

*Remarks of Rich Novack  
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**Before the Education Committee  
On S.B. No. 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS  
Sections 28, 30, 31**

**February 21, 2012**

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Rich Novack, I'm a high school English teacher in Fairfield, and a student at Columbia's Teachers College in pursuit of an educational doctoral degree. I am here today to comment on Senate Bill 24, Sections 28, 30, 31.

It seems that our legislative body is asked to consider a bill that would continue the disempowerment of teachers. Rather than looking at ways to give teachers the tools they need to effectively deliver instruction to students, this legislative body is asked to put into law policies that demoralize teachers; policies that delegitimize the knowledge that classroom teachers have and the knowledge that they seek; policies that place the power of education in the hands of a few rather than in the democratic hands of the many; policies that take the professionalism out of teaching.

Teachers who seek to become more knowledgeable in their field through studies at institutions for higher education, like Columbia's Teachers College, are not valued in this new bill. The insights of these teachers are neglected. The research and theory they learn are not appreciated in this bill. As outlined in section 31, the pay scale that monetarily rewards teachers for their advanced degrees is eliminated. So what do teachers get out of investing thousands of dollars into advanced degrees? Nothing. And what might students get down the road? Fewer teachers learning the strategies and skills that these advanced degrees foster. If this bill passes, I'll be forced to reconsider the financial wisdom of finishing my doctoral degree.

If this bill passes, we will enter a world where a small few have power in education. Government officials and school administrators will run the show with little accountability. Will these few powerful people be knowledgeable? Will they seek to find new and more effective forms of instruction? Will they spur ingenuity and creativity to find better teaching strategies? Well, section 28 seems to place all of the professional development initiatives in the hands of the department of education; after all, each district should expect audits of their professional development programs by the state's department of education. My question here is, where are the teachers? Don't many teachers know of the professional development they need? I do. Don't many teachers have strategies and practices that they could share with their colleagues to benefit students? I do. Don't teachers have access to larger educational communities that research content specific issues relevant to specific grades and disciplines taught? I do. Why aren't we promoting the inclusion of teachers in the development of PD?

In my district, I just gave a full faculty PD with the aid and support of my administration. I shared techniques I've studied and practiced in the use of social technologies to formatively assess student work. I thought we were taking a step forward, but now I fear that instead of promoting this kind of proactive teacher involvement in professional development, we'll be taking a step backward to a time where teachers sat passively awaiting direction from the powers that be. This bill eliminates the requirement for professional development committees in which teachers are active participants and equal voices in the development of valuable teacher training. With the governor's new law, there is no incentive or space for teachers to independently make student learning better. Collaboration between administrators and teachers with regard to PD is stifled. According to the governor's bill, teachers "may" advise the districts, but their voices are not valuable enough to mandate listening to. Why would any teacher want to go out of her way to learn something new if it's not valued by her superiors?

In districts across the state, teachers' voices are muted in favor of the voices of administrators. Who are administrators? These are people who chose to leave the classroom to make more money. There is something perverse in this system when it monetarily incentivizes people to leave the place that is arguably most important to education; the classroom. So administrators leave the classroom and some of them, according to section 30, will go on to be the main judge evaluating teacher effectiveness. Now, while these administrators may receive training to do this evaluating, will the evaluation be based on the latest strategies that have been researched in academia and written about in professional journals like *English Journal*, a journal that I frequently read put out by the National Conference for the Teaching of English? Probably not. So what will these administrators know about effective teaching strategies in the secondary English classroom, and where will they get their knowledge? Who knows?

I am gravely concerned about the power bestowed upon administrators to evaluate teachers. I've sat with administrators and classroom teachers together, and I've witnessed an administrator misrepresent the classroom activities observed. I'm concerned that administrators are not uniformly capable of making fair, accurate, objective observations of teachers. I have a hunch that a lot of administrators believe that teachers are stubborn and lazy, and these kinds of biases should not be present in the person evaluating a teacher. According to section 30, these unskilled administrators may be granted the power to control my evaluation, and ultimately the pay I earn. Why would I want to be subjected to this kind of uninformed scrutiny? When my classroom strategies can be derailed by an unskilled administrator's evaluation, why would I take a risk on a new teaching method that I learned at Columbia? Where is my incentive to try harder to both improve student performance and increase my monetary compensation?

I think we need to reform education, but we can't do it by marginalizing the people that do the most important work. When the troops in Iraq called for better armor for protection, eventually, they were heard and the armor was delivered to do their jobs. Yet in our industry, the boots on the ground, the teachers, are never heard. They request tools. They request support. They seek advanced degrees to acquire better teaching strategies, and their voices are ignored.

CEA has made a number of good proposals that promote the role of teachers as leaders in our efforts to educate our children. I agree with CEA when it endorses teacher involvement in the planning of professional development. Teachers are connected to their professional educational

communities, and they should have more opportunities to help find professional development that is meaningful to their disciplines and their classrooms. I also agree that teachers should be part of the evaluation process. Good teachers know what good teaching looks like, arguably better than administrators. If we're going to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, let teachers be part of the process.

I also think that it's foolish to diminish the value for teacher improvement by divorcing advanced academic coursework from teacher evaluation and compensation. Not only should teachers continue to seek knowledge that improves their craft based on the latest research and theory, not only should teachers bring the knowledge acquired from academia back to their schools and share it with their peers, but teachers should be paid based on the degrees they've earned, and tuition for those advanced courses should be paid by their employers as is the case in many other industries.

This bill seems to imply that teachers aren't doing what's best for students. Now, I agree that like any industry, there are teachers who are truly not a good fit for the profession they've chosen. But this minority population of poor performing teachers should not shape the way all teachers are viewed, evaluated and compensated.

If bills like this one are passed in this state and across the country, I don't see the best and the brightest minds headed for the classroom to become teachers. I see them running to other industries where their skills, talents, and passions are appreciated and compensated. Personally, I'm hoping to send my child to an educational institution that recruits the best and the brightest, not one that scares them away.