

Senate Education Committee
Michigan State Legislature
Lansing, MI

Education Committee Members,

Please consider the long-range implications of the so-called "tenure reform bills."

I have been a teacher for 25 years. I do see the need for reform within public education in Michigan and across the country. However, some elements within these bills are at least superfluous and could be counterproductive. I am sure you have read the House and Senate Fiscal Agency analyses, and already had calls and emails about the likelihood of these bills to cause greater teacher attrition, higher staff turnover, and the lack of institutional expertise, so I would like to testify about something I think has not been considered.

Specifically, a successful, recent trend in education has been to use data-driven, effective strategies to improve student performance. In short, formative and cumulative common assessments are used as diagnostic tools to identify and share effective strategies among teachers in analogous situations. This system depends on honest collaboration. Elements of HB 4627 would at least hinder and perhaps destroy this model. For example, why would a teacher share effective methods with colleagues if this would improve colleagues' students' performance and thus risk the author's job? In industry, professionals work in collaborative teams to improve their products or services in order to compete against other firms. Elements of HB 4627 would have teachers competing with colleagues in the next classroom, not those in other districts, counties, or states. Such a regime would only improve that particular teacher's students' performance, not those of the school or the district.

As a parent and a teacher, I too have been frustrated by so-called, "Last In, First Out [LIFO];" in fact teachers have sometimes endured years with less successful colleagues. However, with new, yearly evaluations both mandated by legislation recently passed, as well as HB 4625, even long-serving, ineffective teachers can be dismissed. In a public school system with stable revenues and student populations, the elimination of LIFO might make sense; but with stagnant or falling revenues and student enrollment, experienced teachers actually have a disincentive to help newer teachers if seniority is diminished as a protection against layoff.

In short, if unsuccessful teachers are fired because of ineffective teaching, seniority is not relevant; if successful, experienced teachers refrain from sharing effective strategies in a district with falling revenue or student enrollment, individual classrooms may prosper at the expense of particular schools and their districts. This is not a recipe for comprehensive, statewide school reform.

In 2006, I testified before both the House and Senate Education Committees about the proposed Michigan Merit Core. Knowing that the curriculum was likely to pass, I encouraged legislators to integrate pragmatic solutions to expedite student achievement. For example, encouraged by the Michigan Department of Education, I urged that graduation requirements in foreign languages and mathematics possibly be earned at the middle school level rather than exclusively in high school. This would allow for students to move further in the study of either at the secondary level. These suggestions were recognized as constructive and made their way into the Michigan Merit Core. My comments today are meant in a similar, constructive manner.

As I said, I recognize the need for education reform in Michigan. I am encouraged by some of the elements of these bills; and I know that arguing against the elimination of seniority is not popular and makes me appear selfish. However, if I were merely selfish, I would not illuminate this public policy concern, I would hoard my successes and glean what I could from my colleagues without reciprocation, and I would not care about my academic department, my school, my district, or the children and future of the state I love. As I apparently, effectively did in 2006, I am calling on you to recognize and implement pragmatic changes to these bills that otherwise would derail the reform you seek.

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