

Teacher Freedom of Speech Matters: #Schools Our Students Deserve

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Finding my way into the classroom took many years. Education has not always been my passion, but children were and have always been. It was important for me to find work that would be meaningful, challenging, and that I could lend my voice for the young and so often, voiceless.

Then, March 26th of 1999 the vision of what I wanted for others and myself took the back burner to what I wanted for the little guy that made me a mother. It was through my son that my passion for education-his education began to grow. The anxiety that came with finding a school I knew my son needed and deserved was both overwhelming and daunting. Children were constantly being moved and shifted from school to school with redistricting and rezoning. Knowing that consistency and structure is something ALL children need and deserve, I was determined to insure that he got just that by getting him into a school he could stay, K-5th grade. So, I did the only thing I knew to do-find a job within the school system so he could do just that.

It was through my job, as a teacher's assistant that my own passion for education, the vision for my life's work, and my philosophy for life were born. I saw for the first time, in that position, the real struggles of our young learners: second language, poverty, absent parents, etc. and I realized then how sadly we are given two chances in life. Our first opportunity is through the family we are born into. If this family fails to meet our needs, we have one more opportunity: public schools. If our schools fail us, well, we all know the sad realities of this.

The only way I knew I could make a difference with this, to truly make an impact, was to become a teacher. I believed that through education, as an educator, I could use my voice and advocate for my children and their families-all the while providing the one true thing that matters most to their lives, their education. There is no way I could've imagined back then after making the decision to go back to school to become a teacher that my voice would become silenced.

In 2013, NC passed a law that restricts me of ever earning career status. This means that for the remainder of my career, I will be on a yearly contract. This contract directly impacts my decision to speak openly about the issues I see day in and day out in our school building and education as a whole in our state. As an educator, I feel it is my duty and obligation to speak on behalf of my students and families I serve, especially when their educations are compromised by inequitable funding and resources made available to them.

Each and every child in this state deserves a voice-an advocate. Many of those that need voices most are the ones who continue to go unnoticed, neglected and left far behind. It is through each voice that the collective "we" make and initiate change. Change is necessary. In education, we need to ensure that the changes put into place are always made in the best interest of the children we serve. And when initiatives are put into place that we know

does not best serve our children, being on the front lines, we should be able to speak out against them. We cannot be silenced! We cannot continue to be afraid of speaking out against the injustices we see day in and day out. This law that was passed, does just that! Many of us sit behind it in fear, because we too have families to feed and bills to pay. For every teacher that sits silent, we also silence the voices of the children we serve.

So I urge school board members and parents all across North Carolina to speak up for teachers so we can speak up for our children and ensure everyone's voice is heard.

Please consider using the sample resolution on the next page to create a resolution to present to your school board members and superintendent.

DRAFT: Sample Resolution on Teacher Free Speech Rights

Whereas, the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects the rights of all Americans to speak as private citizens on matters of public concern; and

Whereas, the First Amendment provides free-speech protection to public, not private, employees because the Bill of Rights applies only to governmental actions; and

Whereas, government also has more authority to regulate the speech of its employees than it does to regulate the speech of the general citizenry; and

Whereas, when serving in their official capacities as teachers, within the duties of their jobs, teachers have certain responsibilities not given those same protections; and

Whereas, what teachers say inside the classroom is considered speech on behalf of the school district and is therefore not entitled to the same protections;

Whereas, speech outside the classroom is protected unless the school district can show that the speech created an adverse impact on school functioning; and

Whereas, teachers can criticize the local school board if the opinion relates to a "matter of public concern," such as public education for all students; and

Whereas, as experts on what occurs in the classrooms of North Carolina, teachers should advocate for public education and public school students;

Therefore be it resolved, that:

The _____ Board of Education recognizes that public school teachers in North Carolina have free speech rights protected by the First Amendment, as long as the speech does not adversely impact the functioning of their public school.

This approved on the ____ day of _____ 2016.

Chair, _____ Board of Education