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"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." - Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dear Matt,

Today, while many teachers are working on their pillars, I have decided to write you this letter instead (this is my second year of boycotting pillars because I do not agree with this policy). I have been in this district for 18 years. Since I was a junior in high school, I have wanted nothing more than to be an English teacher. You could say I have my dream job, but many things have been happening, in this district and in this state, that are, in my perception and according to my experience and values, turning the dream into a nightmare, and the mass exodus of faculty from this district suggests that a great many teachers share this sentiment. I have talked to many teachers about these issues, and I believe that most teachers in our district share these opinions and perceptions. A recurring theme among those resigning is regret at having to leave behind their students, regret at having to make a career decision based not on their students' needs but on situations arising from politics and policies that have nothing to do with the education and betterment of the children. I have put a great deal of thought into whether I should return to Nathan Hale next year, and I'd like to share with you some of the issues that are influencing this decision.

1. Ethics:

Our federal and state governments have put into place some mechanisms that threaten to cut funding to school districts for being honest. Our district, being very savvy in playing the game of educational politics, has excelled at making itself look good, often at the expense of the students. We are deceptively reporting attendance rates (for example, setting it up so that students over 18 can skip school and not be counted as absent). We are deceptively reporting reading scores on our district website. We are deceptively reporting behavioral problems (for example, making it very difficult for teachers to refer students to administration for behavioral intervention and rarely giving any administrative consequences to students and then using decreased referrals as evidence that behavior is getting better). We are deceptively reporting academic success, by pressuring teachers to pass students who have not earned a passing grade, and then by giving students chance after chance to make up credit deficiencies in ways that are not at all rigorous or commensurate with a semester of work. Teachers who try to maintain high standards are bullied and threatened (including by human resources) with the possibility of extra paperwork, extra inservices, additional classes, and termination. As hard as teachers try to be honest and give the grades that are deserved, it becomes harder and harder to do so in this environment. The result is that I often feel I am being dishonest about student achievement. This does a huge disservice to the students (who are not being prepared for the real world where you don't always get a "do-over" and a satisfactory evaluation just because you showed up once in a while) and to society (which is being

told that our graduates are ready for higher education and employment when many are not). To add insult to injury, this year teachers were pressured to sign a document saying that we approve of all these district policies. We were told that this was to help obtain a grant. When many teachers were hesitant to sign, the message was changed: we were no longer signing to say we approved the policies; we were signing to say we approved the district seeking funding for these policies. These are just a few examples of what I feel is district dishonesty and pressure on teachers to echo such dishonesty. I am an honest person. I cannot, in good conscience, go along with this.

2. Professionalism:

Teachers are not trusted and treated like professionals in this district. People do not become teachers because they are greedy or lazy. Teachers become teachers because they love their subject matter and working with children, yet district policy consistently treats us with distrust, like we must be closely monitored and constantly held to account. When I came to this district, in 1996, I was told by administrators and teachers that this was a collegial environment in which teachers and administrators tried to work together in the best interests of the students, and I believed that was true. Since then I have seen this collaboration and mutual respect erode and morale plummet. Teachers used to be given academic freedom and some latitude to determine how they could best meet the needs of their students; building administrators used to have some autonomy in how they ran their buildings; now we are coerced to implement new and unproven methods that those allegedly training us barely know. We are expected to continually switch methods and programs and policies and to create ever-expanding "binders" of paperwork and forms. This is all done in the name of "data" (which we know can be interpreted however one pleases) and a desire to appear "cutting-edge" and enact policies that appear new and groundbreaking but are often not in students' best interest. All this busy work takes us away from helping students and teaching in a genuine way that works best for us and our students. Plus, we are trusted less and less. Most of the paperwork we do is now geared toward proving to administrators that we are doing our work the way they want it done. I want to be trusted as a professional educator. I know how to teach, and I don't need administrators (many of whom spent a few unhappy years in the classroom and quickly moved on) to tell me how to do it differently. People are leaving the district in droves (and administration knows it; why else would they have increased the penalty for leaving mid-year to \$10,000?), and this is a huge reason for it. If you had told me in 1996 what things would be like today, I would never have believed you. Today, it seems to me there are three kinds of teachers in this district: those too new to know what it's like (a constantly growing percentage), those who are actively trying to leave, and those who wish they could leave but feel trapped by economic necessity.

3. Work Load:

This job has always been challenging, but teachers are being asked to do more and more while the ever-increasing number of administrators are doing less and less with and for the students, and more and more to police the teachers. When I started in this district we had two prep periods a day and taught five classes, and I still took home many hours of work every week. The district has taken away one of our prep periods, given us a homeroom period and another period duty (and many teachers a sixth class). In addition they now make us spend 45 minutes before first hour in so-called "collaboration." Well, where I come from, collaboration is where peers willingly work with peers to help each other do their work and solve problems. Our "collaboration" consists of meetings and trainings where administrators go over the ever-changing district mandates and have us fill out forms. I used to be much better prepared for first hour. I used to meet with struggling students before school. I used to find that little extra thing to make my lesson that much better: often, now, I'm lucky to get to the classroom on time. I know administration will say that I should be meeting these expectations after the school day the previous day or before the 7:05 morning meeting. But the truth is that I have a family of my own, and I already bring home enough work that I often feel like I am neglecting them. Thanks to our Governor, our wages and job security are lower than ever, and thanks to district policies, we are working harder than ever while feeling wholly unappreciated. The district often claims they *must* do these things because of Act 10. The truth is that they only have the option to do them because of Act 10, and they are taking full advantage.

Our work load has also increased in terms of dealing with disciplinary problems. When I started this job, if a student was disrespectful or insubordinate, I could fill out a detention form and put it in the assistant-principal's mailbox. That's all I did. The administration would follow up and make sure the student served the detention. Now I am expected to arrange with the student's parent to find a time when I and the student can stay after school together, and when the student refuses to serve it, the administration often does nothing and sometimes, eventually will give the student a "talking to."

4. Technology Policy:

I know that technology can play a strong and positive role in education, and in many districts it is doing so, but it has become increasingly obvious that our district's "bring your own device" policy is ridiculous and contrary to common sense. There was a time when we could require students to keep their phones and other electronic devices in their lockers and we could confiscate them if they didn't comply. There was a time when administration actually supported and helped with this. Now, instead, the district is providing iPads to most (soon all) students and *not putting any restrictions on the internet service* to keep them off sites like YouTube, Netflix, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and countless video games. So when I'm teaching, students are literally watching movies, playing games, texting and video chatting (with other students in other classes) on district-provided devices over the district-provided network. I'm not allowed to take these devices away. I can ask them to put them away, and they ignore me. When administrators observe these students who are engaged in their electronic recreation rather than my lesson (as they often do since each teacher is now to be observed 15 times per school year), I am blamed for not being "engaging" enough. Most of the administrators in this district have never had to compete with such distractions (except, now, during faculty meetings and inservices, during which they aren't doing so well in the competition).

5. Student Accountability:

Each year, our district increasingly goes out of its way to be more and more "customer-service" oriented. We try to give certain parents and students exactly what they want. This includes letting students (with parent permission) choose whichever classes they want. In the past, students needed teacher approval, so a student who failed English 10 could not go on to a college-preparatory English class like American Literature (where he or she would probably fail anyway). I have seen students removed from teachers' classes because a parent had a complaint, and this is often done even before talking to the teacher to hear his or her side of it.

This "customer-service" policy has extended to discipline. I have heard of students blatantly lying about teachers and getting them in trouble, and then – when it is proven that the accusations are groundless – the students are not punished at all. I have heard of teachers being physically threatened by students with no consequences or a one-day, in-school suspension. Students can ignore late work policies and get credit for assignments turned in well after a quarter or semester ends (sometimes even the next school year, and occasionally two years later). They can fail classes and then retake them as a three-week internet version of the same course and get a high grade without their transcript showing any difference. Matt, you probably don't remember this because it was before you came to the district, but several years ago a district administrator suggested to teachers that missing work be given 40% because many students were failing because of missing work (can I stop coming to work and get paid 40% of my salary?). In more recent years we have been switching to "standards-based grading" and grading based on "essential benchmarks." These are euphemisms for assigning students less work and passing them anyway when they fail to do the work. Many times I have been asked by counselors or administrators to "boil down" a student's missing work to the "essential benchmarks." What they're asking me to do is to excuse students from most of their missing work and pass them when they do a small percentage of it.

Students are figuring this out. The lazy students realize they don't need to do much work and they can do it if and when they please. They know there are administrators, counselors and teachers who want them to pass more than they themselves want to pass, and the adults will make it happen somehow. The conscientious, hard-working students are catching on to this too, and many of them resent this. Why should a student who repeatedly failed be able to do an internet class for three weeks and get the same credit as a student who worked

hard all semester? As we lower the bar again and again, gifted students are working less hard as well; an ebbing tide grounds all boats.

We keep making it harder for the students to fail or get suspended or expelled, and so we keep looking better on school-rankings, but we keep teaching our students that they have no accountability; a lie that will soon be exposed after they leave the twelfth grade or transfer to another district.

Here's something we perhaps have not considered: the best parents in our district are counting on us to do what's best for their kids, to prepare them in the best way we can for the challenges ahead. A "customer service" model doesn't do this. We'd be better off losing a few disgruntled families than creating policies that do not adequately challenge and prepare our students.

To Conclude:

These are huge problems, and for years I and many other teachers I have hoped the school board would see what's going on and intervene. This hasn't happened. It seems that some school board members believe that we're on the right path (probably because the only information they get about the schools comes from the district administration). Perhaps others don't feel they can oppose a deluge of policies that are already in motion. This makes for an environment of hopelessness. For several years I have told myself that this would be my last year at Nathan Hale. Yet, I kept hanging in there. Why? Because I love my job . . . that is, I love my job when I'm able to do it the way that I think fits my teaching style, my values, and the needs of my students. I feel so lucky that I get to teach my favorite novel of all time (*The Grapes of Wrath*) to my American Literature classes. (But wait, the English department has been told that we should never teach the same book to a whole class; the students must be able to pick their books, and besides, we should mainly be reading nonfiction anyway) [Incidentally, the social studies department has been told that they can't worry about covering history anymore; they are primarily reading teachers now]. I love that I can use my love of writing to challenge students to be better writers and to prepare them for college writing. (But wait, we've been told that students whose writing falls far below grade level should be given credit anyway, and students who used to try to do better in order to pass have stopped trying.) I love that I can use my love of building things and working with tools to help students build the sets for our school plays. (Indeed, this has been the best part of my job for the last several years, because it's the only part that the administration has not tried to change.) If I could teach five sections of Stagecraft and be the technical director of the plays, I could stay here for the next 15 years and retire from this district. But that's not the reality we're living in.

So after a great deal of soul-searching, I have come to the difficult conclusion that for ethical reasons I am no longer able to continue my employment with the West-Allis, West-Milwaukee school district. There is a great deal about this job I will miss, but those things are being constantly eroded by district policies. Matt, I want you to know that I think you are a decent, compassionate person with good intentions and the potential to be an effective leader given the right environment. I often disagree with the way you unquestioningly go along with district policy, but I understand that self-preservation is a strong motivator in this oppressive environment. This is, no doubt, why so many administrators move on so quickly as well. I wish you the best of luck as you continue to grapple with your conscience in this district.

Very sincerely,



Eric Zentner

P.S. In case you're wondering why I'm sharing this letter with others, it's because I've seen many staff members leave over the years, and, more and more, I hear propagandistic statements like: "He was offered an opportunity he just couldn't resist," or "She had a chance to work closer to home," etc. I do not want that said of me. I do not have another job lined up. I am not leaving to go somewhere else. I am leaving to get away from the aforementioned problems, and I hope that my departure (and those of many others) sends a statement to those in this district with the power and the willingness to make positive changes.