

An Open Letter to Senator Franken

Dear Senator Franken,

I first want to thank you for the direct and relevant questioning you gave Mrs. DeVos during her January 17 hearing. As a high school math teacher, I appreciated hearing her responses on K-12 education policy, and wish I had gotten to hear more about her views on policies aside from school choice.

However, there was something in your exchange that concerned me. At one point, you said the following:

“With proficiency, teachers ignore the kids at the top who are not going to fall below proficiency and they ignore the kid at the bottom who no matter what they do will never get to proficiency, so I’ve been an advocate of growth...”

I would like to make it clear that there is no politician who cares about the education of the 150 students entrusted to my care more than I do, and I would feel very confident making that claim about every teacher with whom I have ever had the pleasure of working. We know our students as people, with hopes and dreams and aspirations, and when we fail to prepare them sufficiently, we have to watch them suffer the consequences. We watch them fail the next class, or not find a job post-graduation, or be forced to move back home after their first semester of college. And it hurts us too, because these are *our* kids. So if you don’t think we’re doing everything we possibly can to help all of our students be successful, you would be wrong.

That being said, I don’t deny that the phenomena you’ve described occurs. But it’s not because of pressure to reach a proficiency mark on a standardized test; it’s because most teachers don’t have the resources to adequately differentiate their classrooms. Successful differentiation—meaning altering curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all students—is difficult, even for skilled teachers, especially in public schools with class sizes over 30. Changing the way a test is graded doesn’t change the fact that many teachers are unprepared and unsupported to do what you’re asking.

I was fortunate enough to attend one of the best teacher preparation programs in the country and to have access to sustained quality professional development opportunities upon graduation. But most teachers I know don’t mince words

about their teacher preparation programs, most often referring to them as “complete wastes of time,” if they even attended a program at all. And professional development for most teachers after graduation is even bleaker; the variety, quality, and quantity of internal opportunities differs greatly across districts, as does the availability of funds for external opportunities. And given that many professional development programs cost \$500 or more, not very many teachers can afford to pay their own way.

If you and your colleagues want to change the way teachers act in the classroom, then you need to change the knowledge and skills they bring into the classroom. Invest in teacher preparation. Support districts in providing opportunities for quality professional development. Develop your teachers. It will be a slow process, but in the long term, it will bring the growth you want to see.

Sincerely,

Lindsay McDowell