

An Open Letter to Members of the Florida Senate

Dear Senators:

I don't think you've met Thomas Lentz.

Tom teaches English at Ridge Community High School in Davenport.

He's the teacher every parent wants for his or her child.

One of Tom's students – a sophomore at the time – lost his family, and his grades plummeted. Tom saw what was happening, so he and his wife Amanda McCallister, also a teacher at Ridge, stepped in. They started taking him to the library and encouraged him to retake the classes he had failed. Then they filed for temporary custody. In 2009, the student graduated with honors. This fall, he's attending Stetson University.

"He had so much raw talent, and it was going to waste," Tom told me recently. "He's done really great things."

Like so many of our teachers, Tom thinks of his work as a calling; the hundreds of kids who pass through his classes each year aren't just his students, they're his life's work.

Like most of his colleagues, Tom has listened proudly as you boast about Florida schools and our stunning educational gains. You've told us Florida elementary and middle school students are reading above the national average. Math proficiency is on the rise. The graduation rate has jumped double digits and fewer students are dropping out. In frequent speeches you've told us Florida schools are now a model for the nation.

And when you cite those stunning statistics, you always give credit where credit is due.

You thank Florida teachers.

You thank teachers like Tom for making our education system one of the best in the nation.

That's why Tom – along with other outstanding teachers – will be here on Monday to ask you some questions.

They want to know exactly what you were thinking when you proposed Senate Bill 6.

They want to know why you're punishing them for delivering tremendous educational gains, why you're lashing out at the same teachers who have made Florida schools a model for the nation.

They want to know why you're championing a bill that puts the best teachers' jobs at risk and discourages new teachers from coming to our state.

You say Senate Bill 6 rids our schools of incompetent teachers, the ones who underperform. But that's not what it does. Senate Bill 6 doesn't distinguish between subpar teachers and highly effective teachers.

It targets every teacher in Florida.

You say you want to continue to improve student learning and increase graduation rates. In fact, on – and off – the campaign trail, you've promised to make our schools a priority.

If that's true, then we share a common goal.

If that's true, you should be introducing bills that provide teachers like Tom with the tools and the resources they need for students to succeed.

Senate Bill 6 is a slap in the face – to Tom and to all the other outstanding teachers across Florida who have dedicated their lives to the teaching profession and have produced learning gains that are the envy of the nation.

You owe them an explanation.

Sincerely,

Andy Ford, President
Florida Education Association