

*Remarks of  
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**To the Education Committee  
On S.B. No. 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS  
Section 29 - Teacher Tenure**

**February 21, 2012**

Senator Stillman and Representative Fleishmann, and members of the Education Committee, my name is Erik Savoyski, and I'm a teacher in the Danbury Public School District. I would like to comment on Senate Bill 24, Section 29.

There is probably a teacher in every school building in this country who should have chosen a different line of work. The staff knows it; the administrators know it; probably the parents know it, too. We have all heard the famous statistic that half of new teachers leave the classroom during the first five years, claiming burnout, low pay, bad working conditions, etc. It is also possible that they simply decided teaching is not for them. I remember several students who went through the teacher prep program at CCSU who started their student teaching experiences and were gone after the first week. The four year probationary period that is currently in place and the rigor of teaching itself gives new teachers plenty of time to determine if this is what they want to do as their life's work. It also gives school administrators, as long as they are doing their jobs, plenty of time to figure out if a particular teacher has what it takes to remain in the classroom.

In a perfect system, only those who have the stamina to teach in front of 25 children all day for 38 years will be in the classroom. However, budgetary issues, student populations, lack of qualified personnel, and a hundred other variables will inevitably have individuals unqualified for the job to be in place. It is laudable to address this issue, as we all know that having a highly qualified teacher in the classroom has the greatest impact on student achievement. Everyone at the hearing today is disturbed by the problems we face in Connecticut's education system, and is looking for someone to blame. However, we shouldn't use the current situation to install a new system that is fraught with unanticipated—and I would hope, unintended—consequences. The Governor's bill as written is a plan to do this very thing.

First, I take extreme exception to Governor Malloy's comment that basically the only thing a new teacher has to do in this state is to show up for four years, and tenure is theirs. Quotes like this are taken directly out of Connecticut's anti-teacher faction's playbook. Their literature comes to my home, and they can barely contain their glee at the prospects of this year's legislative session. I believe this committee has some knowledge of both the old BEST program, and the new TEAM program. These programs were not and are not walks in the park, as I could peruse past yearbooks at my school and pick out dozens of teachers that were released because they could not pass BEST. Add data teams, SRBI, fall, midterm and final benchmarks, pre- and post- CFAs, lesson plans based on state standards, end of unit projects, collaboration with colleagues to promote common educational experiences, and complete transparency in everything we do to learning how to deliver content and maintain classroom management, and no clear-thinking individual could say that is just showing up.

Secondly, tenure does not guarantee a teacher's job for life. What it does is set up a system of due process in which teachers can be terminated, like most in the private sector, for cause. If the hearing process bothers you, look no further than CEA's reform program for proposed changes. But instead of discussing those, we're witnessing a coordinated effort to mislead Connecticut's citizens about what tenure is and a rush to throw out our valid, important and historic tenure system as a way to pander to those who blame teachers for the incredibly difficult challenges that face our society. These folks are not happy with the price tag of education in this country; they feel they are not getting their money's worth. While every person is entitled to his perception of things, I believe in many cases it is his or her own background that plays a huge part in why s/he is comfortable with both radical change, and the punitive nature of changes endorsed by Senate Bill 24.

None of my close friends from high school or college are teachers. Most work in business, finance, or in the medical and high-tech fields. And they all know two things: I have the summer off, and my workday ends at 2:20. My wife—also a teacher—and I have had to defend what we do for a living against charges from our own family members over the years. My brother-in-law summed it up years ago with, “you play with kids all day and work half the year!” This unfortunately, is the attitude that I believe far too many Americans have toward teachers; most went to school during the 1970s, 80s, and into the 90s, when there was a good deal of coasting going on. They also had between 50 or 60 teachers during those thirteen years, and not all were up to par. You can tell them that it is now a completely different ballgame, but like with most ideology, they are not going to change their mind. As far as the anti-teacher crowd is concerned, nothing short of a three to five year teaching certificate that allows teachers to be removed for any reason and without due process is the best way to close the achievement gap.

If one compares Senate Bill 24 to the improvement plan called NextEd outlined by the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, you will find they are essentially the same document. Basically, as the CEO of any school district, superintendents are put yearly into the unenviable position of reducing their proposed budget by one or two million dollars. Is it too far-fetched to imagine a scenario where a municipality struggling to balance a budget will use the power in this document to show the higher paid teachers the door?

There has been a lot in the media the past few years about teacher tenure and the low rates of dismissal, especially when the economy is so poor. When lots of people are losing jobs, it is natural to look around and wonder why some people have such job security. Add to that the constant cacophony of how bad the unions are, and you get a recipe for what's been happening in the Midwest. I haven't met a teacher yet who wants an inferior colleague among them. However, many past options and/or legislative bills that have been introduced by self-styled reformers have language that is both draconian and punitive, and therefore unacceptable. Governor Malloy, when elected, pledged to craft—with help from CEA—a new teacher evaluation system that gives struggling teachers the tools to fix what's broken, and if not, a procedure for the teacher's removal. Senate Bill 24 is not that. It is an overreaching document that concentrates enormous authority in the hands of the state commissioner of education, and will definitely not entice Connecticut's best and brightest to consider teaching as a career. I would like to urge the committee to adopt CEA's positive reform plan as a valid, fair, and sensible approach to Senate Bill 24. Thank you.