



Kentucky Student Voice Team

Rose Revival Public Hearing - Morehead, KY **Centering: Teacher Wellness & Retention**

Introduction

Kicking off the Kentucky Student Voice Team's November Hearing on Teacher Mental Health and Wellness, a Pulaski County student, Emelia Singleton opened the event with remarks about Kentucky Student Voice Team as a whole, what the Rose Revival Campaign covers, and what hearing attendees should expect to hear throughout various testimonies presented and questions answered by expert witnesses. She reports that Kentucky is ranked 42nd across the nation in educator pay. Emelia also notes that various students in KSVT have highlighted the problem of having multiple teachers in one class during that same school year: this teacher volatility must be slowed down; next, Abby Ladwig, a student from Daviess County, introduces the expert witnesses in attendance: Allison Sloane, Christina Frederick-Trosper, Jaylee Collier, and Mary Sloane.

First Expert Witness: Allison Sloane

After Abby introduced the expert witnesses, Mrs. Allison Sloane gave her testimony. In this declaration, she spoke vividly about how her experiences in the special education department for the past twenty-seven years have changed drastically; she was the tenth special education teacher hired at her school in 1999, but she is now just one of four. In addition to this decrease in special education teachers over the years, Mrs. Sloane discussed how all teachers need more training time, how she may have to work after school and receive no compensation, and even how lunch times have severely decreased, which harms her ability to be fully prepared for an upcoming class.

Next, Nate Reeves, a fellow KSVT student member, asked Mrs. Sloane about where to start helping teachers' mental health. Her answer was simple: teachers need fewer responsibilities. She believes that they were once viewed as heroes, but educators are now just attacked by the public; lessening teacher responsibilities may help in shaping a more positive public view on the work they do each and every day. Nate then specifically asked about what type of support systems special education teachers need. Mrs. Sloane discussed ideas such as a more collaborative school culture and more training time for special education teachers to emphasize what must be done in upcoming years.

Second Expert Witness: Christina Trosper

Following the end of Allison Sloane's responses to the panel's questions, Nathan then passed the microphone to Hattie Litton, a Rowan County student, who then called upon Christina Tropser for the second expert testimony. Tropser, a teacher in Knox County for twenty-three years, detailed three essential challenges that she believes teachers face: lack of ability to express opinions, lack of professional development funding, and the defunding of KTIP programs. She expressed that School-Based Decision Making training modules were vital to school success, but without the proper implementation of them, teachers are lacking vital support.

Tropser further expressed a vital challenge to teachers in Kentucky, saying that, "When teachers and students have no voice, there is no hope." According to Trosper, teachers now are missing high quality professional development and site visits, resulting in high mental fatigue. This failure to support new teachers is creating irreparable damage to Kentucky's school systems.

Tropser confirmed the importance of changing her lesson plans and adapting to new standards, but also detailed that without KTIP and similar programs, it is becoming increasingly difficult to reflect upon failed and unsuccessful lessons. As a solution to these challenges, Tropser detailed that teachers must have a say in the running of their schools. Front line soldiers, as she discussed, need to be given a voice.

With the finish of Tropser's testimony, Hattie began her first follow up inquiry, focusing on the emotional wellbeing of students. As a response to concerns of the emotional health of students, Tropser presented a solution, detailing that students need mentor programs as relationships are critical to wellbeing. Building upon this response, Hattie further advanced the conversation by inquiring about the viewpoints of teachers on SB 181. Tropser detailed that this legislation has negatively impacted positive student and teacher relations. In this way, SB 181 has been a relative problem as students are now afraid to reach out to teachers. With this legislation, teachers had no voice, preventing their viewpoint on pressing issues to schools. She detailed that, "We need legislation with local control."

Third Expert Witness: Jay Leigh Collier

Upon the end of Christina Frederick-Tropser's responses to the provided questions, Hattie Litton passed the examination role to Shaivi Balasubramanian, a KSVT student from Jefferson County. Current Morehead State University student Jay Leigh Collier was called to the stand. In her testimony, Collier explained that she has goals of becoming a high school math teacher, with hopes of returning to give back to her Eastern Kentucky community. Collier admits that her individual path in becoming a teacher has been "a gauntlet", that makes it more difficult for people that do what to be teachers to actually become ones. As such, aspiring educators are extremely vulnerable, making this the beginning of the retention problem. Burnout has become a serious concern for

aspiring educators, and Collier detailed a call-to-action, in which up-coming educators need frontloaded financial support, mentorship programs, and action that shows that teachers are being fought for. As Collier said, “We don’t just want to survive in the system, we want to thrive.” Collier finished her testimony by detailing that teachers choose their profession due to a calling, not for the money, and they must be supported. At the end of the testimony, Shaivi asked the first question concerning how to increase overall interest in the teaching profession. Collier detailed that aspiring educators need more financial assistance earlier into their programs, while programs overall need to expand their language to adopt out-of-state students. Current teachers also need to be more passionate about introducing new teachers into the field. Additionally, Collier was asked about innovative teaching strategies that are beneficial to the quality of education. Collier detailed that teachers need to be allowed more time to make high quality lesson plans without cutting into personal (unpaid) time.

Final Expert Testimony: Mary Sloane

The final expert witness was Mary Sloane, an educator from Floyd County with 31 years of classroom experience. She began by acknowledging the student leaders and expressing appreciation for being invited to speak. Her testimony was conversational and reflective, drawing on her long career in Kentucky public schools. Sloane spoke about the many changes that she has observed over time, including frequent shifts in curriculum, testing, leadership, and district priorities. She noted, after working, that the constant change stemming from working under multiple principals and superintendents, makes it difficult for teachers to keep up and sustain effective practices. While collaborative structures such as PLCs still exist, she described how repeated reforms and new initiatives can be overwhelming for classroom teachers. She emphasized that, despite these challenges, relationships with students are what keep teachers in the profession. Sloane described the joy and meaning she finds in teaching and encouraged educators to focus on what they can control inside their classrooms. She stressed the importance of grounding oneself outside of school and not tying personal value solely to student grades or test scores. When asked about teacher pay, Sloane stated that the teacher pay crisis in Kentucky is real and that insufficient compensation negatively affects both teachers and students. She compared teachers being asked to supply their own classroom materials to a doctor being required to bring their own medical supplies. She also shared that repeated requests for support from districts often go unanswered. Sloane addressed the lack of diversity in the teaching profession and noted that while some issues can be addressed through legislation, others are simply rooted in broader community conditions. She emphasized the need for stable internet access, stronger communities, and opportunities for gainful employment to help recruit and retain educators. She also suggested that successful educators should be encouraged to recruit future teachers by sharing their experiences and enthusiasm for the profession.

Audience Questions

Following the small-group discussions, general audience members had the chance to engage with the expert panelists in an open Q&A. Audience members were curious about the representation of the teacher's voice. Immediately, a panelist cited Senate Bill 181, a bill that restricts student-teacher communication, as an example of the legislators not sufficiently valuing teacher voice. Another added that the legislators have never experienced a teacher's work environment, and therefore teachers can't rely on the current top-down model to function in their favor. A current legislator who was in attendance asked a question regarding the dangers of lowering job requirements just to address the teacher shortages. Panelists worried about the potential change in quality of education and educators as a result. They also concluded that the lower requirements ultimately dumbs down the profession, which gives the same legislators who lower those requirements the justification to propose charter schools that are taking less from educators.

Closing

The hearing ended with each student examiner giving their closing remarks. They thanked all of the educators for sharing their experiences and for talking about the challenges teachers face every day. The students said that hearing directly from teachers helped everyone in the audience understand more about what is happening in classrooms and why support for teachers is so important. The student leaders reminded the audience that teachers are appreciated and that their work makes a difference for students and communities. They acknowledged the hard work, dedication, and care that teachers give, even when conditions are difficult. The hearing closed with a feeling of respect and gratitude for the educators, leaving a clear message that supporting teachers is essential for the success of students and schools.