

**STATEMENT OF WILLIAM M. BLOSS**  
**CHAIRMAN, GUILFORD BOARD OF EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>**  
**ON S.B. 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS**

Practical and effective education reforms have long eluded policymakers at every level of government. I do not pretend to have all or even most of the answers, but I have served on the Guilford Board of Education for over twelve years, the last six as its chairman. I have seen how well-meaning state and, in particular, federal policies have led to unintended consequences that local educators must try to fix – often with little support. And I have seen how thoughtful and collaborative efforts between teachers, administrators, parents and board members can lead to lasting and meaningful improvements in student achievement.

Before addressing what I believe are the most pressing problems facing schools in our town, let me first note what they are not. Tenure rules do not significantly handicap student achievement. While they grab the headlines, perhaps because they are the only public education issue that can be stated concisely, the fact is that tenure rules very seldom matter. Wise hiring, meaningful and embedded professional development, and timely and well-reasoned decisions about whether to grant tenure in the first place have been more than adequate to enable our district to provide quality teachers. Having teachers on professional development committees does not limit student achievement. Appeals from non-renewals of non-tenured teachers are not barriers to student achievement.

The most pressing problem facing schools in our town is that we are forced, year after year, to rely far too much on residential property taxes. State and federal aid -- funds raised from broader and fairer revenue sources -- has fallen. Now about 90 percent of our budget comes from local property taxes. Property taxes simply should not fund local education to this extent. Property taxes force some people to oppose programs because their income does not support the level of taxes that the market value of their property mandates. The state should of course, provide more assistance to all towns. But the most significant step that the General Assembly could take to help education in most towns would be to overhaul the property tax system.

Perhaps my greatest concern about some of the reforms that you are considering is that they seem to be based on a conclusion that faculty, administrators, and board members cannot work cooperatively and collaboratively to increase student achievement. That simply has not been the case in Guilford. Starting with collective bargaining with teachers, we chose to follow a model called Interest-Based Bargaining. IBB allows teachers and board members to sit together at a table to talk openly and cooperatively about how to solve problems, rather than exchange and bargain over narrow proposals. We have done this twice with the assistance of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, and arrived at responsible results.

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<sup>1</sup> Affiliation solely for the purpose of identification. These are my personal views which have not been approved by any other member of the Guilford Board of Education.

Admittedly, the possibility of binding arbitration was always in the background and framed parts of the discussion. However, treating all the stakeholders as partners in student achievement, starting with their contracts, has helped to create an atmosphere of mutual trust rather than suspicion and antagonism. Not coincidentally, it also led to all of our employees agreeing to reasonable concessions during the depth of the economic crisis. At the time the Hartford Courant editorialized: "Give the town of Guilford and its teachers an A in diplomacy and good public relations. They have led the way in showing other municipalities how to talk to one another, be flexible and work out a common agenda that benefits everyone." That would never have happened if we had a traditional management relationship with our faculty.

More importantly, our collaborative approach has dramatically improved student achievement. Six years ago our schools simply were not meeting expectations. For example, our score on a state mathematics test for middle school students was 42<sup>nd</sup> in the state. Today, by one measure (the number of students meeting goal on all state tests), our middle schools are 15<sup>th</sup> in the state, and our high school is 11<sup>th</sup> in the state. This is far above where we should be if socioeconomic factors were the only determinant. We didn't reach this level by spending money recklessly – Guilford's per capita tax levy is 48<sup>th</sup> in the state and per pupil spending is 78<sup>th</sup>. We didn't accomplish it by threatening teachers or treating them as adversaries. And, frankly, we didn't get there with much help from either the federal or state governments. We did it by changing our management expectations and approach and by committing to work together toward a common goal. We moved to the Professional Learning Communities model for instructional improvement, following the Principles of Learning of the Learning Policy Center at the University of Pittsburgh. We did it by providing more embedded and more meaningful professional development. We did it by making all our staff – from faculty and administrators to nurses and custodians – partners in improving student achievement. We allowed teachers who had good ideas to give them a try, and we allowed teachers to work collaboratively to let them learn what works from each other.

Education reform is badly needed. Student achievement must be improved. Our experience in Guilford perhaps is not for everyone, but the collaborative approach that we have followed unequivocally has led to substantial improvements. It was not easy to implement; it took long hours and hard work. Most importantly, it took trust. Teachers had to trust administrators and administrators had to trust teachers. The Board had to trust both, and parents had to trust all three. Trust cannot be legislated. The most significant risk from some of the reform proposals you are considering is that they may erode some of the trust that we have built up, and another well-meaning reform will have had an unintended effect. I hope that you will carefully consider our experience as you move forward.

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