

2/26/2020

My name is Christopher Guros and I work as a special education teacher at Main Street Middle School here in Montpelier, where I have been teaching for almost ten years. I'd like to thank the committee for their time today to hear from me on what I consider to be a critical issue of fairness for Vermont teachers. I'm here today to speak about H.805, a bill you are currently considering. This bill has several significant components, including protecting teachers from discipline for testifying before the legislature and making the suspension and termination procedures for teachers under state law subject to collective bargaining agreements for the purpose of grievance. These are important issues and I support those changes. However, it is the third piece of this bill that I believe is perhaps the most important, as it has the widest impact. That piece would prevent interference with a teacher's right to seek employment while under contract.

Under current state law, a teacher who signs a contract for a school year cannot seek other employment as a licensed teacher within Vermont. In most cases, this means that a teacher under contract who sees a new position that they would like to apply for needs to be explicitly released from that contract by their superintendent. If a teacher breaks a contract during the school year, he/she is disqualified from teaching in Vermont for the remainder of the school year. I believe that the intent of this piece of statute is to prevent unnecessary disruptions in student learning that could be created by a teacher leaving mid-year. I do not believe that the intent of the statute is to make it difficult for teachers to seek employment in another district, even if they intend to do so well before the school year has started. This has, unfortunately, been an unintended consequence of this law. H.805 would correct this.

For many years, I served as the Montpelier Education Association's local grievance chair. Serving in this role, I was generally the person that people came to talk to when they had an issue with our employer, The Montpelier School District, now the Montpelier Roxbury School District. Each spring, without fail, when contracts were issued I'd hear from a handful of members with a similar dilemma. In general this dilemma was that for personal or family reasons, the teacher wanted some time to search for a teaching position in a new district. Contracts are generally issued around April 15th and we are given two weeks to return them. For many years, those that asked for an extension would be given two extra weeks and they would need to return their signed contract by around May 15th. Folks would often say that they knew of a position that was going to be posted after this date and had not been granted an extension. Many teaching positions are not posted until contracts are due in districts and those districts become aware of teachers not returning. I was frequently in the position of telling folks that were denied extensions that they would have to either sign the contract or vacate the position and take their chances. For most, this was too much of a chance to take. How could someone put their livelihood at stake, with no guarantee that they would be hired for the position they hoped to secure? This never felt fair or reasonable to me.

Last school year, two particularly egregious cases occurred. In one a teacher wrote the following to our Superintendent on April 21st:

*"I am formally requesting an extension on signing my 2019-2020 letter of intent. Though I do enjoy Montpelier very much, the recent addition of my daughter to my family has me looking for a teaching job closer to my home. Teachers in the district I live in need to sign their contracts in the upcoming weeks. They are currently on April vacation. At that time Chittenden East will post positions that are open.*

*Because positions in Chittenden East do not open up regularly, I would hate to miss out on an opportunity that may be a better fit for my personal life and family needs. It is with this in mind, that I ask you to grant me an extension to May 22nd. If there are no positions that open of which I am qualified, I will gladly be signing my contract with MPS.”*

This teacher received the following reply on April 22nd, “[The Superintendent] will only be granting extensions to those teachers who have an interview already scheduled with another district. I understand your desire to be closer to home, but unfortunately, we cannot grant you an extension without a scheduled interview.” I can tell you that this teacher went on an interview anyway and when they were recommended by the principal of the building they hoped to work in, the Superintendent of that district would not hire her because she was under contract.

In another case just last year, a teacher requested an extension on April 23rd when contracts were due on April 24th. This request was denied and the teacher signed their letter of intent. When a position in the district in which the teacher lived opened up in June, they asked for permission to interview on the grounds that working in their home community would be much better for their family. The reply from the Superintendent was that she would not allow the teacher to break her contract. In part of her response to the Superintendent, this teacher wrote the following:

*“How can people who carry the majority of their families' income and health insurance ever apply for a new career if they are required to essentially have their old one posted before they even get offered a new position? If I worked in another field, I could give two weeks notice and move on. Why is it so completely the polar opposite in education and how would that help the culture or community of a district, if one can't ask to interview elsewhere for the following school year, before this one even ends?”*

My colleague brings up an excellent point. I believe the legislature has the power to correct this inequity. I have personally been commuting from Burlington to Montpelier for almost ten years. This used to be no problem when I was single and had no kids. Currently, as a married father of a four year old girl and a two year old boy, the distance between home and work has gotten more difficult to manage. If I eventually decide to look for a position closer to home, I'd like to have an appropriate amount of time to do so. My kids both have serious food allergies and are always one accidental exposure from an ambulance ride. Leaving my current position and going through a period without insurance while I hunt for a job closer to home is not an option for me. Please adopt H.805 as written and allow me and my colleagues the opportunity to seek employment in another school district. I understand and accept that doing this during the school year would be too disruptive. I don't accept that seeking a new position months in advance of the school year would do the same. Thank you for your time today and I'm happy to answer any questions you might have.