

*Remarks of Christina Black
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Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24

February 21, 2012

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

My name is Christina Black, and I'm an English teacher at Rockville High School. In 2005, after working as a CPA for 7 years, I left the business world to pursue my dream of becoming a teacher. I went back to college to earn my undergraduate degree in English and then went to earn my master's degree in Education at Uconn's Teacher Certification Program for College Graduates. I entered the world of education to make a difference in our world. I have never worked so hard for anything in my entire life. Teaching is everything that I dreamed it would be. While the business world never inspired, challenged, frustrated, and rewarded me, all at the same time, each and every day, it never belittled me or told me my work was worthless. SB 24 does just that. It belittles much the work that teachers perform on a daily basis as well as the dedication with which they perform their work.

First of all, let me say that I support the new teacher evaluation framework designed by PEAC and implemented by the State Board of Education. Important details still must be worked out- particularly, the issue of student performance data. Where will we get performance data for teachers whose subjects or courses are not assessed by standardized tests? I teach a mix of 9th and 11th graders; therefore, many of my students have all already taken CAPT. The problem will be worse for teachers of art, physical education, technology, business education, and other areas that are not assessed with testing. Also, such student performance data will be hard to quantify for school counselors, psychologists, speech therapists etc., all of whom will fall under the new evaluation system. Nonetheless, I believe that the PEAC framework is a huge step forward, and once logistical details are worked out, will completely transform teacher evaluation in a positive way. This new evaluation system can, and should, become a major component of our education reforms.

Now, on to SB 24. I have serious reservations about several portions of the bill. I'll address a few as briefly as I can:

Section 26 [7] (at line 2489) removes the Master's Degree or 30 credits beyond a Bachelor's degree requirement for the Professional Educator certificate. A person could spend their entire career working at the Professional Educator level and never take courses beyond a Bachelor's degree. I don't think this is consistent with our goal to attract and retain the best qualified teachers for Connecticut's students. Furthermore,

Section 31 (d) of the bill (at line 3537) requires school districts to create salary schedules based on the new certification levels- Initial, Professional, and Master- and not based on degree levels. This section of the bill is silent on whether years of experience would still be factored into salary schedules, but, as written, it would potentially penalize those who have already earned advanced degrees or pursued credits beyond a Bachelor's- paid for with their own money- in order to keep their certification. In fact, it would allow for the salaries of experienced, highly educated teachers to be lowered until they could attain "Master Educator" status.

Section 29 (2) (at line 3080) extends the period of "at-will" employment from 90 days to one year. This means that during a teacher's entire first year they are not even a "teacher" as the word is defined in the bill, and can be terminated at any time without cause or due process. This section could lead to great abuses as school districts hire new, inexperienced teachers, let them work for a year, then lay them off on the last day of the school year, with no recourse. A careful reading of the language of this section reveals that there is no requirement or incentive for a district to evaluate a teacher in the first year even once.

Section 29 (6) (at line 3102) addresses tenure. This bill creates an enormously complicated system under which tenure is gained and has to be re-earned based on evaluations. A teacher's certification status is also based on performance evaluations (see lines 2505-2528). Thus, during the course of their careers, teachers can gain and lose tenure and move up and down the pay scale depending on the outcome of evaluations. This will create great instability and insecurity, and will be a disincentive for talented people to enter the profession. Finally, Sec. 29 (7) (E) (1) (at line 3333-3341) authorizes contract termination for any teacher, tenured or not, who receives a single "below standard" evaluation.

It's no secret that school districts' evaluation plans are not always adhered to by their own administrators. There's great subjectivity and inconsistency in the process. Administrators are increasingly overworked and have less and less time to observe teachers and provide meaningful feedback. And, under the PEAC framework, the evaluation process is going to become more complex and time consuming. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that evaluations will be conducted with any greater degree of objectivity or consistency. Nonetheless, as I stated above, I believe every school district in the state should adopt the PEAC framework.

To rectify this, I suggest that the current tenure statute remain in place, with some modifications to the dismissal proceedings to streamline the process. Specific suggestions for doing so can be found in the CEA's "A View From the Classroom" proposal at <http://cea.org/viewfromclassroom/assets/pdf/6-Reforming.pdf> (see pg. 13). Coupled with the new evaluation framework, this would allow us to ensure that our teachers are held to high standards in the classroom, while still providing the due process and stability that will help us attract and retain talented teachers.

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