

Prepared Testimony of
Katherine Bussard

Before the Michigan House of Representatives Education Committee
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Distinguished Chair and Distinguished Members of the Committee: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Introduction:

My name is Katherine Bussard, Executive Director & COO of Salt & Light Global. Before my current position, I spent 14 years as a senior administrator and teacher of history and social sciences in secondary education. Simultaneously, I served in local public office for the last 7 years, in various positions including as a member of my local Board of Education. Today, I am here to testify in my personal capacity in opposition to Senate Bills 395 & 396, as currently proposed.

Child Safety & Good Governance Concerns:

While it is not secret that good teachers are hard to find and even harder to keep in states like Michigan, these bills go too far and ultimately prioritize teachers' careers over students.

As a teacher, I will tell you that most teachers don't enter this field looking for a cushy job or top-paying career. Most of us become teachers because we want to make a difference in the lives of our students, and we put them first 100% of the time. Most teachers would never seek policy that could jeopardize the wellbeing of students. Most teachers welcome high standards of accountability, knowing that it is best for the students. While well intentioned, the legislature has its priorities out of order. There are several concerning examples of this:

Senate Bill 395 and 396, as passed by the Senate, allow for the elimination of student performance as a metric used to evaluate teachers and allows teacher's unions to craft the priorities for evaluation. The number 1 job of a teacher is the academic growth of children. To not evaluate their success on this metric, or as the House bill substitute is rumored to propose, cap student growth at 20% of evaluations, means that 80%-100% of a teacher's success could have little or nothing to do with their core professional function. This is not in the best interest of Michigan students.

Allowing Teacher's Unions, rather than local school boards or state lawmakers, to determine evaluation priorities is another problem. The unions work for the people being evaluated and have an inherent conflict of interest in serving their clients, rather than the citizens of the state of Michigan. Citizens and elected officials have zero recourse if the union does not steward this authority well. As legislators, I urge you to do your jobs and hold on to the reins of public policy crafting. Don't delegate the authority the people of Michigan placed in this body to union leaders who are entirely unaccountable to the people of Michigan. When those setting policy are not accountable to the citizenry, who lose our representative, democratic form of government.

The substitute language before this body today is also rumored to remove the problematic "just cause" language, but it does not fix the "unprofessional conduct" language. The way this package redefines

"unprofessional conduct" so that misconduct will be less likely to appear on background checks has great potential to endanger children and makes it harder than ever for schools to hire great teachers. When individuals who should not be teaching are left in classrooms, students are put at risk. When schools are not able to be as thorough in past employment record evaluation, children are put at risk. As an administrator, I've fired teachers for a variety of reasons in order to protect the wellbeing of my students, but none of them met the standard now proposed in SB 395. Instead of a standard of "misconduct", this bill narrowly construes only actions "that endanger the safety of any student and directly had to the separation of employment" or require repeat instance of moral turpitude or inappropriate behavior towards a minor. When the safety of children is at stake, waiting for a repeat offense can be far too costly, not mention the exposure it creates for our local school districts. Adding insult to injury, this package goes further to remove the state requirement for unscheduled observation in the classroom, removing yet another layer of accountability and transparency.

Conclusion:

The best people to make decisions about fit teachers are the local administrators and board of education. Protecting teacher's jobs at the expense of student safety and well-being is simply unconscionable. We need strong accountability and transparency in our schools to ensure the safety of all.

I urge you to continue to explore creative ways to attract teachers to Michigan and improve the lives of the selfless, invaluable many who choose the noble profession of teaching today's youth to be the leaders of tomorrow. However, these bills, in their current form, fall short of what is best for students and teachers across Michigan. I urge you to vote no on these bills in their current form.

Thank you for your consideration.