

Testimony
House Education Committee
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From
Divera Buegeleisen

My name is Divera Buegeleisen and as a member of Students First, a new national movement to transform public education, I am here to speak in support of the education reform package introduced today.

One of the reasons I support this legislation is because it ends seniority based layoffs. We must make sure that all of our students have quality teachers at the head of their classrooms. By requiring districts to use performance ratings when granting tenure, we ensure that our students are being taught by effective teachers. All teachers are not the same; some are far better than others, and our great educators should not be treated like interchangeable pieces or widgets. Those who strive for and achieve excellence with their students should be recognized and rewarded accordingly.

The legislation also will ensure that the placement of a teacher in a school is made only with the mutual consent of the teacher and the school principal. This creates the right environment to foster student achievement.

I wonder how many people are aware that the problems in our schools are not just recent. Almost 60 years ago, when I did my student teaching, I was assigned to a supervising teacher who was not only incompetent, but at times made children stand up while she humiliated them because they were too tall for their legs to fit comfortably under the seat so they put them in the aisle, or some other small infringement of the rules such as not putting their pencils in the slot on their desk or not folding their hands properly.

I taught school in Detroit for 20 years, and have followed the school's deterioration ever since I retired. In all the time that I taught, I never heard a teacher question his or her teaching method. There was only constant complaining about the children, the parents and the community as reasons why the children didn't do better.

I took time out of teaching to raise my family. When they were all in school, I returned to teaching. Even though I had heard how much the school situation had deteriorated, I was amazed at how much more difficult it had become.

Everyone has read many reports about the low scores and the alarming number of children who don't graduate high

school. As negative as that is, I think that there are even worse consequences. As a result of their school experiences, many, if not most, developed a negative attitude toward learning. They think that it is irrelevant and unnecessary and believe that they are smarter than their teachers.

Every fall, the children complained that I did not know how to teach reading. They were used to having each child read a paragraph in turn. I explained to them that reading was a written method where an author communicated his ideas and thoughts to the reader. It was not just saying words. I asked the whole group to read a paragraph to themselves to find the answer to a question. In this way the whole group not only had to be involved, but they had to think while they were reading. They objected strenuously at first, but soon got used to it, and really seemed to enjoy the stories more.

I would like to give you an example of how the teacher's attitudes are so far from reality as far as their interest in reading. The teachers that I knew were always complaining that the children were not interested in reading. I brought in some books that my children had read and read to them. Sure enough, they were not interested. So I went to the children's section of the library and found that there was a new genre of children's literature. These books were beautifully written and were about black families and their experiences. When I started to read to them, they were quickly on the edge of their seats. After reading a page, I asked for

comments. Their comments were so mature and so sensitive, I was very moved. Many hands went up when I asked who would like to take the book home and read it. I did this with many books. The person who took the book had to write the title and author on a paper. They then passed the paper around and people who were interested made a waiting list. This was posted on the bulletin board. I contacted the main library in Detroit and had them send me a box of books every month. They were well used.

I tried to share the techniques that I learned while taking a master's degree at Oakland University. But the teachers were convinced that the children couldn't do those things. So I went in my room and was constantly amazed at the wonderful work that they produced.

I wrote a comprehensive writing curriculum based on what I was learning at Oakland. I started with a simple sentence- taught them how to expand it, and gradually added all of the elements of a story. By the time spring came, most of the children were involved in writing very creditable stories, which we put in book form. When the teachers saw them displayed on the walls outside of my classroom, they wanted to know if I would teach them how to do that. I said "Of course. In the fall you..." "Oh no, they said. I want to do it now." I had to explain to them that it didn't work that way, but they were not interested.

I could give many other examples, but I am sure that time will not permit it.

Thank you for supporting this legislation and giving me a chance to speak about it today. I believe that supporting these bills is the right thing to do. We must make the hard choices that force us to put our students first, at the forefront of every conversation and every policy decision. This bill is a step in that direction.

Thank you

Divera Buegeleisen