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## LINDA JOY SULLIVAN: ABANDONING TEACHERS OR BEING PRUDENT?

MAY. 10, 2017, 7:05 PM BY COMMENTARY 0 COMMENTS

*Editor's note: This commentary is by Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, of Dorset, a Democrat who represents the Bennington-Rutland district in the Vermont House of Representatives.*

have taught in the public schools – I was until very recently licensed to teach in two states and in fact taught

in middle school, high school and developmental disability programs. I fully appreciate the contributions of our teachers, the value they bring to our communities, the important trust we reside in them.

My husband works for the State of Vermont. In partial exchange for his commitment to public service, my family is insured by a state-subsidized health insurance plan. I know firsthand the value of this important benefit. It's good insurance and we're blessed to have it.

My family pays its fair share of property taxes. I have always been happy to pay taxes in exchange for good government and the delivery of public services. But like a number of my neighbors, I am increasingly worried about whether many of us will be able to keep their homes, and carry this tax load, into retirement.

For all the furor that has surrounded Gov. Phil Scott's recent proposal that we allow the state to negotiate a more economically favorable health care deal with our insurance companies covering our teachers, you'd think that someone was out to gut their health care protections in the style of what is happening in Washington, D.C., these days. Claims are flying that Gov. Scott wants to disenfranchise our teachers, that he under-appreciates their contributions, and that he's just plain "anti-teacher."

We have to cut through this uninformed rhetoric.

*In balancing the interests of all of my constituents, this "tweak" to the current imbalance of the relative negotiating positions of the teacher's union, health care providers and our school officials made abundant sense.*

Right now, our volunteer school boards are asked, individually, one by one to negotiate teacher contracts with a well-financed statewide teachers union. They are being asked as well to negotiate the best possible insurance deal for those teachers and for school employees with our oligopolistic (two-provider) health care industry. Talk about being between a rock and a hard place.

What Gov. Scott recently asked my colleagues in the Legislature was simply to allow the state, with its superior bargaining power, to negotiate a better deal. I was a bit skeptical about whether we will achieve \$26 million in savings, and I knew that any tax savings would not have directly reduced property taxes, but I could not see how it wouldn't have improved our ability to secure quality health care – full health care benefits for our teachers – at a far better cost.

From a business perspective, it's a no-brainer. If the plan was to downsize health care coverage for teachers,

that would be one thing. I was not hearing that – I heard instead that the proposals under consideration had the support of Vermont’s school superintendent association and are supported by actuarial analyses that seek to better match our spending to experience.

In the end, even assuming the state’s assumption of responsibility for negotiating this benefit, teachers would have still been left with the sort of robust, Vermont-style collective bargaining rights they have long enjoyed. There was no thought of laying off teachers or reducing their pay. Their ability to negotiate teacher contracts with our local school boards was to be left untouched. Their benefits would not have been slashed. In fact, we are likely in the next few weeks to extend to teachers paid family leave rights to supplement the many other protections we extend to public employees. From what I can see, they would have still had health insurance as good if not better than the health insurance my family has. That’s all appropriate – our teachers are a treasure.

Last week I heard very loudly from my constituents a plea for fiscal responsibility and restraint. On the heels of my town’s recent approval of a significantly increased school budget for FY18, my town manager informed me of the substantial increase in our real estate taxes expected this coming year. Many of my constituents urged me to support Gov. Scott’s proposal, and I did. My constituents include teachers. They include parents of school-aged children. They include taxpayers. In balancing the interests of *all* of my constituents, this “tweak” to the current imbalance of the relative negotiating positions of the teacher’s union, health care providers and our school officials made abundant sense.

Of course, the measure failed – by one vote. This week, then, I am hearing suggestions from some of my colleagues in the House that those who supported the proposal failed some Democratic Party “litmus test.” More rhetoric. Most shockingly, I have heard from at least one of our members that independent-thinking-constituent-minded Democrats really ought to have been better “leashed” by party leadership (his word not mine). I’m proud that my leaders, Speaker Mitzi Johnson and Majority Leader Jill Krowinski encourage members that vote their conscience and who listen to – *and who hear* – constituents. Leash people? Really! No leash for me, thank you.

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