

March 8, 2014

Governor Dannel Malloy
State Capitol
210 Capitol Avenue
Hartford CT 06106

Dear Governor Malloy:

I could never be a true leader. True leaders have a very difficult job—balancing the needs of the masses while holding onto your own ideals and values. Listening to every side to make informed decisions that will propel people forward to greatness. Anticipating problems before they occur, so that final decisions don't cause larger problems. And all the while addressing current issues with the understanding that future ones will undoubtedly occur and shift any number of outcomes.

I say I could never be a true leader, but in a sense, I guess I am. I am a teacher. I have been a Kindergarten teacher for 15 years now; over the years, I have learned the value of listening to the other side while using what I know as a teacher to bring out the best in my students and families. I try to engage my four, five, and six year old students as best I can, taking into account their needs and experiences while implementing state and national mandates that come from non-educators, which now tell me what I must do to be a "highly effective" teacher. I follow these mandates, while sometimes negating my own personal beliefs, values, and expertise on child development, because I enjoy these children. Sadly, if I want to keep my job, I must follow these mandates even when I can see daily in my classroom that they clearly do not represent the best learning for how a four, five or six year old mind works, feels, or explores their world.

No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and now Common Core, all ideally look wonderful on paper, but when you are a classroom teacher and must implement

them, these mandates do not take into account a student's educational background, a school system's economic difficulties, family dynamics, or past and future developmental milestones, which all clearly impact how and when a student learns best. I feel these initiatives at heart, may seem very logical, but in practice, are very foolhardy and do not adequately allow teachers to do their jobs using the years of expertise, knowledge, and maturity that they so readily and want to use on daily basis, but are hindered by laws like Common Core.

I would venture to guess that a child born in 1947 is not that biologically different than one that was born in 1970, or even 2014. Every infant, toddler, preschooler and Kindergartener still needs to pass through specific social, emotional, and physical developmental milestones in order for him/her to be able to access academics in a meaningful and appropriate way. When we try to speed up this natural process by teaching abstract topics like sight words or metacognitive skills, the end goal of engaged, inquisitive students doesn't justify the means, and we are only asking for more frustrated teachers, students, and parents. I feel like these initiatives are akin to giving a 13-year-old child a set of car keys and saying, "Go drive on I-95 and then switch to I-91 in Hartford". Any rational parent would never do such a thing, realizing that the outcome will be deadly. The child has certainly may have had a good deal experience in a car, but experience as a passenger is very different than experience behind the wheel, when coupled with maturity and solid age-appropriate teaching.

But my words are probably not what you want to hear. Let me share what one of my Kindergarteners wrote to illustrate my point. We use a Writer's Workshop model, which teaches the fundamentals of writing—spaces, punctuation, capitalization, and formats of writing, within a child's developmental level. Appropriate trade book texts are used as models for the students, and they truly enjoy writing because of the format and model of instruction.

Our past unit was about “How To” writing. I modeled “How To Be A Kindergartener”—use listening ears, use kind words, do your best, and clean up. One of my students also decided to write on the same topic, but his slant was very different:

Step 1: Work! Work! Work! Work

Step 2. Learn! Learn! Learn! And Learn!

Step 3: Write! Write! Write! And Write!

Step 4: Don't make silly faces.

I have enclosed a color copy for your review, and on the surface, this is a fabulous piece. He included all the facets of a how to piece, his illustrations were perfectly aligned with his text, and he used the conventions of writing that have been vigorously taught: capital letters, spaces, sight words, and punctuation marks. And yet, its underlying message is also very sad. The fun has been taken out of Kindergarten—highlighted by all four lines of his text. And step four says it all: no silliness for five year olds is allowed in school.

Kindergarten used to be just that: a garden for young children to grow and blossom. In the past, children learned how to socialize, solve problems, and respect both teachers and peers. Now, we are so focused on teaching academics, --racing to the top at the cost of the students' emotional and social growth-- that these natural developmental stages are being pushed further and further away from core curriculum. And the trickle up effect of all of this is that EVERY GRADE is not an appropriate grade level. Students from Kindergarten up to 12th grade are now expected to work well out of their grade level just to be “on grade level”.

In the future, I am sure we will see many more elementary children, teens and adults with social problems, anxiety, and increased stress levels because we as a educational society are not adequately addressing their needs at the right time in their education. Instead, we are force-feeding academics at the expense of their social and emotional well-being.

Please keep this student in mind the next time you meet to discuss education reform. He is one of many who are feeling the negative affects of the current legislation, but thankfully he will only be a Kindergarten student once in his lifetime.

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