

Remarks of Gray Wanzer  
Social Studies Teacher  
Enfield Public Schools

Before the Education Committee  
On Senate Bill 24, Section 18, 29, 30  
(Teacher Incentives, Tenure, Teacher Evaluation)

February, 21, 2012

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Gray Wanzer, and I'm a High School Social Studies teacher in Enfield. In my 9 years as a classroom teacher I have done much more than simply show up to keep and excel at my job. I'm here today to explain how the current structure of certain sections of Senate Bill 24 will be equally detrimental to the dedicated professional educators and diverse student population in this state. Changes to the current structure of incentives, tenure, and evaluations for teachers will help to water down the profession and make true school turnarounds for the neediest students much less likely.

Section 18 of the bill calls for extra incentives for teachers identified as exemplary. While the idea may be enticing to those who believe a business model should be applied to schools, research shows that this does nothing to bolster student achievement. The Project on Incentives in Teaching (POINT) study conducted by the National Center on Performance Incentives (NCPI) "intended to test the notion that rewarding teachers for improved scores would cause scores to rise." The stated conclusion was clear: "By and large, results do not confirm the hypothesis" (NCPI, 2010). Aside from plainly not working, the proposed incentive program will be based on evaluations, which are dramatically changed in Section 30 of the bill. It will create a dynamic between professionals and students on which competition, not learning, is paramount. This is not helpful to anyone truly interested in education. Again the NCPI is clear in stating that "teachers might also behave strategically by resisting the placement of new students in their classes during the school year." By attempting to grant incentives to teachers outside the realm of their teaching contracts negotiated in good faith, as defined in Section 18, only segregation, not achievement, will be guaranteed. I would hope most will be able to see this as against the stated spirit of the legislation. Reforms based on passion or political lobbying by well funded corporate interests instead of sound research and true stakeholder involvement will ultimately reach one conclusion: complete failure.

Another section of this bill that is a failure to Connecticut's students is section 29, which would fundamentally change tenure in the state. Tenure is part of the Teacher Fair Dismissal Act and not a lifelong job guarantee. The current statute is very clear on the 6 reasons for termination based on measureable data and unbiased observation. What tenure really means to a teacher is intellectual and professional freedom. It helps protect teachers from heavy handed evaluators who may have personal, philosophical, or budget minded differences. At its core, teacher tenure allows education professionals to bring forth issues impacting students that the administrative bureaucracy may not be comfortable recognizing or dealing with. Proof of this can be found embedded in news coverage on the alleged use of "scream rooms" in Middletown or the unfortunate string of and school response to student suicides in Enfield. Section 29 of the bill would replace the practice of locally based, school appropriate reforms with groupthink, mob mentality of conforming to the latest and greatest privately funded driven reforms. This transition would occur by creating a stigma or fear of questioning the validity of the newest top-down initiative that gives teachers directives to follow without voice. When teachers have to focus on looking over their shoulders to avoid negative evaluations, which are directly tied to their ability to acquire tenure under the new system, without the ability to question the content of the evaluations, they simply cannot be focused on the education of their students. Section 29, much like Section 18, is antithetical to the stated goal of the legislation.

Some of the reform groups testifying before you today claim that the focus of reforms should be what works for kids, not whether or not they make adults happy. On the surface, this is a piece of rhetoric that fits nicely into a media sound bite. Taking the care and time to investigate deeper lends itself to seeing how this is just another example of simplistic solutions to complex problems. In a joint statement to elected officials by six lobbying groups, CAPSS, CABE, CAS, ConnCAN, CCER, and the CBIA, the supposedly bold reforms put forth by the Governor were lauded. While each group's organization, funding, and lobbying efforts are naturally interesting to a Social Studies Teacher, the signing on of the CAPSS group is the most perplexing. This group supports the changes to Section 29 of Senate Bill 24 and further supports evaluation timelines being followed, without allowing for the content and validity of evaluations to be questioned. Yet countless publications found in the NASSP Bulletin and within the group's website talk about the crucial need for teacher voices to count equally as administration and teacher buy in to turning around the learning culture of a school. Put plainly these groups support gutting teachers legal protections of professional freedom yet state teachers are valued stakeholders in turning schools around.

I hope you all have the time necessary to weigh these paradoxes as you decide what is best for your constituency and for the students of Connecticut. I strongly urge the Committee to scale back the scope of this bill so that we can truly help the students and the professionals tasked with instilling a valuable education to our students. I strongly urge the Committee to strike sections 18, 29, and 30 from the bill. I strongly urge the committee to also strike sections of the bill that are not research based or that are the result of satiating the desires of corporate funded reform groups bent on privatizing education. I strongly urge the Committee to send a message to the rest of Connecticut's elected leaders that ill conceived, simplistic solutions to the state's complex educational challenges is not acceptable for the students of this State.