

Dear Rep. Cook,

Thank you for your service as on the education committee. Please enter this email in the public record as my testimony before the committee and I would greatly appreciate your forwarding to the committee members.

As a music teacher in two public elementary schools in Torrington-East and Forbes- (I live in Simsbury) and serving as co-chair of the Forbes School Governance Council, it is with great disappointment and concern that I have been following the recent comments and proposals from our Governor and legislators regarding teachers and education reform. I was very upset by the Governor's comment that all teachers have to do was "show up" to receive tenure and that it was, in essence, a lifetime guarantee of employment. Not sure what district he was speaking of because in Torrington I had to prove my abilities over a four year period that included several formal and informal observations over the course of that period. Once I received tenure I still have formal and informal observations throughout the year to ensure I still exemplify and exhibit best practices.

I also wish to dispel the misconception that tenure is a "lifetime guarantee" of employment. That is not the case. All tenure guarantees is that a teacher will receive due process in any disciplinary actions and/or dismissal from their position. There are mechanisms in place for administrators to dismiss teachers. It is whether the administrator wishes to conduct the appropriate due process to do so. I served as the Torrington Educators' Association VP of Elementary Schools and over the course of my service in the position grieved several situations where teachers were unjustly disciplined or where an administrator had taken a disliking to a non-tenured teacher. In some situations the teacher in question had many very positive observations in their personnel folder from previous administrators yet the current administrator had taken a disliking to the teacher. Thank goodness tenure was there to protect this teacher from the arbitrary whims of that administrator. I worked the corporate side for over 15 years as an "at will" employee (received B. M.Ed. from SUNY Potsdam and NYS certification then worked in the pharmaceutical industry developing educational programs for medical professionals). How many occasions had I seen a colleague dismissed on the whims of "the boss" or whole departments let go because the boss decided to try a "new direction." How nice it would have been for these individuals if "the boss" had to follow due process and just cause. Tenure is not a lifetime guarantee rather it guarantees due process. And I hope we can agree that people deserve a fair chance to present their case.

It is always with great frustration how I read that schools in countries like Finland or Singapore, for example, have all the answers while we who teach in America just don't "cut the mustard" and are failing our children. Whenever anyone then brings up the data and states that Finland, in particular, supports their teacher with higher salaries (in fact recent data prove that those countries with the top PISA scores also pay their teacher top dollar), that teachers receive support from Government, that teachers are highly respected professionals...well...this part of the argument seems to fall on deaf ears. In fact, when the data is read scientifically and thoroughly (rather than out of context) we see that schools in America really are not failing and compare favorably to these countries. Attached please find an article from *Bloomberg's Business Week* entitled "U.S. Schools Are Still Ahead—Way Ahead" illustrating how favorably American schools compare to the rest of the world. This is one of many myths about our education system. Also attached is a recent article from *The Washington Post*, entitled "Five Myths about American Schools" which details five misconceptions about teachers and education in America.

Each of us works as hard as we can for our students. And, believe me, given the socioeconomic problems facing Torrington it's not a walk in the park. I have students who come in to school cold and hungry...we feed them breakfast and warm their hearts...students who sleep on different couches throughout the week...we give them a "home"...students who arrive from uncaring homes...we show them love and

patience. I could go on. I am imploring you to please support us and not punish teachers for society's ills. We work our hardest to overcome these challenges in the hope of a better life for our students. We need to support our veteran teachers not punish them or threaten their livelihoods with wrong-headed reforms.

To demonstrate my point, please see below a recent article found on Judy Strauss' Washington Post Blog, "The Answer Sheet" which follows and comments on education issues. I felt it was particularly compelling given the recent spate of negative comments about teachers and our schools.

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## Five Myths About America's Schools

Washington Post

By Paul Farhi, Published: May 20, 2011

The end of the school year and the layoffs of [tens of thousands of teachers](#) are bringing more attention to reformers' calls to remake public schools. Today's school reform movement conflates the motivations and agendas of politicians seeking reelection, religious figures looking to spread the faith and bureaucrats trying to save a dime. Despite an often earnest desire to help our nation's children, reformers have spread some fundamental misunderstandings about public education.

### **1. Our schools are failing.**

It's true that schools with large numbers of low-income and English-as-a-second-language students don't perform as well as those with lots of middle- and upper-middle-class students who speak only English. But the demonization of some schools as [“dropout factories”](#) masks an important achievement: The percentage of Americans earning a high school diploma has been rising for 30 years. According to the Department of Education, the percentage of 16-to-24-year-olds who were not enrolled in school and hadn't earned a diploma or its equivalent fell to 8 percent in 2008.

Average SAT and ACT scores are also up, even with many more — and more diverse — test-takers. On international exams such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, U.S. elementary and middle school students have improved since 1995 and rank near the top among developed countries. Americans do lag behind students in Asian nations such as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan on these tests, but so do Europeans. The gap in math and science scores may be an East-West divide.

## **2. Unions defend bad teachers.**

Unions have proved amenable to removing the bad apples in their ranks — with due process. Montgomery County, for instance, implemented its Peer Assistance and Review program with union cooperation a decade ago. It requires every new teacher and those flagged as “underperforming” by a principal to be observed by a specialist over a school year. All teachers get support, advice and a chance to do better; then they are reevaluated. Those who fall short lose their jobs. Between 2006 and 2010, 245 teachers resigned or were dismissed. Many districts have similar programs, but, as [a Harvard study](#) pointed out, they are expensive.

Reformers who attack unions for school problems should mind their logic: Some school systems show better results than others, yet most have teachers' unions. If unions are universally problematic, why are some students succeeding while others languish?

## **3. Billionaires know best.**

Bill Gates, real estate developer Eli Broad and Facebook chief Mark Zuckerberg have made massive financial contributions to public schools to promote pay-for-performance programs, which reward teachers with bonuses when their students do better on standardized tests. They argue that merit pay creates the same incentives for public-sector employees that bonuses do in the private sector.

But the emerging research on merit pay for teachers disputes that.

In a three-year, \$10 million study released last fall, Vanderbilt University researchers found no significant difference in performance between students who were taught by middle school teachers eligible for cash bonuses and those who weren't. That's no surprise to most teachers; they know that teamwork is key to success. Individual pay-for-performance schemes create the opposite incentive, fostering competition, not collaboration.

Despite this, Gates alone is investing \$290 million over seven years in schools in Memphis, Tampa, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. Zuckerberg has endorsed New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's merit-pay agenda by [pledging \\$100 million](#) over the next five years to Newark's schools, whose budget this year is \$940 million.

There's no doubt that these schools can use every dime that rich guys give. But attaching strings for pet projects is elitist and wasteful.

#### **4. Charter schools are the answer.**

President Obama certainly thinks so. He's said that state limits on the number of charter schools aren't "good for our children, our economy or our country." He and Education Secretary Arne Duncan want more charters — taxpayer-supported schools that operate independently of traditional public school systems. About 1.5 million children, or 3 percent of public school students, attended a charter school this past school year. Some have outperformed their non-charter peers, particularly in inner cities.

Credit for that may rest solely with the students, however. Charter school students are among the most motivated, as are their parents, who sought an alternative education for their children and mastered the intricacies of admission.

And siphoning off those better students through choice may create the same disastrous effect as de facto segregation through the geography of poverty — it leaves behind those least able to advocate for themselves and most susceptible to falling through the cracks.

All for results that are not uniformly impressive: [A 2010 study](#) of 2,330 middle school students at charter schools in 15 states found that they performed no better in math and science. And a Stanford University study in 2009 concluded: "Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student[s] would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools."

#### **5. More effective teachers are the answer.**

Former D.C. Schools chief Michelle Rhee and other big-city superintendents called for more effective teachers in a [reform "manifesto"](#) published in The Washington Post last fall. Well, sure. Who doesn't want more effective teachers? While we're at it, let's get more effective superintendents, curriculum specialists and principals, too.

Let's be realistic: Teachers aren't miracle workers. There's only so much they can do to address problems that troubled students bring to class every day, including neglect, abuse, and unaddressed medical and mental health issues. The obvious and subtle ways that poverty inhibits

a child's ability to learn — from hearing, visual and dental problems to higher asthma rates to diminished verbal interaction in the home — have been well-documented.

So let's seek to improve the state of families. Attacking schools and teachers makes everyone feel like a reformer, but the problems begin long before a child steps through the schoolhouse door.

**Paul Farhi** is a reporter for The Washington Post.

## **From: Bloomberg Business Week**

January 12, 2011

### **U.S. Schools Are Still Ahead—Way Ahead**

**America's alarm about international rankings of students overlooks some critical components of our education system,**

By [Vivek Wadhwa](#)

America has an inferiority complex about its education system. You hear the sirens every year, when the OECD Program for International Student Assessment ([PISA](#)) releases its annual test results. Finland, South Korea, and Singapore usually come out on top; we start blaming our K-12 teachers for not teaching enough mathematics and science; we begin worrying about the millions of engineers and scientists China and India graduate.

This year the big surprise was that Shanghai garnered first place in the PISA rankings. Then *The Wall Street Journal* ran a story on the home page of its website titled "[Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.](#)" The *Journal* article claimed that Chinese (and Korean, Indian, etc.) parents raise "stereotypically successful kids"—math whizzes and music prodigies. They do this by *not* allowing their children to attend sleepovers; have a playdate; be in a school play; complain about not being in a school play; watch TV or play computer games; choose their own extracurricular activities; get any grade less than an A; not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama. The article went on to recount as typical a series of acts that would be considered child abuse in the U.S. (and aren't the norm in India and China).

The *Journal* article was simply bizarre, yet it is true that education in China and India is very challenging and fiercely competitive. Children are brought up to believe that education is

everything, that it will make the difference between success and starvation. So from their early years they work long and hard. Most of their childhood is spent memorizing books on advanced subjects.

## **American Stereotypes**

Meanwhile, the perception is that American children live a relatively easy life and coast their way through school. They don't do any more homework than they have to; they spend an extraordinary amount of time playing games, socializing on the Internet, text-messaging each other; they work part time to pay for their schooling and social habits. And they party. A lot. These stereotypes worry many Americans. They believe the American education system puts the country at a great disadvantage. But this is far from true.

The independence and social skills American children develop give them a huge advantage when they join the workforce. They learn to experiment, challenge norms, and take risks. They can think for themselves, and they can innovate. This is why America remains the world leader in innovation; why Chinese and Indians invest their life savings to send their children to expensive U.S. schools when they can. India and China are changing, and as the next generations of students become like American ones, they too are [beginning](#) to innovate. So far, their education systems have held them back.

My research team at Duke looked in depth at the engineering education of China and India. We [documented](#) that these countries now graduate four to seven times as many engineers as does the U.S. The quality of these engineers, however, is so poor that most are not fit to work as engineers; their system of rote learning handicaps those who do get jobs, so it takes two to three years for them to achieve the same productivity as fresh American graduates. As a result, significant proportions of China's engineering graduates end up working on factory floors and Indian industry has to spend large sums of money [retraining](#) its employees. After four or five years in the workforce, Indians do become innovative and produce, overall, at the same quality as Americans, but they lose a valuable two to three years in their retraining.

## **Rankings Reconsidered**

And then there is the matter of the PISA rankings that supposedly show the U.S. trailing the rest of the world. Hal Salzman, a professor at Rutgers' John J. Heidrich Center for Workforce Development, debunked myths about these in a May 2008 [article](#) in *Nature* magazine. Salzman noted that international tests use different sampling criteria from country to country, so we're not always comparing apples to apples. As well, the tests compare select populations of small countries such as Singapore and Finland, which each have about 5 million people, with the U.S., which has 310 million. These countries achieve the top rankings on the PISA list. Compare these countries to similar-sized U.S. states, however, and you find that some of those states, including Massachusetts (population 6.5 million), produce the top students. Additionally, we're comparing America's diverse population—which includes disadvantaged minorities and unskilled immigrants with little education—with the homogeneous populations of countries like Finland, Japan, and New Zealand.

Much is made of the PISA test scores and rankings, but the international differences are actually quite small. Most of the U.S. ranking lags are not even statistically significant. The U.S. falls in the second rank on some measures and into the first on others. It produces more highest-performing students in science and reading than any other country does; in mathematics, it is second only to Japan. Moreover, one has to ask what the test results actually mean in the real world. Do high PISA rankings make students more likely to invent the next iPad? Google ([GOOG](#))? I don't think so.

Let's keep improving our education system and focus, in particular, on disadvantaged groups. Education is the future of our nation. But let's get over our inferiority complex. America is second to none. Rather than in mastery of facts learned by rote and great numbers of accomplished martinets, its strength lies in the diversity and innovation that arise in an open, creative society.

[Wadhwa](#) is a visiting scholar at University of California-Berkeley, senior research associate at Harvard Law School, and director of research at the Center for Entrepreneurship and Research Commercialization at Duke University. Follow him on twitter—[@vwadhwa](#)