

Union Leader's Testimony for Bill to Grant District Teachers Money to Help Start Teacher-Powered Schools

Testimony given by:

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“To improve the quality of teaching,” you need to “improve the quality of the teaching job.” And, “If you really improve that job ... you would attract good people and you would keep them.” So, when you change the job, you change the outcome. Richard Ingersoll at U Penn, does research on teachers and the work of teaching. His research underscores our work.

Ingersoll also tells us in a new report on teacher demographics that we have a teacher force that looks like an “M” (including Minnesota), not a bell shaped curve. Many in their first five to six years and many in their third decade in the classroom, but no one in the middle. Why does that matter? Dr. William Sanders’ research showed us that teachers don’t achieve peak productivity (in teaching terms, productivity is student results) until year 10 – 12. Then we plateau at this highest level of productivity until about 25 years. It matters to Minnesota because when we look at the demographic “M” it means we have no one in the peak productivity years.

In addition to the productivity issue, we care that nearly half of teachers leave teaching within the first five or six years because universities and school districts make enormous investments in preparing pseudo professionals for half a decade of service; pseudo professionals because teaching is not a true profession yet even though many individual teachers are. Being a part of a true profession means you have control, authority, autonomy over your work.

Teachers used to have that professional culture—in one-room school houses. Then along came the industrial model, and education became an industrial bureaucracy.

In education, we copied ourselves after the auto industry until Saturn changed that industry, respecting workers, encouraging innovation, empowering teams to have pride in their creations. One Saturn worker told us on a visit to the plant, “The reason I love working here is that I am respected for not only my hands and my head but also my heart.” From an auto worker!

Teachers used to be respected for their minds and their hearts as they did what they loved to do, teach children. Now, the experienced best and brightest are leaving in droves because they have no respect, no opportunity for creativity and innovation, no support for their work, and no control, authority, or autonomy in their school or classroom.

Two days ago, I spoke to a full assembly room of teachers considering getting out. “Just can’t do it anymore,” or “This isn’t what I came into teaching for,” they said. “I love my students but I’m beginning to hate teaching because it is no longer teaching and I’m no longer trusted to know what to do.” And, the young ones leaving early? The ones everyone likes because they’re peppy? The reasons they give are much the same—plus no support and no rewards.

And what are they talking about? A couple of months ago, an elementary teacher had *nine* administrators in her classroom observing not her teaching or creativity or relationships with the children or even her ability to individualize instruction. Nope, they were counting the minutes she was spending on reading and counting the minutes in her 15-minute pacing schedule. That’s it.

Years ago Albert Shanker, AFT president and noted education leader and thinker said a couple of things I never have forgotten. He said that if teaching ever became reduced to pre-testing, record results, testing, record, post test, record, repeat and others saw themselves as supervisory cops keeping teachers under their thumb, then teaching would become nothing more than clerical work and the people coming into teaching would no longer be the best and the brightest.

He also said that if we wanted better results, we should find a way to give groups of teachers the opportunity and support to start schools of their own creation with a group of parents to try what they knew worked, try research-based pedagogy, try active learning, try brain researched curriculum, try... .

Now, years later, we are trying to dig out from under the results of ESEA becoming NCLB with not just orders from headquarters but orders from the feds in DC, from states, from districts, boards and superintendents dictating and governing every minute of that pacing schedule and every aspect of pedagogy, curriculum and testing.

So, you have heard the result from Minnesota superintendents and HR directors in this committee that they can’t find licensed teachers with a search party especially in greater MN and in critical licensure areas. Universities are telling us that they can’t find classrooms for student teachers because the districts worry more about what it will do to test scores than the need for mentors and classrooms for the next generation of educators.

One antidote to keep the most experienced and proven from leaving and to attract some of the most intelligent and skilled we always hoped would follow us into this work—Teacher-Powered Schools. If you know the characteristics of Millennials, you will know that they are attracted to

even the title as well as the opportunities and the experience. Finally, they can create and shine and have autonomy and be respected as well as taking full responsibility:

Respect & Responsibility = Results.

Professionally-powered schools give teachers the power to be true professionals—to make decisions about not just what to teach and how to teach but who will be their colleagues, how will they promote their school, how will they evaluate each other, how will they pay for new technology. The decisions are endless but the challenge is invigorating, inspiring, and the teams of educators are true colleagues and collaborators in creating, delivering, and deciding.

You have a great example just down the road a piece at University & Raymond. I'd suggest a field trip. They've been a teacher-powered school for 11 years. Check it out. It's what's best for kids AND educators.

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