

House Education Committee Hearing
December 3, 2013
Testimony of AFT Pennsylvania

I first want to say thank you, Majority Chairman Clymer, Minority Chairman Roebuck and House Education Committee Members for this opportunity to submit testimony for today's public hearing on HBs 1722, 1735, 779. I am Ted Kirsch, president of AFT Pennsylvania, which represents 36,000 active and retired teachers and support employees; community college and university professors, instructors and staff; and state government employees. AFT PA supports policies that ensure that every child has access to a quality public education, which allows for children to grow as individuals and puts them on a path to becoming viable adults in tomorrow's society.

HBs 1722, 1735, and 779, all expand the allowable reasons for suspension of professional employees, change the requirements for deciding who will be suspended, and tie new teacher evaluation requirements to the process by which professional employees are suspended.

In all house bills on today's agenda, "economic reasons" is added to the list of causes by which a school board may suspend professional employees, with HB 1735 indicating the process by which a school board is required to exercise this newly proposed option. AFT PA is opposed to adding this additional option for suspension of teachers and other certified staff. "Economic reasons" is a broad criterion which leaves room for numerous interpretations by school boards, thereby allowing for unequal application of the law. In addition, "economic reasons" does not mean that there has been a decrease in student

enrollment or a decrease in the types of services necessary to provide quality public education. A school board can create an economic crisis by failing to ensure that enough revenue is collected by the school district.

Under this proposed addition to the school code, suspending teachers and other certified staff will lead to increased class sizes and decreased support services for the public school students in the Commonwealth. For example, new state standards are more rigorous, and students now have to prove proficiency on Keystone Exams in order to graduate. However, neither the General Assembly nor school boards are required to provide dedicated funding to instructional support to ensure that every child passes the Keystone Exams. AFT PA submits that increased class sizes are unacceptable ways to free up additional funds for programs.

Secondly, all legislation on today's agenda removes the requirement that school boards use inverse order of seniority at school sites as the sole basis for suspending professional employees. Even though HBs 1722, 1735, and 779, amend this section of the school code differently, AFT PA views all bills a step backward in ensuring that all students have access to quality teachers and other certified employees. Time in the classroom only improves teaching, not the opposite. In addition, teachers must be certified by the state and continue professional development throughout their careers in order to retain their certification.

On a personal note, if anyone on this committee or any member of your family would be in need of surgery, would you choose the least experienced or the most experienced doctor for that surgery?

Lastly, all legislation on today's agenda ties new teacher evaluation results to the decision making process as it relates to suspension and/or reinstatement. The new teacher evaluation system is being used this school year for the first time, and AFT PA has grave

concerns about using this new, untested, and unproven program to make any decisions regarding professional employee suspension. All across the Commonwealth, the new evaluation program is being implemented inconsistently. As of today, December 3, teachers and other certified staff are still waiting for the training necessary to implement the program. Their basic questions have not been answered regarding how they will be evaluated. AFT PA contends that the General Assembly should seriously consider postponing the required ratings of teachers until the program demonstrates that it accurately assesses what goes on in the classroom. Implementing this new system in the same year that teachers will be permanently rated on the program is unfair.

Throughout the Commonwealth, this school year started with increased class sizes, scarcity of quality resources, discontinued instructional programs like music and art, and an overall lack of investment in public schools. Despite all of that, new programs instituted by the PDE and/or General Assembly, namely the new teacher evaluation program, the new School Performance Profile, and the new requirement that students score proficient on Keystone Exams in order to receive a diploma, have begun. AFT PA believes that this confluence is disastrous for public schools and public school students. We look forward to a House Education Committee hearing on those issues, and we believe that HBs 1722, 1735 and 779, are a distraction from that debate. These bills do not deal with the real issues facing public schools, such as lack of a fair funding formula.

In closing, I would like to thank Chairman Clymer and Chairman Roebuck for the opportunity to share AFT PA's concerns with HBs 1722, 1735, and 779.