

Remarks of Emily Kilbourn
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Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24, Sections 28 and 30
On teaching certification and evaluation

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

My name is Emily Kilbourn, and I'm an English teacher at Ridgefield High School and the Director of the Student Life Office and Advisory Program. I am also a resident of Redding. I am here today to comment on Senate Bill 24, Sections 28 and 30.

Though now I am a teacher in this state, it bears mentioning that I am also a product of public school education in Connecticut. I attended Joel Barlow High School when it was a "Blue Ribbon School." I had excellent teachers and a vibrant educational experience. Indeed, I was so touched by some of my teachers that I, too, was moved to pursue a career in education. Great teachers can have this effect on students. Bad ones can of course, have the opposite effect. I acknowledge that there are ineffective teachers in our system and I believe we should all be responsible for preventing incompetent educators from working with young people. I am, however, suggesting that the approach proposed in SB 24 is dangerously misguided.

Just last year, I served as a representative to the CT State Department of Education Advisory Committee regarding passing standards for initial certification in the state of Connecticut. After having attended a conference at ETS with representatives from all over the nation, I was pleased that at the follow-up meeting our state took the lead on adopting higher standards for initial certification. Teachers should be highly knowledgeable in their content areas and highly skilled in pedagogy. This bill suggests lowering the bar for teacher certification. At best, this would encourage mediocrity. We should be encouraging the increased professionalism of the teaching force—not discouraging it by removing the requirement for a master's degree except at the highest level of certification. We want to be well-respected as professionals at the peak of our own educational development. If you keep standards high for professional certification, we can move the discourse from one of accountability to one of responsibility.

The new outline for teaching certification is just one means by which SB 24 is a step in the wrong direction; the other is with regard to the teacher evaluation process. In her recent article in the *New York Review of Books* ("Schools We Can Envy"), education author Diane Ravitch criticizes the practice of applying "market-based solutions" to the realm of education. The criticism applies to this bill. As Ravitch asserts in her article, increasing competition, allowing data to drive educational decisions, and employing corporate world management models were ineffective in the contexts to which they were applied—indeed—as this author suggests they helped produce the economic crash of 2008. In his article from Friday's *Danbury News Times*, high school teacher Jonathan Budd references the difficulty of applying a corporate model to a school environment, as the latter is rife with complexities and concerns not present in other contexts. I will offer an example from my own school. Kevin Higgins, a talented third year teacher works tirelessly to deliver meaningful, content-rich lessons to engage the students with whom he works. Kevin teaches "co-taught" classes that cater to students with learning and social-emotional disabilities. This population of students requires differentiated instruction tailor-made for their 504 plans or IEPs. They struggle with absenteeism, and when they are present in the classroom, these students can

be hard to reach. This is not for Kevin's lack of trying. Clearly, I am concerned for my colleagues like Kevin who, under this new bill, will be evaluated in part by his students' performance. If all students were the same, such a model might be possible, but the conditions vary radically even within the same school building.

While I am not in Kevin's situation as I work with an accelerated population of students, I fear the notion that authentic learning and a student's love for learning will be replaced by the boring and banal: teaching to the test. I do not mean to suggest that the measurement of student outcomes has no place in education; however, weighing it so heavily in the teacher evaluation system will have disastrous implications. The highly successful Finnish education system does not rely on data produced by standardized tests either to evaluate teachers or to drive educational policy. Neither should we. The real moments of joy and authentic learning are not embedded in lesson plans that feature CAPT practice. The real moments of discovery happen as we encounter literature as collective discoverers. Right now, my freshman English students are reading *Romeo and Juliet*. As I'm sure you can imagine, Shakespeare is a tough sell these days. My ninth graders, however, come to class every day eager to learn. They beg to read, because they've discovered—through exploration of a variety of enrichment pieces that we've examined—that certain emotions transcend the ages. The way that Romeo and Juliet pine for each other in the first blushes of love is more familiar to, than different from, what my students know. I fear the loss of this kind of collective discovery when the test (or whatever measure of progress)—specifically my students' performance on it—takes center stage. The intensity of our rich writing program would also suffer as we move to standardization. We celebrate students' individual growth as writers. When Sam can't write a topic sentence even midway through the year but he can by June—that's real progress...for Sam. He might not be as gifted at analysis as Julia, but he's grown, and this kind of differentiation between students is not accounted for by way of standardization.

Let me be clear: I do not think that education reform is unnecessary. Indeed—I believe we should be carving a pathway for the elimination of ineffective teachers. This bill, however, goes about reform in the wrong ways. I would like to urge the committee not to look to market-based solutions that have not been effective on their own—let alone in the classroom. Even though I am a highly-competent, successful teacher, if my salary were variable, I would be forced to compromise what I love best about teaching, or walk away from the profession altogether. To reform education, look to models for highly successful school systems. Please strongly consider heightening rather than lowering standards for teacher certification. Having a teaching certificate in this state has always *meant* something in terms of its value. While we don't yet have children ourselves, my husband and I—who's also a teacher—would want them to be challenged by an education system that makes them think, fosters activity, and honors creativity and cooperation, rather than competition or the attainment of test scores. Let's look to a more vibrant vision; SB 24 is not it.