

**Spoken** Testimony of Wendy Teller-Elsberg,  
Public-School-Based Speech-Language Pathologist  
AGAINST ENACTMENT AS WRITTEN OF S.217,  
Before the Senate Government Operations Committee  
February 17, 2016

Esteemed Senators White, Pollina, Bray, Benning and Collamore:

As a language-lover who teaches language professionally, I strongly believe that semantics matter. During my 11 years as an SLP, one of my favorite topics of not-so-small talk has been my dissatisfaction with the words “speech-language pathologist” to describe what I do. What I teach transcends speech and language, and has little to do with pathology. My job is to teach children the communication skills they need to be good speakers, listeners, readers, writers, and problem-solvers. I do my work as part of a close-knit community of teachers. We are special educators, classroom teachers, reading specialists, media technologists, counselors, art teachers, etc., but we are all teachers, both in daily fact and by law. When people ask me what I do, I answer, “I teach communication--so I think I should be called a communication teacher--but I am licensed as an SLP.”

So it was as if my pet semantic quibble suddenly showed its real-world fangs when it came to my attention last month that educational SLPs’ standing in Vermont as teachers was in question. Until then I was ignorant of what was going on; and I can confidently say the same for the other SLPs in our district. I have now pored over S. 217, and its impact on SLPs and schools gravely concerns me. If it passes as written, our inclusion in teachers’ negotiated agreements will hinge on whether our employment contracts give us State retirement benefits--which they are unlikely to do if we are not covered in the teachers’ negotiated agreements in the first place. This is at best a Catch-22, and at worst the death-knell for our current protections and benefits.

Moreover, to withdraw our teacher status and by extension our labor status would mean to endanger the sense of camaraderie and equality we have and need with our fellow teachers. We work together under stressful conditions, and our sense of group membership is critical to our ability to cope and to support one another. Imagine telling a group of soldiers, “Ninety-five percent of you are going to get the basic contract, but the other five percent will be free to negotiate a more competitive salary--although we don’t promise any benefits, and we’ll be able to lay you off at will. Also, you five percent won’t have to be directly supervised, but we’re going to tell a different agency how to check in on you. Go team!” This is what this licensure division feels like to me.

We can fix, or better, prevent, this problem. I urge you to consider allowing SLPs to choose between an OPR-issued clinical license and an AOE-issued educational license. School-based SLPs are educators and should be regulated by the Agency of Education! Barring that sensible fix, I would recommend that you require school-based SLPs to obtain an AOE-issued endorsement on their OPR-issued license, and that you clearly state that anyone with an AOE endorsement is a teacher. However, I see this alternative fix as suboptimal, like hanging a sign in the produce section saying, “For apples, see dairy.” Why not keep the apples with the other fruit in the first place? Why not keep communication teachers with other teachers?

I sincerely appreciate the work you do and your time today. Thank you.