

Written Testimony of Gary Peluchette
Bridgeport Teacher

Regarding SB 303
'An Act Concerning Boards of Education'

Before the Education Committee
March 5, 2012

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

My Name is Gary Peluchette, and I have been a resident of Bridgeport for the past 33 years. I have been a teacher with the Bridgeport Public schools for 27 years, 21 of those years as a teacher in the Talented and Gifted Program. I am in my second term as the President of the Bridgeport Education Association.

I am here today to testify regarding SB 303. SB 303 addresses the timeline for restoring democracy to a board taken over by the state. We should not have to restore democracy, we should commit to supporting and improving boards of education in the first place. Last July a great injustice occurred against the citizens of my city, citizens of all ages, when the Board of Education was reconstituted prior to the Fourth of July weekend. That injustice was corrected last week when the State Supreme Court declared that the actions taken did not follow the law for such a reconstitution. SB 303 is a move to create a second injustice.

SB 303 exists because politics took precedence over democracy. That is not a lesson that our children should be taught. The citizens of Bridgeport elected a Board of Education. It was the will of the people that those elected should serve in the capacity as board of education members. If certain members felt that they could not do the job, then they should have either resigned, or with an election only 4 months away, they could have chosen not to seek re-election. If the president of the board could not bring consensus, then the board should have had the opportunity to elect a new board president. If the board lacked the training to get the job done, then the training mandated by the law should have taken place.

The question that needs to be asked at the end of the day is "what is best for the children?" As a classroom teacher for over 30 years, I can say that democracy works best for them. I can say that teaching our children the values of our democracy and importance, of being represented by community members chosen by the people works best. In that lesson they need to learn that democracy is sometimes messy. It involves discourse, debate, and the involvement of its citizens. It can't be packaged, pre-made and ready to use when you open the box. Assembly is required, and that all the parts are there if you know how to use them.

What is being done by SB 303 may be necessary, given the can of worms board takeovers open. But more concerning is what is potentially being done through emergency certification legislation to overturn the Supreme Court decision. This only teaches our children that whenever someone in a position of power doesn't agree with a ruling of our judicial branch, then all they need to do is introduce a retroactive law that can undo what is right and just. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a lesson that all teachers will refuse to teach.

If children need to be better served by their elected board of education, and, Bridgeport children do, then the state should commit to helping board members become better. The state should collaborate with struggling boards, not obliterate them. This approach would go a long way to building capacity in the community for the future. It would be a path that supports and enhances democracy, versus a path that is disenfranchising Bridgeport's citizens.