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A movement to transform public education

Michigan Senate and House of Representatives
Joint Meeting of the Senate and House Education Committees and the Senate and House Appropriations Subcommittee on K-12, School Aid

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Testimony of Michelle Rhee

Good afternoon Chairman Pavlov, Chairman Scott and members of the committees. I am honored to be here today to share my experiences in reforming public education that may benefit Michigan's children. I understand you are considering bills that will influence teacher tenure and the work of charter schools, and I commend you for dedicating yourselves to creating an excellent education system in Michigan.

Background

As you may know, I started my career in education as a classroom teacher in Baltimore City, Maryland. I later founded The New Teacher Project (TNTP), a non-profit organization that has brought more than 43,000 teachers to struggling schools through alternate routes to certification. As the leader of TNTP I also worked with school districts and teachers' unions across the country in the effort to bring great teachers into our nation's public schools.

DC Public Schools (DCPS)

In 2007, I accepted Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's invitation to lead the DC Public Schools, a system in which only 8 percent of children were on grade level in math, and 12 percent were on grade level in reading at the time we started. We received our share of push back when we moved quickly to change the status quo, but at the end of three years, the hard work had paid off in students' academic gains.

Washington, DC was the only major city to see double-digit growth in both state reading and state math scores in seventh, eighth and tenth grades over the last three years. The graduation rate rose, and after decades of steep decline, enrollment rose for the first time last year. In 2010, every eligible DC public school attracted applicants for the annual K-12 Out-of-Boundary, pre-school, and pre-kindergarten (pre-k) lotteries, and fourteen schools had waitlists for the first time. Ultimately, a record high of families expressed interest in DCPS programs located in all eight wards of the city.

Schools in DC still have a long way to go, and in all of my years in education, I certainly have made my share of mistakes. But educators and students in Washington, DC showed us through their substantial progress that we are right to hold high expectations for what children can accomplish, with the right direction from adults.

StudentsFirst

By the time a new mayor was elected in DC in 2010, I had worked for almost two decades alongside powerful special interest groups that had been skewing decision making to support agendas with no links to gains in student achievement. As straightforward as I wanted district and school management to be, I could no longer wish away the influence of politics in public education. So I founded StudentsFirst, a national movement to solely represent children in the policies and decisions impacting their education. Since our launch in December, approximately 170,000 citizens have joined this movement, and so far several thousand of our members are right here in Michigan.

At StudentsFirst we have identified three areas for reform that will have the greatest impact on student achievement:

- Elevating the teaching profession by valuing teachers' impact on students;
- providing parents real choices and real information; and
- spending taxpayers' money wisely to get better results for students.

I don't have to tell you that Michigan leaders are taking encouraging and courageous steps in education reform. Last year, Michigan changed its laws to allow alternative routes to certification for educators, allow state-level accountability and intervention in failing schools, and most importantly, to include student achievement in teacher evaluations. Of course and as is true for many states, there is still so much work to do, and I appreciate your continued efforts to look ahead to the next steps in reform.

Teachers – A School System's Most Powerful Resource

I want to turn my comments at this point to what I think is the most important lever for school reform: teacher quality. Research tells us that teachers are the most powerful school influence on student achievement in our classrooms, and most of us would be hard pressed to imagine where our own lives would be without their influence. We value the profession by holding them to high expectations for what they can achieve with their students, rewarding them for their success, and surrounding them with colleagues of equal striving and excellence.

There are a number of reforms states can implement to value the profession of teaching by focusing on their impact on student achievement, and I want to share a few that I believe are most important.

Elimination of Last-in-First-Out Policies

With the current fiscal crisis the nation faces, we are at risk of losing some of the best teachers in the nation. States are making major cuts in education to close severe budget gaps, resulting in significant teacher lay-offs. In most jurisdictions, lay-offs are based on seniority, an outdated and bureaucratic practice known as "last in, first out" (LIFO). LIFO means that the last teacher hired has to be the first teacher fired, regardless of how good teachers are. LIFO is bad policy that hurts children, and there are three main reasons I support its elimination.

First, research indicates that when districts with LIFO conduct lay-offs, they end up firing some of their most highly effective educators. These are the memorable and powerful teachers that students remember for the rest of their lives, and we lose more of them with every LIFO lay-off.

Second, LIFO policies increase the number of teachers that districts have to lay off. Because junior teachers make less money, districts have to lay off more of them in order to fill their budget gaps.

Finally, LIFO disproportionately and negatively impacts the highest need schools. These schools have larger numbers of new teachers, who are the first to lose their jobs in a lay-off. High-income areas have more stable systems and fewer newer teachers, and they are often untouched by budget cuts. Meanwhile low income, high need schools where a large percentage of the staff are newer teachers, are decimated.

By eliminating LIFO, Michigan would help to hold districts, boards of education and state legislators accountable. By disallowing it across the state, Michigan will be able to save many great teachers during the economic recovery.

Reform Teacher Evaluations to Raise Accountability and Reward Success

As I mentioned, when I first came to DC 8 percent of kids were at grade level proficiency in math. However, if you looked at the performance evaluations of adults in the system at the same time, you would have seen that 95 percent of teachers were being rated as doing a good job. When the sole function of a school system is to educate children, how can you have a system in which the vast majority of adults are running around thinking they are doing a great job while simultaneously producing such dismal results for kids?

This dynamic is not fair to students, families, or teachers, who deserve an accurate assessment of their impact after pouring their sweat into children's achievement every day. Teaching is an incredibly complex skill that is not easy to assess, and no evaluation will be perfect. But

research shows that meaningful performance evaluations promote teacher effectiveness, and nothing should stop districts from implementing good evaluations and improving them every year with ongoing feedback.

A Positive Step for Michigan's Schools - Adding Student Achievement Growth to Teacher Evaluations

If the purpose of education is to give children the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed, then it only makes sense to measure where that is happening in our classrooms. Until states include objective measurements of student achievement growth in teacher evaluations, it will also be incredibly difficult to reward teachers who are doing an outstanding job.

Separate Teacher Evaluations from Collective Bargaining

With Michigan already working to incorporate student achievement into new teacher evaluations, I would argue that in order to create evaluation systems that drive student achievement growth, going one step further would help Michigan to be even more successful: separate teacher evaluations from collective bargaining.

To be most effective, teacher evaluations must be implemented with fidelity as part of larger accountability systems. These systems have to differentiate between teachers, reward the most successful, and swiftly improve or move out those who are not successful. This will be very difficult to do unless teacher evaluations are separated from the collective bargaining process.

Union leaders are legally obligated to represent the interests of all of their members, including ineffective members. Yet the majority of rank and file teachers deeply values having strong colleagues and a culture of excellence. Their ethic of high standards becomes lost in the process when the union dedicates time, effort, and money fighting for the lowest performers according to their contract with all teachers. Simply put, labor leadership has a conflict of interest when it comes to evaluation of their members, and it does not lead to rigorous evaluations that promote reflection and improvement.

Implement Performance Pay – With Accountability

I strongly support performance pay to reward the most effective educators. However, in most professions employees expect these rewards to come with high accountability for their work. Legislators in Michigan could choose to bring teaching in alignment to other professions by bringing this same expectation to education. Performance pay is only possible by differentiating between the level of performance among different teachers, and it makes sense that performance pay should come hand-in-hand with higher accountability. But it will be very difficult to hold teachers accountable with current tenure provisions in place.

Eliminate Tenure – in Name or Practice

I was encouraged to learn that you are considering ways to eliminate tenure. While controversial, we must have the conversation about what value tenure adds to our school systems. Our point is simple: there is no correlation between tenure and student achievement. The policy does not put students first, and with federal due process laws in place, tenure is no longer necessary to sufficiently protect teachers from arbitrary dismissal. Whether you are able to eliminate it or otherwise redefine it to separate tenure from personnel decisions, you can disempower this outdated practice that has no correlation to improved student achievement.

Most teachers are granted tenure within just a few years. Once a teacher has tenure, in most states that teacher essentially has a job for life regardless of performance, making the practice of tenure a barrier to separating teachers who are ineffective and unable to improve.

As much as we must acknowledge and reward effective educators, it **should** be virtually impossible for an ineffective teacher to remain in the classroom. Michigan's policies must address the fact that even after just one year, an ineffective educator can set a child behind for years to come. This also puts a greater burden on subsequent teachers who are working so hard to catch that student up while advancing their other students to higher levels. As Stanford economist Eric

Hanushek's study on teacher quality indicates, even if we replace just the bottom six to ten percent of teachers with average teachers, we will see dramatic results in student achievement. Tenure makes it very difficult to do even this.

I understand that proposing to eliminate tenure outright is incredibly difficult politically. But there are many ways to address the tenure issue to ensure that all personnel decisions are made in the best interests of students.

1. Reduce Tenure's Impact Through Mutual Consent

Under mutual consent, both the teacher and the principal must agree for the teacher to work in a school. Without it, teachers are often forced on schools in the event of a school closing or staff reconstitution for failing schools (in which staff have to reapply for their jobs, but are often still owed a job somewhere in the system if the principal does not rehire them. This does not bode well for school or teacher performance, and mutual consent is in the best interest of schools and children.

Let me describe how this played out in DC. One year we decided to reconstitute two of the large comprehensive high schools in the city. All teachers were required to reapply for their positions, which was great for those schools. However, as a system, we still owed those who weren't rehired at that school a job. This means that the upwards of 200 teachers from those schools would have to be forced on the 10 other comprehensive high schools in the city. In essence none of them could hire the candidates they thought were best, since we had to force these folks on the schools. It meant that the schools that were barely better than the worst were being disadvantaged by having teachers from failing schools forced on them.

The state can ensure this dynamic is avoided by mandating mutual consent placements, including the provision that if a teacher cannot find a mutual consent placement within a reasonable timeframe (such as 30-60 days) then that person is placed on unpaid leave from the district until the time that they can find a mutual consent placement.

2. Reduce Tenure's Impact in Teacher Assessments:

You can also fight tenure's negative impacts through a strong evaluation system that works in tandem with higher accountability measures that enforce it. This would separate ineffective teachers regardless of tenure on a timeline that responds to the urgency parents are calling for now.

Teachers and Expectations: A Suggestion

As I consider all that is happening in education reform right now, what heartens me most is the new level of energy people are bringing to this effort. Families are actively and vocally digging into the most difficult problems in education that are keeping too many American students from their dreams. I have heard from thousands of students, parents, grandparents, teachers and other stakeholders who feel so passionately about this issue. I could also tell you story after story that illustrates how fiercely American teachers believe in their students and hold themselves to high expectations for success in their classrooms. Often teachers' expectations of themselves sit far above the expectations I could ever set for them, even in DC where I believe we had one of the most rigorous assessments in the country.

These educators also speak of a need for greater administrator accountability so that teachers are supported and empowered to make their own decisions to drive student achievement in their classrooms.

I hope you will also demonstrate your commitment to supporting teachers through administrator accountability in Michigan as well. If you'd like to learn from one of my mistakes in particular, make it as clear as possible that you are not out to get teachers when you talk about and create policies that reflect how incredible their influence is. Teachers believe so much in what they do that they are hardest on themselves, and we have to respect that when we talk about accountability. We have many problems to fix in public education, and focusing on teacher quality does *not* mean we believe teachers are the problem in public education. Far from it. Rather, they are our most powerful part of the solution.

Thank you for inviting me to contribute to this important discussion for Michigan's efforts to reform public education. There is no doubt that it will take incredibly hard work to create the kind of school system Michigan's students and families deserve. But you are not alone in making these reforms. You are part of a nationwide effort as state leaders in Florida, New Jersey, Nevada, Ohio and others take aggressive steps to reduce the bureaucracy in public education and put students first in the policies that ultimately will shape their lives.

I will be happy to answer any of your questions, and I wish you the best as you make the difficult choices ahead on behalf of Michigan's children.