



**Testimony to the
Pennsylvania House Education Committee
Re: Hearing on Seniority, Economic Furloughs and Tenure Reform
Submitted to the Office of The Honorable Paul Clymer**

**Brian Armstead, Director of Policy and Partnerships, Philadelphia Education Fund
December 3, 2013**

Dear Chairman Clymer,

On behalf of the Philadelphia Education Fund, I'd like to thank Chairman Clymer and the members of the House Education Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony in favor of changing regulations to the Commonwealth's mandates regarding tenure and suspensions of professional employees.

My name is Brian Armstead and I am Director of Policy and Partnerships for the Philadelphia Education Fund. At the Ed Fund, we have been champions for public education since 1985. We believe that opportunity is for all young people, not only the fortunate few. We support more than 15,000 students and 600 teachers in 30 schools across Philadelphia and the region. We provide professional development for teachers, work with schools to better identify and support students at risk of dropping out, and help districts rethink their approaches on topics as diverse as parent engagement, curriculum design, the effect use of data, and creating college-going cultures. We also grant one million dollars per year in last-dollar scholarships to send neighborhood high school students to college, most of whom are first-generation college students. And our research and interventions have helped transform Philadelphia's approach to drop-out prevention.

We know education at many levels – from the city and system to school by school, teacher by teacher, and child by child.

Through the better times and the harder times, we have maintained a vision of a great public school system that delivers for children and is a desirable place for teachers to start their careers and to stay and succeed.

I am submitting this testimony in favor of making staffing decisions based upon each school's specific needs rather than length of service.

At the Ed Fund we believe in the importance of building great teams in schools and matching teachers with schools so that there is a great "fit." Deciding who to retain should take into account the wide variety of school needs and not simply be based upon years of service in the district.

Experience and research firmly support these beliefs. Teachers, counselors, and others are unique professionals, with unique abilities and experiences, and unique roles and fit within schools.

In fact, Philadelphia has a unique perspective on the placement of professional staff. Faced with dramatic underfunding, the School District of Philadelphia was forced to lay-off thousands of personnel prior to the

beginning of this school year. Among them were hundreds of school counselors. Fortunately, at least some of them have been rehired.

In preparing to rehire guidance counselors, there was a loud outcry from parents, students, principals and others calling for principals and school leadership teams to have the right to select their counselors rather than adhere to seniority provisions. In these difficult times, school communities clearly prioritized the importance of school leaders selecting staff based upon the professionals' skill sets as well as the continuity of relationships among staff and with students.

This level of discretion is not only best practice for staffing counselors during an overt crisis, it is also best practice for staffing teachers and other professionals when faced with reductions in personnel.

Therefore, while we support the end of provisions utilizing seniority to dictate suspension of professional employees, we also caution not to substitute an equally rigid criteria, such as performance evaluations.

Basing suspensions solely upon performance evaluations has several drawbacks:

- 1) In economically diverse school districts, this would create a perverse disincentive to teach in "difficult" schools. Experts are almost unanimous in citing the need to get the best teachers in the most challenging schools. This becomes even more difficult if teachers believe they are at greater risk of suspension.
- 2) Similarly, in medium to large districts, there is often a lack of consistency in how principals rate their teachers. Issues of fairness and accuracy arise.
- 3) An evaluation that utilizes building-level data for suspensions is also problematic because the teacher's rating is dependent upon a series of socio-economic and educational factors beyond the teacher's immediate control.

Our most important concern, however, is that the substitution of another rigid criteria would, once again, remove the ability of the school leader to decide what is best for his/her school. We should be maximizing—and not limiting--each school's discretion.

It is time for the Commonwealth to give schools the flexibility to build their teams in the ways they need to best educate their students. Ending the practice of "LIFO" will go a long way. Schools, school teams and students deserve this.