

Mr. Casey Barduhn, Superintendent Westhill Central School District  
400 Walberta Park Road  
Syracuse, New York 13219

Dear Mr. Barduhn and Board of Education Members:

It is with the deepest regret that I must retire at the close of this school year, ending my more than twenty-seven years of service at Westhill on June 30, under the provisions of the 2012-15 contract. I assume that I will be eligible for any local or state incentives that may be offered prior to my date of actual retirement and I trust that I may return to the high school at some point as a substitute teacher.

As with Lincoln and Springfield, I have grown from a young to an old man here; my brother died while we were both employed here; my daughter was educated here, and I have been touched by and hope that I have touched hundreds of lives in my time here. I know that I have been fortunate to work with a small core of some of the finest students and educators on the planet.

I came to teaching forty years ago this month and have been lucky enough to work at a small liberal arts college, a major university and this superior secondary school. To me, history has been so very much more than a mere job, it has truly been my life, always driving my travel, guiding all of my reading and even dictating my television and movie viewing. Rarely have I engaged in any of these activities without an eye to my classroom and what I might employ in a lesson, a lecture or a presentation. With regard to my profession, I have truly attempted to live John Dewey's famous quotation (now likely cliché with me, I've used it so very often) that "Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself." This type of total immersion is what I have always referred to as teaching "heavy," working hard, spending time, researching, attending to details and never feeling satisfied that I knew enough on any topic. I now find that this approach to my profession is not only devalued, but denigrated and perhaps, in some quarters despised. STEM rules the day and "data driven" education seeks only conformity, standardization, testing and a zombie-like adherence to the shallow and generic Common Core, along with a lockstep of oversimplified so-called Essential Learnings. Creativity, academic freedom, teacher autonomy, experimentation and innovation are being stifled in a misguided effort to fix what is not broken in our system of public education and particularly not at Westhill.

A long train of failures has brought us to this unfortunate pass. In their pursuit of Federal tax dollars, our legislators have failed us by selling children out to private industries such as Pearson Education. The New York State United Teachers union has let down its membership by failing to mount a much more effective and vigorous campaign against this same costly and dangerous debacle. Finally, it is with sad reluctance that I say our own administration has been both uncommunicative and unresponsive to the concerns and needs of our staff and students by establishing testing and evaluation systems that are Byzantine at best and at worst, draconian. This situation has been exacerbated by other actions of the administration, in either refusing to call open forum meetings to discuss these pressing issues, or by so constraining the time limits of such meetings that little more than a conveying of information could take place. This lack of leadership at every level has only served to produce confusion, a loss of confidence and a dramatic and rapid decaying of morale. The repercussions of these ill-conceived policies will be telling and shall resound to the detriment of education for years to come. The analogy that this process is like building the airplane while we are flying would strike terror in the heart of anyone should it be applied to an actual airplane flight, a medical procedure, or even a home repair.

Why should it be acceptable in our careers and in the education of our children?

My profession is being demeaned by a pervasive atmosphere of distrust, dictating that teachers cannot be permitted to develop and administer their own quizzes and tests (now titled as generic “assessments”) or grade their own students’ examinations. The development of plans, choice of lessons and the materials to be employed are increasingly expected to be common to all teachers in a given subject. This approach not only strangles creativity, it smothers the development of critical thinking in our students and assumes a one-size-fits-all mentality more appropriate to the assembly line than to the classroom. Teacher planning time has also now been so greatly eroded by a constant need to “prove up” our worth to the tyranny of APPR (through the submission of plans, materials and “artifacts” from our teaching) that there is little time for us to carefully critique student work, engage in informal intellectual discussions with our students and colleagues, or conduct research and seek personal improvement through independent study. We have become increasingly evaluation and not knowledge driven. Process has become our most important product, to twist a phrase from corporate America, which seems doubly appropriate to this case.

After writing all of this I realize that I am not leaving my profession, in truth, it has left me. It no longer exists. I feel as though I have played some game halfway through its fourth quarter, a timeout has been called, my teammates’ hands have all been tied, the goal posts moved, all previously scored points and honors expunged and all of the rules altered.

For the last decade or so, I have had two signs hanging above the blackboard at the front of my classroom, they read, “Words Matter” and “Ideas Matter”. While I still believe these simple statements to be true, I don’t feel that those currently driving public education have any inkling of what they mean.

Sincerely and with regret,

Gerald J. Conti  
Social Studies Department Leader  
Cc: Doreen Bronchetti, Lee Roscoe