

Testimony of Tina Whitaker
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American Federation of Teachers, Local 01974-0

Before the House Education and Labor Committee

“STANDING WITH PUBLIC SERVANTS: PROTECTING THE RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE”

June 26, 2019

Good morning, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx. I would like to thank Chairwoman Wilson and Ranking Member Walberg for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee. My name is Tina Whitaker. I am a veteran teacher of 21 years in Miami Dade County Public Schools in Florida, and a proud union member of the United Teachers of Dade. I teach social studies at Arthur and Polly Mays 6-12 Conservatory of the Arts.

I began my teaching career in May 1995 as a substitute teacher in Scotland Neck, N.C., at Brawley Middle School. Scotland Neck is in Halifax County, N.C., and is currently ranked 90th in per capita income in the state. I was excited not only to be giving back to the community in which I was raised, but also to have the opportunity to work with teachers who had nurtured me as a student.

At the beginning of the following school year, I began teaching North Carolina history and language arts to seventh-graders. Still excited, I decorated my class for my new adventure with the help of those same teachers who were now my mentors. After the completion of a successful year, unfortunately, I was released from my teaching duties because I was told I had not fulfilled my obligation of getting my certification within my "two years" of employment. A month being a substitute teacher and one full year does not calculate to working for two years, but I had no one to advocate on my behalf since there was not a union I could belong to in North Carolina. I realized that I would have to navigate these waters alone.

I drove to Raleigh, N.C., and pleaded my case to the North Carolina Department of Education. With hope in my heart, I proceeded to go back to the Human Resources Department at the Halifax County School Board. I had no one to advocate on my behalf. I had no union, no professional organization, that could fight for me. Here I was, a product of the community and the county school system, who had beat the odds, but I could not get anyone to listen to my pleas. I wanted the students who lived in my community to see that you can go off to college, get your degree, and come back home to serve the community in which you lived. I went from sadness and embarrassment to

anger. I was angry because I was let go unfairly, and those who could have helped me, didn't. I was able to find an education lawyer who took my case pro bono.

Months later, I moved to Miami and started the process of gaining employment as a substitute teacher and eventually as an educator with Miami Dade County Public Schools. From my experiences in North Carolina, I had learned what happens when you don't have someone to advocate for you, therefore I did not hesitate to join the United Teachers of Dade once I became a teacher. This union has helped me reach my full potential. After coming from a place where my dreams were stifled and where I was unable to help my community, I found my voice in Miami because of a union that has helped me become not only a better educator, but a better professional.

UTD has afforded me opportunities that I otherwise would never have had. The professional development I've taken part in has given me the tools needed to be chosen as the Teacher of the Year and the Social Studies Teacher of the Year.

We are not just a union within the walls of our school buildings. We participate in advocacy and activism.

With all that we do in our community, we have still had to organize to combat legislation that adversely affects the children and workforce in the communities in which we serve.

Yes, bad legislation trickled down into our classrooms.

When bad legislation is passed, it affects morale and district funding that could provide for smaller classes, more mental health services, education services and teacher salaries. This bad legislation has caused our union to seek other means of giving education professionals a partial solution to a reasonable living wage.

You must walk your talk. Your message must be one of bringing togetherness in our communities. Healthy workforces with bargaining capability build strong and active communities, and strong communities build stronger economies.

I am Tina Whitaker, and as a proud public school teacher and a proud union member, I want public school teachers around the country to have the right to collectively bargain. It is my hope that Congress will soon pass this important legislation. Again, thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering your questions.