Feb 21 Public Hearing Testimony Regarding SB 24

TO: The Honorable Education Committee Chairs
Rep. Andrew Fleischmann & Sen. Andrea L. Stillman

TOPICS: Teacher Preparation/Certification/Tenure/Parent Involvement

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REMARKS: Thank you for taking on this urgent task. Our public schools, whether they are traditional, magnet or charter schools must do better for all current and future students throughout Connecticut. Gov. Malloy's SB 24 is a very good beginning, but there is room for new input. I urge you first and foremost to focus on PUBLIC schools. Charter schools may have a place in this discussion, but should not drive the conversation. Robbers go to banks because that is where the money is. School reform should focus on public schools because that is where Connecticut's student population is! What makes my testimony unique is that I became a teacher at age 60, as a second career, because as a citizen I wanted to see first hand what it is like inside, not for one day, but for academic years. What I found alarmed me, but the experience also inspired me. Inspired me because if we let our public schools sink lower, our economy, and yes, even our democracy will be at risk.

I taught in all three of Stamford's high schools over four years. And yes, I got tenure. I would have stayed in teaching longer were it not that my mother was dying a thousand miles away and so I resigned. Because of my prior corporate experience, I was hired as the school-to career teacher, a grant funded position, mainly working along with guidance counselors to help students explore career choices and find internships or part-time jobs. My program hosted career days where bankers, auto service managers, hospital human resources professionals and others donated their time to help students better understand what the world of work requires. I mainly worked with juniors and seniors from immigrant and economically-challenged families. My goal was to help these students see the connection between the classroom and the outside world. The grant's focus shifted and at age 63, I was assigned to Westhill as a 9th-grade world history and 10th-grade civics teacher, a state-required course for graduation. So I have been in the trenches. Today my testimony is my "civics" exercise.

My remarks will be focused on just three areas of SB 24: Teacher Preparation, Tenure/Dismissal and Parent Involvement. The last is not included in SB 24, but you must find a way to add a parent/guardian involvement component in this legislation or the rest may sound good, but will not be enough.

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1. **Teacher Preparation:** I became Connecticut certified in 2002, some 35 years after obtaining my master's degree journalism and working in the communications field. Never before as a teacher. I had minored in education as an undergraduate. The Praxis examination in my two subject areas was the only hurdle, as I met all other state requirements. On each Praxis date, as I waited for the test booklets to be passed out, I overheard 20-something recent grads chatting about the test about to begin. "How many times have you taken this test?" one would ask the other. The answer was once or twice before. I passed all three required Praxis tests on the first try. I think my testimony on this topic can end here. But I will add just the obvious. In my generation bright students (especially women) chose to go into teaching. Now there are higher paying jobs available that attract the best and brightest. Somehow my fellow Praxis test takers graduated, but did not learn. Were they given passing grades they did not deserve or was the content so watered down it wasn't meaty enough to meet the national expectations of a Praxis test? Teacher academic preparation must become more rigorous. Teacher preparation must also prepare better in motivational- and behavior-modification strategies because the level of respect for rules in schools today is low and we all know this to be true. And parents may or may not back up the teacher who holds their child to rules or standards.
2. **Tenure/Dismissal.** ConnCan and other education advocacy groups, including Michelle Rhee's First Student, are convinced that the seniority system should be changed as a key to better student outcomes. They believe low student performance is mainly a "tired" teacher failure. Many reformers believe last in, should not be the first to be let go if reduction in force becomes a necessity due to revenue shortfalls. A belief that teacher unions today are not open to tenure modification paints a false picture. The Connecticut Education Association, following the lead of reforms in other states, has put forth a plan in January with a variety of ways to evaluate teachers that includes use of student test results and importantly other evaluation tools. These include more peer mentoring, more peer and supervisor observations and development of improvement systems to help a teacher become more effective and drive better student outcomes. CEA says it will support shortening of the timeframe for school administrators to weed out teachers who should be weeded out. CEA has signaled that tenure modification can be negotiated. But I hope you heard my experience. It may not only be the "tired old teacher" who is ineffective. Today's new teacher recruits may not be topflight in their subject area. Also keep in mind that educational statistics have found that five years down the road of teaching, a high percentage of those new teachers leave the field because they have found that teaching is tough and that they do not have respect from just enough students to make each day a battle. When you discuss evaluating teachers, please insist on measurements that take into account the composition of the students assigned to that teacher. Yes, I had at least one disruptive student in each of my five teaching periods. When I telephoned the parent about this behavior, I was told more than once that the parent could not control the child either. The legislation

that you are considering should include strategies for dealing with the "bad behavers" who draw too much teaching time away from those who want to learn. In my own experience, I found the in-school suspension system was more babysitting than an intervention designed to help the student understand school rules and expectations.

3. **Parent Involvement.** Please consider expanding the Governor's proposed plan to include money and strategies to CHANGE parent involvement, especially for students who struggle academically and behaviorally. This is an urgent need as it is the parents of struggling students that teachers rarely get to see or even speak with. When cell phones came in vogue, the ability of teachers to even phone parents screeched to a halt. (If the cell number provided is wrong, no phone book can help.) Schools must hold Parent Nights beyond "nights," perhaps to weekends or whatever it takes to get parents face-to-face with their child's teachers. Beyond this, this legislation should include more ways to learn what is cause behind a low-performing student, perhaps factors far beyond the teacher's ability to solve. Parenting training programs should be encouraged. And more school social workers who can help uncover nutritional, health and relationship problems that affect learning. In Bridgeport, where I live, organizations such as the much-respected Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition (BCAC) seek to involve all economic, ethnic, religious and cultural affinity groups. This is the way school reforms should be discussed and ultimately decided. BCAC's annual profile of my community paints an alarming picture of the deficiencies in nutrition, health care, safe housing, family stability, and economic security Bridgeport's children bring into school classrooms every morning. These factors most certainly hinder learning readiness and legislators must keep these sad realities in mind when considering whom to hold responsible. I say we taxpayers are all responsible. Attention must be paid to the "complete" picture of the real Connecticut.

CONCLUSION: Further hearings with more time to prepare meaningful testimony must be held. President's week was not a good time for this important topic.