

Vocational Instructor

Local 4200A ~ AFT, AFTCT, & AFL-CIO



**"It Pays
To Be Taught
By a Vo-Tech
Teacher"**

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But the State is Broke!

By Ed Leavy, SVFT President

February in odd numbered years is State Budget Month. The Governor releases his budget, the press reports on it, the Yankee Institute screams that he needs to cut taxes more, and then the legislature glances at it occasionally while they create and try to pass their own budget. Everyone goes through the Governor's budget to see how their own agency or department is affected; we get a call from the AFT CT lobbyist within minutes of its release telling us what the proposed budget for the CTECS is.

This year's budget is especially telling, because 36 bargaining units will be negotiating contracts this year. We see that the Governor's budget states that there is no expectation of raises in the biennial. People both within and outside the administration will continue to argue that the State cannot even afford its pension liability, so raises are out of the question – of course, they conveniently ignore that the pension liability exists because the State chose not to make their pension payments in the past, not because State workers did not pay their share through payroll deduction. In fact, State workers voted to increase their contributions both to the pension and retiree healthcare in 2011 and 2017. That should be repeated: State workers voted twice to increase their own contributions, while at the same time accepting 0% raises (obviously, a 0% raise is, by definition, not a raise). There is a group – a small group – of rich people in Connecticut who publicly state that perhaps the very wealthy can afford to pay a little bit more in taxes than other people can. That group calls itself the "Patriotic Millionaires." While I appreciate their efforts, no one calls State workers who have voted for concessions to help the State in hard times the "Patriotic Employees." The moment we make a sacrifice, attention immediately shifts to the next sacrifice we can make.

It does not have to be this way; the State does not need to shift the budget burden on State services and the people who employ them. We have argued for years that a millionaire's tax of 1%, which would only partially address the inequities in the way our capital gains are taxed. After decades of making the same argument, it may be time to waive the white flag and try something new. Perhaps instead of raising taxes on the wealthy, we can stop giving huge subsidies and tax breaks to businesses. Over the past decade we have given nearly half a billion dollars to Raytheon Industries. We have given over a quarter billion dollars to Jackson Labs and Disney (Disney owns ESPN, which is in Bristol). I have never read any study that proves these subsidies improve Connecticut's economy or create jobs. One would hope that when we hand out subsidies or exempt companies for taxes, we know that doing so is beneficial. It's not clear we do.

This is simply not an exercise in policy wonkery. Budgets are statements of values: it is one thing to say how much everyone loves the technical school teachers, and another thing to say that instead of giving Disney \$80,000 a year we can give them \$78,000,000 and give the tech school teachers an increment and a 2% raise. It is not unreasonable to assert that our teachers, who have been asked to do yeoman work in these incredibly difficult times, deserve and need the money more than Disney shareholders. When we hear the State has no money, what is really being said is they have no money for State services and the people who provide them. The State seemingly has plenty of money for the things they want to spend money on. It's just not us.

Labor History: Mobley Teachers and Brown v. Topeks BOE

By Ed Leavy

In 1954, the Supreme Court ended the practice of segregated schools with *Brown v. Topeka*. “Brown” was Oliver Brown, whose daughter Linda attended Monroe Elementary, an all-black school. Linda had to walk seven blocks to catch the bus to Monroe; the white school, Sumner, was four blocks from her house. At the urging of the NAACP, Brown tried to register his daughter for fourth grade at Sumner, and was refused based explicitly based on race. Brown sued; he was one of over 200 similar cases in the court system. The Supreme Court decided to hear one of these cases, and chose Brown.

The Supreme Court decided in favor of Brown. In the decision, the Court stated, “Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children... Segregation with the sanction of law has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of negro children.” The Court made it clear, in these quotes and throughout the decision, that integration was needed because black children could not receive an adequate education unless they were educated with white children.

The decision, while giving Brown the desired result, had nothing to do with the argument made by Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP lawyer who represented Brown. For the plaintiff, this was an argument about educational fairness, not educational quality. Brown believed his daughter should not be excluded from the nearby public school which his taxes supported based on the color of her skin. Neither he nor Marshall ever claimed Linda’s school (Monroe) was inferior to the white school, Sumner. In fact, the Brown family loved Monroe. Linda’s mother later said, “[Monroe] was wonderful, if it wasn’t having to walk so far to school... We didn’t have any bone to pick with our school or our teachers, because they were qualified and did what they were supposed to do.” The all-white Court simply assumed that black schools and black teachers must be inferior to white schools and white teachers.

The Supreme Court’s rationale had wide-ranging impact on students and especially Black teachers. The presumed inferiority of the black schools became a rationale for removing Black teachers when communities reluctantly integrated their schools.

When Mobley, Missouri integrated, all 15 African-American teachers were fired. They sued, arguing their evaluations were superior to many of the white teachers who were retained. The city argued their evaluations were immaterial, since they were evaluated in the context of African-American schools, not the allegedly superior white schools. The court agreed with the district. It was, however, impossible to argue one veteran African-American teacher, Mary Ellen Timini, was not above the standard of most white teachers. She had multiple advanced degrees, and her students were phenomenally successful. The judge instead attacked her character. “She gave the impression she considered herself superior to other teachers,” he wrote. She seemed “resentful toward authority.” As Malcolm Gladwell noted in his podcast on the subject, of course she considered herself “superior to other teachers.” She was demonstrably superior to them. Of course she was “resentful”; she was being fired. She refused to feign subservience, so she lost her job.

What happened in Mobley happened everywhere. In Topeka, only one African-American teacher was offered a position, a part-time middle school job. Assistant Principal Stanley Salter had to call white parents and inform them their child would have a black teacher; the protests were so numerous she was let go. She was going to quit anyway, since she was not allowed to use the teachers’ bathroom, a common practice where some black teachers remained. When *Brown v. Topeka* was decided, there were 81,000 African-American teachers in the South. Within a decade, fewer than half that many remained. The percentage of African-American teachers has never recovered, North or South. Nationally, the percentage of teachers of color is far less than the percentage of students of color. Teaching, which had been the one professional job African-Americans could enter for decades, was no longer available. If anyone doubts the impact of the Mobley decision and the way integration was handled in general on the number of minority teachers, look around at the next faculty meeting.

Why does this matter? Statistics tell a great deal. A long-term study was taken of 100,000 Black students in North Carolina.

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The study showed if one of the students had even one Black teacher between third and fifth grade, they were 39% less likely to drop out, an incredible difference. Black students are less than half as likely to be put in gifted and talented programs than white students with the same test scores and grades; the difference is entirely attributable to the fact that white teachers are much less likely to recommend Black students for these programs than white students. Statistics show what we see anecdotally. When I was part of the Student Assistance Team at Bullard-Havens in the early 1990's, I noticed almost every student recommended for special education help was white, even though whites were a significant minority in the school. To be clear, little of this is overt racism; teachers were simply attributing poor school performance to external factors they did not fully understand, rather than seeing the problem as a learning disability. It is one of the many reasons we need more minority teachers.

I have written about *Brown v. Education* in the newsletter. I have given a speech about the case at the AFT Connecticut Business Convention, and AFT's willingness to write an amicus brief in support of the plaintiff (while NEA remained silent). I taught about the decision in my English class, which required some creative lesson plans to justify. Until I heard about Mary Ellen Timini, I never – literally never – wondered what had happened to the Black teachers after the decision. How many other times did I stand in front of a classroom filled with students of color and ignore issues that were central to their experience, simply because it was not also my experience? No matter how well-meaning I have been, there have been times I could not speak to my students in ways that would have helped them understand best. We as a union and a country take great credit for the integration of our schools. We never mention that black teachers paid the cost. We need to work together now to address the problems that were created.

Almost all the information comes from Malcolm Gladwell's podcast Revisionist History. The episode "Miss Buchanon's Period of Adjustment" is startling; it cannot be recommended enough. A similar version of this article ran four years ago, but our Minority Teacher Committee has led me to think about this story quite a bit

December's Labor-Management Meeting

The second Labor-Management meeting of the school year was held via Zoom on Tuesday, December 15th. Central Office was represented by Superintendent Jeff Wihbey, Assistant Superintendent Nikki Menounos, Talent Office Manager Bob Sartoris, and Raphael Palacio from HR. The SVFT was represented by the three full-time officers, Lisa Higgins (Director of Counseling, Prince), Angela Ocasio (social studies instructor, Windham) and Tom Viola (IST DH Platt). Below are many of the issues discussed.

- 1) Admission Policy – The SVFT brought concerns that admissions were significantly behind where they were in most years. Superintendent Wihbey said that COVID has had a negative impact on admissions, but the numbers were beginning to rise. SVFT leadership has subsequently been invited to participate in the Enrollment Team.
- 2) Student camera requirements – Teachers have legitimate concerns about mandated reporting issues when students are remote. The Superintendent stated that teachers now are able to turn off cameras. Inappropriate behavior should be handled as it is in a classroom.
- 3) Teachers reporting during inclement weather – We asked that when districts who have students who are all remote and teachers teleworking will not be closing schools, how will our teachers know that they do not have to report to school and should telework? The Superintendent said schools will cancel will make a decision with plenty of notice, and that has been the case.
- 4) COVID positive reporting – SVFT leadership has access to reports sent to the State COVID mailbox but were not receiving information on CTECS incidents. There had been a breakdown in communication that has since been rectified.
- 5) Makeup Policy – While teachers understand the need for flexibility in these difficult times, they are afraid of an overwhelming avalanche of work coming in at the very last minute. The Superintendent said the district will look to improve communication, but the difficulties with remote instruction were creating failure rates that had to be addressed.

We Testify

House Bill #5612 sought to eliminate the course requirement for trade teachers with ten years in the classroom. The SVFT provided two testimonies against the bill on February 11th; below is Paul's testimony. The representative who wrote the bill, Representative Leeper from Fairfield, and Commerce Committee Chair Senator Hartley, had lengthy discussions over the bill, and representative Leeper agreed to meet with us to discuss other ways to help recruit and retain trade teachers. It was an inspirational example of the public hearing process working as it is intended.

My name is Paul Angelucci, and I am the vice president of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers. I am proud to represent the over 1150 educators in the technical high school system. I am also the Plumbing and Heating Department Head at Bullard-Havens and began as a Plumbing DH in 2007. It is because of my experience in both these roles that I testify today in strong opposition to Proposed Bill #5612: AN ACT CONCERNING A TEACHER CERTIFICATION FOR TRADE PROFESSIONALS.

I had worked as a licensed plumber for nearly 25 years when I decided to change profession, take the significant reduction in pay, and become a teacher. Though I had graduated from the system and understood how the program worked, I was not prepared for the demands of teaching. It was very clear that by going to work for the technical high schools, I was in fact changing to a new profession. Issues of classroom management, special education requirements, and teacher evaluations were completely new to me. I would never have survived my early years without the courses I took. Every week, I sat with other new teachers and the instructor to be taught the skills and techniques required to be successful in our new profession. When an issue arose, I had a frame of reference to address it. Not only did I benefit from what I had been taught, more importantly my students benefited. I was a very different teacher in my fifth year than I had been in my first. Certainly, the experience in the profession helped, but the courses I took played an even bigger role. I would not have survived without them.

In my role as SVFT vice-president, I talk to new trade teachers every day. I work with them as they discover the unique demands on this new profession. I also see the benefit they receive from taking the classes. Being a plumber is a different profession from being a plumbing teacher. The skills and abilities I developed in the plumbing trade are an important factor in my success in the classroom. The skills and abilities I learned in the coursework were an important factor as well.

As our school system accepts an increasing number of special education students, we cannot ask our trade teachers to fulfill both the legal requirements and the student's unique needs if they have not been taught to do so. Proposed Bill #5612: AN ACT CONCERNING A TEACHER CERTIFICATION FOR TRADE PROFESSIONALS is bad for teachers, and therefore bad for students. It would be a devastating step backwards for our system. Trade teachers must be educators first, and the course requirement is necessary for that to happen.

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SVFT Mission Statement

The SVFT is an organization of professional educators that promotes excellence through the mutual adherence to policies, documents, and procedures negotiated with the CTEC. We work to guarantee that the contract is followed and positive working conditions are maintained. This organization shall be to provide a safe and positive teaching environment for all by:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the contract, the Vocational Technical High School System, and the solidarity of the union
2. Ensuring all members are protected by the contract and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to make them successful
3. Protecting the jobs of our members and strengthening our system
4. Providing members opportunities to further their education and receive quality professional development
5. Responding quickly to the emerging changes to the workplace and technological challenges
6. Handling all interactions with fairness and integrity
7. Striving for productive, open communication between the SVFT leadership and our membership
8. Building and improving relationships with our union affiliates and local labor councils