Dear Administrators, Superintendent, et al.:

This is my official resignation letter from my English teaching position.

I’m sad to be leaving a place that has meant so much to me. This was my first teaching job. For eleven years I taught in these classrooms, I walked these halls, and I befriended colleagues, students, and parents alike. This school became part of my family, and I will be forever connected to this community for that reason.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to serve my community as a teacher. I met the most incredible people here. I am forever changed by my brilliant and compassionate colleagues and the incredible students I’ve had the pleasure of teaching.

I know I have made a difference in the lives of my students, just as they have irrevocably changed mine. Teaching is the most rewarding job I have ever had. That is why I am sad to leave the profession I love.

Even though I am primarily leaving to be closer to my family, if my family were in Colorado, I would not be able to continue teaching here. As a newly single mom, I cannot live in this community on the salary I make as a teacher. With the effects of the pay freeze still lingering and Colorado having one of the lowest yearly teaching salaries in the nation, it has become financially impossible for me to teach in this state.

Along with the salary issue, ethically, I can no longer work in an educational system that is spiraling downwards while it purports to improve the education of our children.

I began my career just as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was gaining momentum. The difference between my students then and now is unmistakable. Regardless of grades or test scores, my students from five to eleven years ago still had a sense of pride in whom they were and a self-confidence in whom they would become someday. Sadly, that type of student is rare now. Every year I have seen a decline in student morale; every year I have more and more wounded students sitting in my classroom, more and more students participating in self-harm and bullying. These children are lost and in pain.

It is no coincidence that the students I have now coincide with the NCLB movement twelve years ago–and it’s only getting worse with the new legislation around Race to the Top.

I have sweet, incredible, intelligent children sitting in my classroom who are giving up on their lives already. They feel that they only have failure in their futures because they’ve been told they aren’t good enough by a standardized test; they’ve been told that they can’t be successful because they aren’t jumping through the right hoops on their educational paths. I have spent so much time trying to reverse those thoughts, trying to help them see that education is not punitive; education is the only way they can improve their lives. But the truth is, the current educational system is punishing them for their inadequacies, rather than helping them discover their unique talents; our educational system is failing our children because it is not meeting their needs.

I can no longer be a part of a system that continues to do the exact opposite of what I am supposed to do as a teacher–I am supposed to help them think for themselves, help them find solutions to problems, help them become productive members of society. Instead, the emphasis on Common Core Standards and high-stakes testing is creating a teach-to-the-test mentality for our teachers and stress and anxiety for our students. Students have increasingly become hesitant to think for themselves because they have been programmed to believe that there is one right answer that they may or may not have been given yet. That is what school has become: A place where teachers must give students “right” answers, so students can prove (on tests riddled with problems, by the way) that teachers have taught students what the standards have deemed to be a proper education.

As unique as my personal situation might be, I know I am not the only teacher feeling this way. Instead of weeding out the “bad” teachers, this evaluation system will continue to frustrate the teachers who are doing everything they can to ensure their students are graduating with the skills necessary to become civic minded individuals. We feel defeated and helpless: If we speak out, we are reprimanded for not being team players; if we do as we are told, we are supporting a broken system.

Since I’ve worked here, we have always asked the question of every situation: “Is this good for kids?” My answer to this new legislation is, “No. This is absolutely not good for kids.” I cannot stand by and watch this happen to our precious children–our future. The irony is I cannot fight for their rights while I am working in the system. Therefore, I will not apply for another teaching job anywhere in this country while our government continues to ruin public education. Instead, I will do my best to be an advocate for change. I will continue to fight for our children’s rights for a free and proper education because their very lives depend upon it.

My final plea as a district employee is that the principals and superintendent ask themselves the same questions I have asked myself: “Is this good for kids? Is the state money being spent wisely to keep and attract good teachers? Can the district do a better job of advocating for our children and become leaders in this educational system rather than followers?” With my resignation, I hope to inspire change in the district I have come to love. As Benjamin Franklin once said: “All mankind is divided into three classes: Those that are immovable, those that are movable, and those that move.” I want to be someone who moves and makes things happen. Which one do you want to be?

Sincerely,

Pauline Hawkins