

Testimony of

Mrs. Leigh Connole

Canton Public Schools Educator of The Year

S.B. No. 977 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING VIRTUAL LEARNING

Before the Education Commission

MARCH 8, 2021

Good afternoon, Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Leigh Connole and I am a Canton Public Schools Teacher of the Year.

I teach because it is what I love.

While it was more commonly noticed by the public last March, educators have consistently gone above and beyond to ensure that their students are receiving the best quality education. It is essential to note that educators have always done this, but this year, the demands of the job have increased exponentially. They have attended webinars, researched new virtual learning strategies, adopted new understandings of learning management systems, curated new and/or differentiated materials, most often on their own time and while juggling their personal lives. I'm working well beyond contract hours because there is not enough time in the school day to complete all the necessary work. I'm arriving an hour early, staying an hour later and working multiple hours on weekends. I feel that every spare minute I have is doing something school-related, which is neither healthy for me nor for my family.

Educators are working to the best of their abilities and want to do the best they can for their students, but the demands of teaching both students physically in front of them and at home takes a significant toll on the mental health and well-being of teachers. We are painfully aware that we are compromising our quality of instruction to "make it through". This is not sustainable practice and should not be considered as such.

Why?

This year is far more labor-intensive and thus, requires much more uninterrupted time in the school day for educators to plan, grade, provide feedback, collaborate with peers, check in with students, attend meetings-the list is endless. For instance, depending on the class I'm preparing for, I'm really planning two different lessons for students because to effectively teach students at home and in person requires implementation of different instructional strategies. Also, I need to differentiate accordingly to meet the individual needs of students.

It takes 2 hours to prepare detailed slide deck agendas to ensure students comprehend instructions and to head off emails at times when I am unable to respond. 3 prep = 3 different

slide decks; this is commonly happening outside of my workday. And this is just preparing the agendas, let alone creating shared docs, slide decks, Google forms, and Screencasts. Formative assessment feels impossible to keep up with and yet they are an essential component of my teaching.

Then, so much time in class is spent checking the technology, particularly for those learning at home. I often ask myself this array of questions: Will this technology work? Can distance learners hear me? Can peers in class hear them? Can they hear peers if that's my intention? Understand directions? Need help? Are they sitting at their computer? Is their home environment conducive to learning? How can I help them navigate noisy environments? Have they logged in "late", resulting in a need for repetition of concepts already covered, thus impacting the students sitting in person? So much monitoring needs to occur in a variety of different ways that it is easy to feel pulled in many directions. And oftentimes, it feels more like I am managing students than educating them.

I personally have a degree in Instructional Technology, but not every teacher possesses the same level of expertise, which speaks to inequities about the quality of instruction students receive; this is certainly not the educator's fault. Without targeted professional development opportunities and quite literally, time to develop effective instructional strategies to meet both the diverse needs of students learning in person and at home, students suffer.

As a teacher who strives to develop personal relationships with each of her students, and takes pride in doing so, I find that to be nearly impossible this year. If I cannot cultivate relationships with students, I am not meeting their individual needs on a personal level. That is a painful reality for so many educators and one that we do not take lightly. From a mental health perspective, our students are struggling. A piece of their adolescence has been drastically impacted, and yet we continue to forge ahead. It is 100% more difficult to assess the mental health and well-being of students learning from home than in class, and to do so simultaneously requires different modes of thinking and approach. Additionally, the constant disruption of students contracting COVID-19 or being quarantined because of possible exposure is a physical and mental disruption to both students and teachers alike.

Additionally, and I would argue most importantly, I worry the virtual learners do not consistently feel as if they are members of the classroom community I'm working to build, and I struggle because I do not consistently have control over that fact.

I am an educator. I will continue to educate to the best of my ability because it is what I, and other teachers, do.

Thank you.