a single mom who wants better for her children." – BISON Mother.

"I vividly remember opening and reading our acceptance letter from the BISON Children's Scholarship Fund, because it was a real turning point in our family's life. We realized that, with the help of the BISON Fund, if we re-organized our financial priorities, we would be able to send our son to the school of our dreams." – BISON Family.

"Thank you to the BISON donors' generosity so that our children can benefit from such great educations. BISON's impact on my family is immeasurable. I hope my children will one day give back to BISON. My hope and prayer is that the BISON Fund will continue to support families like mine for years to come." – BISON Father.