

I appreciate the opportunity to share my perspective with the committee on the proposed legislation, S.157. My name is Sheramy Tsai, and I am a Registered Nurse and a parent of five children, four of whom are in the South Burlington, Vermont school district. I am also the co-President of the Orchard PTO, although I speak entirely on behalf of myself and my opinions are not representative of the PTO at large.

I will preface this by disclosing that I do have some experience in labor relations. In 2012, I sat on the negotiation team for the University of Vermont Medical Center, as we negotiated the 2012-2015 nursing contract with the Vermont Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals. Today, however, as I speak as a concerned community member and parent.

October 2014 was a challenging time for our family. My husband, a busy physician at UVM, and myself a nurse manager of the PACU, were both working more than full time. Our youngest child had just turned one. At that time, two of our five children attended South Burlington schools, one in first grade and the other in 3rd grade.

Our first-grader had a difficult transition to Rick Marcotte Central School from the Schoolhouse, where he attended kindergarten. Our son spent most of September adjusting to his new school, and was finally feeling more settled as October approached. Just as we were in a groove, the South Burlington school teachers voted to strike. This came as a huge surprise and created a massive disruption to our lives, as well as the lives of many families in South Burlington. In addition to making alternative childcare arrangements, we tried to explain to our then-young children what was occurring. While the strike was resolved after five days of negotiations, the impacts lasted much longer than that for our family. A sensitive child, I firmly believe that our son could feel some of the tension that is unavoidable in situations like these. His transition back to school was shaky, at best.

Fast forward to October 2017, and we were faced with the same situation. As the two sides negotiated until the wee hours of the morning, parents were left not knowing whether or not their children had school. More, the tension began to rise within the walls of the building. As PTO co-President, I spend a lot of time in the schools. I had a front-row seat to the situation. Myself and countless other parents could feel the stress. Teachers were tired, and parents were uneasy.

It was during this time that I began to feel, "there must be a better way." My ex-husband is a teacher in the state of Vermont. Our path prior to moving to Vermont had us both working for schools in Baltimore, MD, and Boston, MA. Granted, we did not have school-aged children during those time, our experiences as a public-school educator and a public-school nurse were not fraught with these types of intense conflicts.

I began speaking with parents in my community who felt strongly that this process was broken. While our education system in Vermont has evolved, we were wondering why we were consistently stuck when it comes to collective bargaining. As the only New England State, and one of only 13 states in the nation, that allows for teacher strikes, myself and other parents became increasingly concerned.

I began a petition on change.org to encourage lawmakers to take up the issue once again, as I understood that it was addressed by Representative Kurt Wright and senator Joe Benning in 2015. The language of the petition made it clear that signature support did not imply that one was for or against the teacher's union and/or the school board. Again, the proposed legislation addresses BOTH sides because it bans school board imposed contracts and school strikes.

In approximately one month we garnered 486 signatures. While this may not sound like a lot in comparison to the state population, we only marketed our campaign via social media and word of mouth, mostly in the South Burlington area. I began hearing from countless parents and community members who expressed desire to sign the petition, but also expressed fear. Our community had been through many significant high-tension issues over the last few years, and individuals expressed concern of feeling ostracized or of being perceived as being

“against teachers” if they signed the petition. The long-standing collective bargaining issues in South Burlington added to the anxiety.

I have read the opposition statement from Martha Allen, President of the Vermont-NEA. As has been recalled countless times, she points to the fact that contracts are mostly settled successfully, claiming that over the course of 50 years and 5,000 contract settlements, only 27 strikes have occurred and only 24 boards have imposed contracts. While these numbers may be accurate, the numbers do not capture the negative emotional ramifications that the process has on a community, nor do they capture the effects of “near-strikes.” Case and point, while South Burlington averted a 2017 strike, the emotional toll that the possible impending strike had on the community was no different than if we had actually experienced another one.

I understand that there is much concern about what to do in the case of an impasse. While this is a very valid concern, I truly believe that the new legislation will address that by the nature of eliminating the final “weapon” that both parties are currently using.

Both the school board and the teacher’s union have a vested interest in settling contracts as quickly as possible. As the teacher’s union has expressed on multiple occasions, they have a desire to focus on the students and the classrooms as soon as the school year begins. Further, the school board has pressing issues that are often put on hold due to contract negotiations.

In fact, I would go on further to say that I believe that the current system actually prolongs negotiations. In my opinion, the process as it currently stands allows our children to be used as pawns in the system by both parties.

Although Vermont is an innovative state who appears to be on the cutting edge of many decisions, we are way behind the eight-ball when it comes to adjustments needed to the collective bargaining agreement process. I fear that upcoming financial constraints to the education system will only worsen the current situation, and that action to reform our collective bargaining system needs to be swift.

At the end of the day, we all strive to teach our children to work through their conflicts maturely and reasonably. It’s about time that the adults of the community model the behavior that we encourage our children to follow.

Thank you,

Sheramy Tsai, BSN, RN

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