

*Remarks of Joel Farrior
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*Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24*

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

My name is Joel Robert Farrior, and I'm an 8th grade social studies teacher in Montville, CT. More importantly, I am a parent whose oldest son will be attending Kindergarten in the East Lyme School System. I am here today to comment on Senate Bill 24 and how I believe this bill is a detriment to our education schools system should NOT be approved. I am here to share my testimony and why our system isn't broken and teachers are not what need fixing. I am addressing the "value of education".

Originally I had written a long testimony about how this bill is bad. I was going to address specific sections and wage a debate on what the real issues are and how this bill does nothing to solve them. I hoped to appeal to some compromising side in hopes that you will not overhaul too much and affect my profession that I love so much. I read my original draft to my father like any proud son excited for the chance to take part in the democratic process and share something of pride and importance to him.

Before I continue, I must tell you a bit about my father. He is an East Lyme public schools graduate, and a veteran whose goal in life was to put his kids through college—something he achieved. He did not have the perfect upbringing. My Dad had an alcoholic father and his was not the best home environment. He would tell me, "Joel, I would come home and wonder if my father was drunk and angry. Homework and school were the least of my concerns." My father always talked about his excellent teachers and how they helped him value education at a time during which he was dealing with bigger issues. He could have been a statistic, taking up drinking and becoming just like his father. I could have followed that same path. However, thanks to his teachers, my father broke this chain and started a new one. I am proud to be that second link of the new chain. Growing up listening to these stories, it was clear what I was going to be: a teacher. In some way, I feel like my father was setting the path for me. Even today, he still talks of his teachers as if he just graduated. Now that I am a teacher, he is always reminding me of those unfortunate kids like himself, whose homes are not always the best environments. They need school more than anyone, and they deserve great teachers.

After talking to him about why I am here today, it became clear to me: I need to take the high ground and not get suckered into debate about a bill that only looks to punish teachers and use them as scapegoats. My epiphany came a long time ago as a result of many discussions with my father about education. I declared that mine was going to be a lifetime of education; I won't settle on just a year.

It is easy to sit at a desk, analyze numbers and test scores, see that there is an achievement gap and say, "Education needs reform." We are bombarded with media detailing all the negatives in society because those stories sell and make for good headlines. So the successes get left out. Of the many students I have taught over the years, most of them graduate. Many go on to college or continue with education beyond the 12 years of public school.

Connecticut has always had some of the best towns and places to raise a family. We boast some of the best education systems in the country, and our scores rank higher than many other states. Why? Because of their education systems. For every failing child there are many, many more who are successful. For every struggling district, there a lot more who are doing great. Just because we have a small percentage of students who do not go on to become doctors, engineers, and lawyers don't mean they are failures.

Most failing students are products of their home environments. They come from broken homes or homes where education isn't a priority. Studies have shown that by third grade, a student will have already identified himself or herself as being a successful or failing student. This identification occurs because they will learn they are not like the other kids. They don't live in a strong community and may not have parents capable of instilling the value of education. If a child is behind in third grade, he will most likely be behind his entire school career. The misconception is that the gap happened because of the school district and poor instruction from teachers. The truth is that the gap began in the home. This student didn't have an entire educational career of bad teachers. There are studies that show if the parents have college educations, the child is more likely to do well. Those students who go to college and graduate have parents who are supportive of continuing education. While the state politicians talk about reform and try to answer questions about how to bridge the gap, those of us who teach are doing the real work and making a difference. We can't afford to spend time politicking because we have to answer the tough questions that politicians ignore: "What do we do when a student refuses to learn or has given up on his education? How do we instill a value of education in a child whose parents don't value it themselves?"

It is in my classroom and many like mine, where the battle lines have been drawn. As teachers, our war is against poverty, bullying, physical and sexual abuse, child neglect, and the list goes on. Politicians can't legislate families and tell them how to parent. Instead, we create these one-size-fits-all policies that don't do anything but take up time and waste funds. Our society doesn't want to create policies that require more tax

money, but which may actually improve some of these failing communities—that would be too difficult and costly. Instead, politicians politicize the education system in our country, and now in our state, by going after the one group who is actually working hard to make a difference. We have seen this in Wisconsin, New Jersey, New Hampshire, and now in Connecticut. No Child Left Behind treated all students as if they were the same kind of learners. Now we have to Race to the Top, a policy that treats states as if they all have the same needs and issues. The federal government dangles money in front of state governments in a time where states struggle with its budgets. States like Connecticut are pressured into reform despite being successful at educating our children.

Now we have Senate Bill 24, which says we want to bridge a gap by holding teachers accountable, when sadly they are not the ones who need the accountability. I was once proud that Connecticut always seemed to be the leader in education. We valued our teachers and our laws ensured we had the best. Today, we have tougher standards than any other state. Senate Bill 24 is an attempt to strip all of that away because someone decided “this is the year”.

There are many places in Connecticut that are successful. I think of East Lyme and Colchester, which both were recently rated as the top places to live in America. I would put Montville up there too. Why should these towns have to be punished or change? Why should their successful practices in evaluating, hiring, and management have to change because other towns might struggle in these areas? Instead, we should learn from them and see what makes them successful. We should provide supports for teachers and not look to make them more accountable for things they don't have control over. No one ever robbed a store and said, “I had an awful teacher.” However, many successful people, like my father, credit the wonderful teachers they have had.

I have been teaching for 11 years. I have had 7 different assistant principals, and three different Principals. In the time I have been teaching only once has my principal observed me. However, I have proven in many other ways I am an effective teacher through other indicators. What I see is my building administrators forced to deal with behavioral problems that require a lot of attention. They spend too much time being disciplinarians rather than evaluators of educational instruction. Again it comes back to the one-size-fits-all approach to educating. Students learn at different paces and with different styles. We should embrace these differences and track them by placing students in classrooms that meet their individual needs. This also means focusing on those who do not value education by creating intervention classrooms that focus on basic skills other students learn in the home. Strategies like this should have been what was focused on, not teacher accountability, and overhauling a system that works. Sometimes a simple look at things and going back to basics is the perfect fix.

Finally, my father raised two kids on the “value of education”. I became a teacher and my brother became a police officer. Both of us chose our professions because we

wanted to help those who need it most. I am now a father of two, the third links on the chain my father started. My oldest goes into kindergarten next year at the same school I and his grandparents attended. Unlike our governor, my family is proud of the school systems we have in Connecticut. I am also proud to be a part of the one in Montville, hoping to influence and instill the value of education my father's teachers instilled in him.

I leave you with this thought: when deciding if dramatic change is needed, ask yourself, "If a child wanted to receive a good education, could he?". The answer is yes because this is Connecticut, and we are in America. No country does a better job of educating those in poverty, and no state is better at educating its students. It isn't coincidence that Connecticut has always valued teachers and supported concepts like teacher tenure and binding arbitration. My father gave me a challenge he wanted to share with you: Imagine your worst failing student. Now imagine raising that same child in a good environment. Does he still fail? The issue is not education and how our teachers need to be better, but rather education and how do we make a community or family value it.

I think Hillary Clinton was right; it does take a village to raise a child.