

*Remarks of Jose M. Vas  
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**Before the Education Committee  
On S.B. No. 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS  
Sections 28 - 33 - *Teacher Certification, Evaluation and Support***

**February 21, 2012**

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

My name is Jose M. Vas. I'm a high school history teacher in Danbury and a parent of four students in the Danbury public school system. I would like to comment on Senate Bill 24, Sections 28 to 33.

There is no question of the good intentions of our governor and legislators in attempting to improve education for all of our children. The question is whether the measures being reviewed at this hearing will bring about the desired outcome. I have grown more and more dismayed over the years at the direction public education has taken in Connecticut. Instead of proven, thoughtful and flexible responses to challenges in educating our youth, we have turned to one-size-fits-all, centralized and prefab solutions to problems that are ill-defined. I have seen the detrimental effects of these changes in the growth of my own children.

How will eliminating the requirement for a master's degree, reducing the standards for teachers migrating from other states and eliminating the critical support offered by CALI improve education? We need teachers with better training, higher standards of educational achievement and richer and deeper support. My oldest daughter, a senior, took an elective course with a teacher who openly admitted she did not know much about the subject. She also took multiple AP courses that our school offered. Our school claimed we would not have been able to offer as many sections of those courses if we had not received funds for training from a large grant. Therefore, we need to at least *maintain* our current certification requirements, not water them down.

When my second daughter arrived in ninth grade earlier this school year, she almost did not get to take French III. Budget cuts impacted scheduling but, ultimately, the school was able to make an accommodation. She loves her French class and teacher, trying out her vocabulary and engaging in stimulating projects. But recently, she came home bitter about the kind of work she has to do in *other* classes. It is CAPT time, you see, and the teachers are drilling students on the skills that will be tested. In our school, "teaching to the test" was considered to be a stinging indictment of poor teaching. That is no longer the situation. Teachers fear what might happen to them if they do not teach to the test.

How much worse will this become if evaluation authority is centralized under the principal? At a time when the business world has recognized that effective operations require maximum

flexibility, responsiveness and initiative at all levels of the organization, education administration is headed in the exact opposite direction. In our classrooms we differentiate our instruction and respond to students' needs. How is stripping away teacher protection and centralizing power in the principal's hands going to accomplish this? Teachers will fear for their livelihood and do what they are told, which may well not be what their students need. The *New York Times* only today reported on the difficulties Tennessee is facing in implementing its new evaluation policies. A principal pointed out that a teacher who was delivering a good lesson had to receive a bad evaluation because of the rubric that the principal had to use.

We should not assume that more evaluation authority for school administrators will lead to better education. These administrators are already overworked and do not have enough time to conduct the classroom visits and evaluations that are so critical to improvement. Many lack the training and know-how to conduct these observations properly. When schools are under pressure to push up test scores, we can safely expect principals to put the same pressure on teachers to do the same and threaten their jobs if it does not happen. This does not sound like the path to better education. This might close the achievement gap only if we believe that the achievement gap exists as measured by test scores.

Allow me to show you three faces of the achievement gap. (I have changed the names of the students but I assure you that at least half of my students have similar stories.) The first is Xavier. He is the child of recent immigrants, speaks English well enough to hold a conversation, has poor academic skills and has had brushes with the law. Xavier will not pass CAPT under current conditions and will not bother to work for it. With support and respect though, Xavier was willing, even eager, to do homework for me, to participate in class discussions about the economic philosophies of Hoover and FDR. But if I had been evaluated by the standards set by our school, I would have been in trouble. Xavier failed CAPT, not bothering to take some sections. Sitting near Xavier was Erving. Also the child of immigrants, his academic skills were stronger than Xavier's but still very weak. Using instruction that is considered ineffective in our school, not only was I able to engage Erving in learning (he now watches the History Channel to learn more about history) but he almost got into a fight with another student because that young man did not do the promised amount of work in a group project and Erving did not want his grade lowered. Erving did not pass CAPT either. In another class, I have Darlene, yet another child of immigrants. Her father is gone and her mother recently was in the hospital for a minor stroke. Darlene takes care of her mother and her siblings. She spent almost a week in the hospital last week because of an ulcer. She has been in poor health, with breathing and stomach issues. She does not dare be out sick from school anymore because she fears she will lose credit for excessive absences. Whenever she missed a day of school, she always made up her work for me. Needless to say, Darlene failed CAPT. Are test scores what we have to worry about for these students? Does nothing else matter?

Danbury High School has been roiled by the current reform movement. We are now on our sixth principal since I joined the school in the mid-90s. Our students, schools and teachers need help, not ever more draconian evaluation methods. Do we want our students to grow up to be thinking, contributing citizens or do we want them to know how to pass tests? These two things are not even mutually exclusive but we have made them so. My youngest child, a boy in fourth grade, recently came home with another writing assignment, a worksheet on determining main

ideas. His teacher, an excellent, experienced teacher, tried to engage her students with more interesting material. The topic of the worksheet was woolly mammoths. For the first time in my life, I saw a little boy *not* interested in woolly mammoths. He just wanted to get the worksheet done so he could go build Legos. If his teacher had less experience and felt less secure in her job, I doubt my son would have any interest in school.

So I implore you to give careful and deliberate consideration to the governor's reform proposals. Please examine carefully all aspects of Connecticut's education gap, what is causing it and how we can solve it. Resist facile attempts to "fix the teachers because we cannot fix the students," as a wise retired veteran, who had high-level corporate administrative experience, once told me. Make sure that we have the funds and training to implement new programs properly. Maintain the high certification requirements of our profession. Make partners of your teachers, not scapegoats. Hold us to high standards but give us the professional respect and support to achieve them. No one wants success for students more than their teachers. Keep the spotlight on us but do not neglect to shine it on others who are critical to our challenge: administrators, parents and students.

I close with this metaphor: we are trying to rebuild the airplane while it is in the air. Many nod knowingly at it, acknowledging the difficulties of trying to reform our schools. But what is obvious about the metaphor is that you cannot rebuild a plane while it is in the air. You might rearrange the seats, change the pilot, redecorate the cabins but try to rebuild the wing and the plane will crash. Perhaps, in the true interest of building a 21<sup>st</sup> century education system, we should take on the difficult challenge of building a new plane entirely. Isn't it about time that we stopped trying to fix an educational model rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and build a new one instead? Let's stop talking about a 21<sup>st</sup> century system and start building it. After all, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is already 12 years old.

Thank you for all your time, consideration and hard work.