

## **Testimony for the Education Committee Regarding Senate Bill 1104**

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**Principal, Amistad Academy Middle School**

Good Morning. I would like to begin by thanking the members of the education committee for allowing me to speak in support of Senate Bill 1104. It is an honor to be part of this work, and to stand before you today as the Principal of the most passionate, committed and talented faculty of educators that I have ever seen. We are all very proud of the successes of our scholars over the last twelve years at Amistad Academy. Our students – who are 98% black and Hispanic and 70% free and reduced lunch – come to us, on average, two years below grade level in fifth grade. However, by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, these same students have year after year beat state averages on the CMT and proven that Connecticut's vexing achievement gap can, in fact, be closed. In fact this year, we are the #1 school in CT for African American Achievement. These successes are the direct result of the hard work and skill of a talented group of educators.

Which brings me to the reason why I am here with you today. During my six years as principal of Amistad, teacher certification and compliance has been one of the most frustrating issues that have stood in the way of creating and maintaining the strongest teaching team we can build. Indeed, compliance with certification requirements is the only reason our school was not granted a full, 5-year renewal of our charter two years ago. After a lot of hard work by both our team and staff at the State Department of Education, we have now reduced the certification problem to a small handful of hard cases – but these cases are really hard and include several teachers who are responsible for Amistad's success over the last several years. My hope today is to introduce a few of these teachers to you, and by doing so, to highlight why I believe passing Senate Bill 1104 is such an important step for CT.

Clare Byran came to us three years ago. Last year, 92% of Clare's seventh grade students, all selected by lottery from the City of New Haven, scored at proficiency on the CMT. 72% of Clare's students were at goal or advanced. This compares to 52 percent of New Haven students who scored proficient in writing and 25 percent who scored at goal or advanced. When you enter her classroom, you see a passionate educator developing both great persuasive writers – and great poets. Claire loves her students, and they love her right back. She has incredibly high expectations – and her students rise to meet them. We are fortunate to have a number of very talented teachers at Amistad – and yet, even amongst this group, Clare stands out.

Clare holds a Master's degree in education from the University Of Melbourne, Australia—the biggest and most prestigious university in the state of Victoria. She specialized in English and history. She is certified to teach English Language Arts grades 7-12 in her home country. She came to us with 4 years of language arts teaching experience under her belt in grades 7-12. During that time she created curriculum in writing and reading.

According to Connecticut Certification standards, Clare is not eligible to teach grades 7-12 language arts. According to the State Department, in order for Clare to qualify for certification, she needs to take first-year undergraduate courses in math, science and foreign languages. Completing these courses would be both expensive and time-consuming – and it is difficult to argue that they would make her a better teacher. Based on her performance, I would like her next year to coach our 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade writing teachers and lead our writing team in our long-term planning efforts. Instead, under guidance from SDE, I am being asked to terminate her.

Another tough certification case involves our upper-school science teacher Lauren Horne. Lauren has a BA in astro physics from Boston University. She has a master's degree in education with a secondary science focus from George Washington University. She has taught three years of high school science in Washington, DC, including chemistry and physics. Then she taught three years of middle school science in Boston, MA, where she also served as science department chair. Along the way, she has designed curriculum and designed several science courses, including a special education class. We recruited her through our Leadership Fellows program and were fortunate enough to have her sign on as a teacher. She is now the chair of our science program, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade chair, and a teacher coach.

According to CT certification requirement, Lauren is not eligible for certification as a middle school science teacher. She would need to take a special education class, a biology class, a chemistry class, and a U.S. History course to be eligible for even a provisional educator's certificate. She is currently working under a long-term substitute certificate and, again, I am being told I need to terminate her.

A third teacher I would like to introduce is Emily Morse, who is our 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading teacher and grades 7-8 reading coach. Last year she was one of the three reading teachers that led our 7<sup>th</sup> graders to setting a school record last year on the reading CMT (91% proficiency and 85% mastery – compared to 66 percent and 53% respectively for New Haven Public Schools). No class at any grade has achieved those scores at our school – and few do in the State. Judging by our internal Interim Assessment results, our current class is poised to achieve even higher scores. This year Emily teaches every section of 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading.

Emily has eight years of middle school teaching experience in both California and Connecticut. She has a master's degree in remedial reading grades k-12. She is certified k-6 in Connecticut. Unfortunately, the statutes do not allow her to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading. According to certification rules, a 7-12 certified teacher can teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade, but a k-6 certified teacher cannot teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade.

I'm working really hard to convince all three of these teachers to do all of the required coursework, but they are honestly very frustrated about the situation, and I'm not sure we're going to be able to hold on to them.

These are three of the most talented teachers I have ever met. Without them, Amistad would not be the school that we are. Yet according to Connecticut certification regulations, I would be better off replacing these teachers with rookie teachers, who are recent graduates of state certification programs.

I hope my stories make two points apparent. First, I hope that you understand that we are as committed as you are to hiring and developing high-quality, highly-effective teachers. We believe that the quality of the teachers we have is the single greatest factor contributing to the success of our students.

Second, I believe these stories illustrate a real issue with our CT state certification requirements. Our requirements, while designed to uphold a respectable minimum standard for Connecticut teachers to meet, are also creating an unintended consequence of keeping some of the best teachers out of the classroom.

Senate Bill 1104 has the potential to remove these road blocks to keeping great teachers for me. I don't believe that there is a principal in the Achievement First Network who wouldn't make the same statement. This bill, from my seat, seems like a decisive shift in focus away from teacher "qualifications" to teacher "effectiveness". I hope that the state legislature can create this avenue for great, highly effective teachers like Clare Bryan, Lauren Horne, and Emily Morse, so they can continue to serve Connecticut's students.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today.