

Testimony on House Bill 99

House Criminal Justice Committee

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Submitted by:

Rebecca Morton

Chair LaRe, Vice Chair Swearingen, Ranking Member Leland, and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to House Bill 99. My name is Rebecca Morton and I am a resident of Columbus, Ohio. I am a parent of two adult children who spent a combined twenty six years in Columbus area classrooms. I am a teacher who has taught at many grade levels. In Ohio, I have spent 12 years in a college classroom teaching education majors looking forward to their careers in their own primary and secondary classrooms. I am here to urge you strenuously, passionately to prevent HB 99 from becoming law. It is a preposterous, deadly proposition certain to result in tragic, avoidable deaths, unspeakable loss, and severe trauma to schoolchildren and their communities.

When I was in college in the 1980s, at no point did I say to myself, "In the next quarter century I will teach at every grade level from preschool to college." But somehow I did. One thing led to another. I have had the great fortune to enjoy students of every age, classrooms configured to adapt to various architecture and philosophies, school buildings erected in three different centuries, on both coasts and the midwest, in every state of repair. Within this variety of settings and age groups and subject matter, I frequently organize my thoughts by theme. This week, as I think about this bill in my adopted state's legislature and as I read the latest news, I am thinking about mistakes.

At its best, a classroom is a laboratory, a place for discovery, for following leads, a place where ideas beget ideas and lead to creative problem-solving. In order for a classroom to be alive with hunches and inferences and ambition, everyone needs to be game. Being game means being able to tolerate making mistakes. Part of my job in every class I've ever taught is to remove the venom from students' fear of making mistakes. I fancy myself pretty good at this by now. I can't begin to guess the number of times I've said, "So you made a mistake," or the number of ways: So you made a mistake.

We all make mistakes.

It was just a mistake.

Hey. We're all gonna make mistakes.

Let's correct a few mistakes.

No big deal.

Just say, "Oops" and move on.

We all have to get comfortable with saying, "Oops."

But this week in the news we're all reading about a mistake that doesn't fit my pedagogical mold, and it has everything to do with why this bill, HB 99, is horrible. Three days ago, on April 11 in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, police officer Kim Potter, a 26-year veteran of the force, killed Duante Wright at a traffic stop. She shot him with her firearm when she putatively mistook it for her taser. She was heard to exclaim, "Oh sh*t! I shot him."

"Oh sh*t" is a synonym for "Oops." But here, with the exclamation we're dealing with a matter of degree. The consequences, though, are a matter of life and death.

The classroom is a place where it should be a sacred truth that anyone should be able to address a mistake by saying, "So you made a mistake. Nobody died." A classroom is a place where we should expect to grow from our mistakes. These are the sorts of mistakes we should anticipate in a classroom setting:

- Arithmetical mistakes.
- Spelling mistakes.
- Grammatical mistakes.
- Incorrect pronunciation.
- Social missteps.
- Breaches of etiquette.
- Improper sequence of steps in a project.
- Failure to follow directions.
- Lapses in memory.

I have devoted much of my own teaching practice to normalizing the making of mistakes, to addressing mistakes as an opportunity for introspection and for adjusting our classroom mechanics to reducing them. In order to do that, the mistakes themselves need to be of an order where we can all truthfully say:

So you made a mistake. You're human.
So you made a mistake. Nobody died.

HB 99 looks to me--to a teacher of more than thirty years--like nothing so much as the answer to these questions:

- What can we do to make schools more dangerous?
- How can we inculcate in our young students chronic anxiety?
- How can we enable our schools to engender lifelong trauma in their students and staff?
- How do we make each of our school buildings ground zero for its community's most tragic events?
- How can we teach that mistakes are deadly?

This bill is a mistake.