

Remarks of Joe Zipoli
Mathematics Teacher
Guilford Public Schools

Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24, Sections 29 & 30
Tenure and Teacher Evaluation

February 21, 2012

Good afternoon, Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. I'm Joe Zipoli, a mathematics teacher in Guilford, and today I'd like to comment on Senate Bill 24, regarding teacher evaluation and tenure.

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I reasoned as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Corinthians 1:13

Governor Malloy has recently proposed sweeping education reforms across Connecticut. Indeed, the national reform movement is heating up, again, because we Americans are facing bitter truths about our institutions and, by turn, ourselves. I'm furious because, yet again, it seems teachers will suffer from the banter and abuse of an uninformed, disconnected multitude. As often as not, so-called "reformers" in education insult the experience and wisdom of a grounded teaching corps with disingenuous remarks intended to infantilize and intimidate. One would think that the voices of veteran teachers should always matter in education reform, especially those who have earned advanced degrees in their subjects and taught hundreds of students— those who have graded thousands of problems and essays and research projects. Well they don't; at least, not as often as they should.

In the cynicism that is sweeping hallways in Hartford and Washington, and many other places besides, teachers are marginalized and silenced. When teachers speak, if and when they are given the chance, who is listening? Perhaps teachers' comments fall on strained ears, especially during legislative sessions, because they are saying things no one wants to hear. Many discussions in education center on failing schools and failing teachers. One seldom hears dialogue about failing communities.

I used to think the most important part of my job was assessing students' work which, to me, is squarely a matter of competence. Now, if I cannot find effective teaching strategies to counter many serious problems over which I have little (if any) control, then I'm not a good teacher. Competence, in the minds of those who have legislated a colossus of problems into the corridors of our schools, has been trumped by a sinister ideology that plants huge responsibilities squarely in the hands of those from whom authority has been taken: Teachers.

In our haste to have transparency and accountability and all else that makes for "successful" schools and "effective" teachers, we've put the cart before the horse. There are those who exclaim, "Just because someone is good at mathematics doesn't mean he or she will be a good teacher!" with which I agree. But I know that to be an effective teacher, in the first place, one must know their subject. Competence is the core ingredient in any teacher, and it a disservice to the accomplishments of many educators that the requirements of an advanced degree are under attack, though I understand that the

Governor's aim is to improve the ranks of our teachers, which is to be applauded. But how will he do this?

I should like to tell the Governor that I could well imagine many circumstances in which I would be highly ineffective, although I don't think of myself as an ineffective teacher. I cannot find effective teaching strategies to counter drug addiction, pregnancy, absenteeism, or physical and emotional abuse. Nor do I contend well with students' full-time jobs, poor diets, and sleep deprivation. Assorted phobias and disjunctive personality characteristics add to the list of what I'm expected to circumnavigate with effective instruction, and I haven't even gotten to the students who come to class woefully unprepared by a system that's passed them along with hopeful, but unrealistic intentions. And then there are the students who never show up. Sometimes during roll call other students will tell me that so-and-so has dropped the course. I pause and ask the students, "How can someone drop something they never held onto?"

Imagine your worth as a teacher being tied to the outcomes of these students on standardized tests. Further, imagine the types of dishonesty such a system of evaluation invites. We have already seen scandal, and I'm afraid there will be more—especially in a system without tenure.

Tenure is the one thing, above all others, that makes it possible for teachers to broker truth as understood within the context of their respective disciplines, and brokering truth in plain terms is perhaps the most important call for an educator to heed. Is an answer correct? This is a question I have to ask myself every day. Given the pressures put on teachers to award grades and passing marks to those who have not earned them, tenure makes it possible to say no in situations where "No" needs to be said. Tenure allows teachers to give personal interpretations of material within their disciplines without fear of intimidation, solely because their opinions and conclusions might be controversial.

From an historical perspective, tenure is extremely important, and I confess that I am increasingly dismayed by how many people who ought to know better about these things want to sell out on the tenure debate. Academic freedom maintains a cherished position in the American classroom for an essential reason, and I hope those who decry tenure understand its importance. Tenure allows for individuality in a world of crushing bureaucracy and legal intimidation. Effective teachers need to be vital in their classrooms, indeed, vitality is the core ingredient of effective teaching, and tenure gives teachers some much needed breathing space. If there are poor teachers in our classrooms, I assure you this is not the case because of tenure. Indeed, I would argue to the contrary.

For the sake of illustration, let me tell you a bit about my experience going through the tenure process in Connecticut. I should tell you that I am now a tenured teacher. Evaluations were supposed to be an integral part of the tenure process, and in the beginning and towards the end, they actually were. Unfortunately, those who evaluated me in my first year of teaching, save for my department chair, were totally unqualified to speak to my content area. They had no idea whatsoever about what I was trying to teach. In my second year of teaching, I wasn't evaluated at all. In my third year, I received two significant evaluations. My first evaluation was poor. The Dean noted that I was not meeting the students' learning needs and that my curriculum for this Algebra 2 class was not appropriate. The Dean took some time to concede that the curriculum was, essentially, a published document which I was—more or less—following. It didn't help that I had given this class Algebra 1 exams and that more than seventy percent of them had failed. I'd opened a proverbial can of worms. My next evaluation was an all-senior

class that was the last class of the last day of school. The poor Dean was repeatedly called out of class by a buzzing walkie-talkie and after the third time, or so, he never returned. My evaluation was glowing!

My worth as a teacher is directly tied to the performance of my students, but my measure is long term. I want my students to get back to me about what's going on in college. I want them to tell me about what classes they find easy or difficult and to make suggestions about what I can do to beef up my mathematics courses. (For the record, the number one suggestion is to teach more trigonometry. That, and to "kick out" students who don't want to learn—like what happens in college.) It strikes me that something pernicious is happening as a legal labyrinth of social problems continues to bankrupt our schools. I worry that talent is being driven out in both our student bodies and in our faculties. In many conversations that get heated, I'm asked about where I went to school. Anticipating the knee-jerk response to my answer, I brace and almost with shame, but never with shame, I say, "Taft." The usual commentary follows about private versus public schools and like that. The conversation never gets anywhere, really. But if we are to speak candidly about education reform, must we not also speak honestly and openly? Shouldn't everything be on the table, or is that simply too much to ask? We should have the right to think of our public schools as first-class institutions, but we have a long way to go to get there, and it's not just up to teachers to see this through. If we insist on heaping every problem imaginable into our schools, people will vote with their feet. They'll leave. If people are sincere about quality teaching in public schools, they'd better find ways to support teachers. Simply put, teachers need help and they're not getting it. I repeat, teachers need help.

Finally, I would like to comment on what I consider to be an unquantifiable problem in American education, but a problem, nevertheless. A few weeks ago, I was sitting in the lunch room amidst the usual chaos helping one of my brighter students through a calculus problem. Other students watched. At the end, in our triumph as we sat eating and talking, my student paused and said that he was surprised I was a teacher. Did I always want to be one? Why would anyone want to put up with what I put up with? He thought I was a bright guy, and he wondered why I wouldn't have wanted to do something more than just teach. I found the exchange revealing, though I'm sure he meant what he said as a complement. Thinking back to the school masters I had known, I asked my student if he could imagine a high school where the teachers were the very best at what they did, the most talented. His answer didn't take long, "No."