

Susan Lawrence, Teacher at Watauga High, asked for a forum for her thoughts on the direction of public education and on a number of state initiatives. Her letter talks about the 'starving' of public schools that she says has been going on for a decade, and specifically points to a number of proposals that, in her opinion, could lead to lots of damage in the public schools. Her letter, in its entirety, follows:

Dear Editor,

There has been considerable public dialogue of late regarding North Carolina's public schools, specifically, how they are failing us and how to "fix" them. Citizens have become convinced of a crisis I would argue is much exaggerated. Why the press and some politicians have abetted sensationalism and scapegoating is another conversation, but I would like to offer some perspective.

Ninety-nine percent of Americans are literate (CIA World Factbook). Schools across the United States provide a remarkable range of services tuition-free to all children: basic academic skills and content taught by qualified, trained teachers; vocational training; enriched environments for talented students through gifted programs, AP and IB courses, and dual college enrollment opportunities; extra assistance for students identified as learning disabled, health impaired, autistic, and emotionally handicapped; clubs, academic competitions, sports, field trips, travel opportunities, leadership opportunities, age-appropriate and chaperoned social events, health services, and counseling services. Schools feed poor children and provide affordable after-school day care. Schools transport children to and from school and extracurricular events. Schools provide access to technology, libraries full of books, art programs, music programs, drama programs, and physical education/health facilities. And schools are stimulating, nurturing environments that are safe; statistically, an American child is safer in school than any other place.

In short, public schools are a bargain. I, a public school teacher, am a bargain. I am not overpaid. I am passionate and dedicated. I care about my students personally and I care about their achievement. I am not an exception. I am the norm.

Schools can be empowering places, but students must be willing to take advantage of the opportunity our society is extending to them. Parents must be energetic and engaged. Our elected leaders must be morally courageous. Holding teachers accountable for sound instructional delivery and effective classroom management is perfectly reasonable. Holding school administrators accountable for providing educational services in ways that are fiscally responsible and educationally sound is perfectly reasonable. But vilifying public schools and

teachers as the cause of (you fill in the blank) is not only counterproductive, but dishonest. There is no problem facing our state or our nation today that will be solved by gutting public education. North Carolina has been fiscally starving its public schools for nearly a decade. Teacher pay has declined to 48th in the nation and per pupil spending to 47th (<http://projects.newsobserver.com/node/27058>), valuable programs have been lost, and needed resources curtailed. Vouchers will weaken public schools and give your tax dollars to the owners/shareholders of private institutions. The elimination of teacher tenure (in the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013) will encourage intimidation and tempt school districts to dismiss experienced teachers in order to save money. The proposal in Governor McCrory's current budget to eliminate teaching assistants from all 2nd and 3rd grade classrooms will make it considerably harder to achieve the state's literacy goals (as set forth in the Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013).

I urge you to contact your state representatives and tell them that you value the public schools of North Carolina and support their mission. I urge you to read Senate Bill 361 (Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013), note its sponsors and supporters, and determine for yourself whether its provisions represent sincere reform.

The state of our public schools reflects our priorities, our values, and our collective will. When we fund and support them, our children learn what we value and benefit from their services. When we undermine them, our children are ill-served. And, as our children go, so goes our nation.

Susan Lawrence
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