

To: House Education Policy Committee, via Laura.Taken-Holtze@house.mn
From: Jane Lonnquist
Re: Page Amendment Testimony
Date: March 4, 2021

Dear Representatives,

My career in education has exposed me to many students, teachers, and schools, strengthening my commitment to improving the equity and efficiency in our system of public education. I'm convinced that the Page Amendment is a critical tool -- much more than symbolic language -- to improve outcomes for students and communities.

Twenty five years ago, I finished my master's degree and became a middle school science teacher in Baltimore. When I moved to Minnesota, teaching licensure policies (which have thankfully since improved a bit) made it cost prohibitive to return to the classroom, so I taught science field trips at the Bakken Museum. In addition to being a "shockingly" fun job, it gave powerful snapshots of the tremendous disparities between 4th graders from various backgrounds and schools. Even more than the wide range of background knowledge students brought to our workshops, the variation in critical thinking and communication skills was clear, and often heartbreaking. It was obvious -- even over a few hours of interaction -- which groups had the benefit of quality teachers who had helped them internalize habits of problem solving, curiosity, and collaboration.

I spent a year working as a tutor in a chronically underperforming public school in North Minneapolis, wanting to gain more insights into dysfunctional schools. The impacts of poverty and the unintended consequences of public policy were on full display here -- a highly effective teacher who met the learning and personal needs of students with care and creativity was being told she needed to take additional coursework to keep her job, while a teacher who droned on while students slept or talked was left alone. Challenging behaviors of some students and ineffective ways to address them meant that the time-on-task for actual teaching and learning was minimal in many classrooms. With research showing that students from low-income households typically start kindergarten a year behind their more affluent peers, the widening gap was inevitable in this school.

I have since educated myself on the tremendous impact of chronic stress on brains and behaviors of children. I have shifted into early childhood education, moved by growing research on the 0-3 age window as the most vulnerable, as well as the most beneficial time to affect children's brain development, including the emotional regulation and executive function that make traditional classroom learning feasible. The Harvard Center for the Developing Child has confirmed that early exposure to chronic stress,

without the buffering effects of healthy rituals and relationships, not only has negative impacts on brain development and emotional regulation, but also on long-term health.

So what do we do with this knowledge? First, I ask you to reject testimony that oversimplifies causes or solutions to our state's educational disparities. This is a complex issue impacting all areas of society and it demands honest conversation. That includes the acknowledgement that student outcomes and school jobs are sometimes at odds, and the union's duty is to prioritize the latter over the former.

After that, I urge you to pass the Page Amendment. I offer the example of a different public school serving the same North Minneapolis neighborhood to illustrate the profound potential of replacing the word "adequate" with "quality," anchored by accountability to "uniform achievement standards set forth by the state" in our Constitution's framing of public education. Before shifting to early childhood teaching, I spent seven years working for a public school that was doing the hard work of improving the trajectories of its students, nearly all of whom were African American and from low-income households. By anchoring its mission to quality, using data to frequently measure student learning, and insisting that all adults in the building were contributing to the mission, this school became the only one in all of North Minneapolis to earn a "High Performing" rating from Great MN Schools for multiple years. We all know testing isn't perfect and of course it doesn't tell the whole story. But it anchors accountability and measures growth. One year, the incoming 5th graders demonstrated average scores on the nationally normed Measure of Academic Progress Test of the 9th percentile in reading and 13th in math. These were averages. But great leadership, strong teacher supports, nimble student interventions, strong parental collaboration, positive school culture, and careful data tracking can do wonders. By the end of 8th grade, student performance on the same tests reached or exceeded the 50th percentile -- a strong proxy for grade-level performance. It would not be hard to replicate this model and these outcomes if we insist on quality and accountability with our public education dollars.

Thanks for considering my experiences and for holding these hearings.