

Testimony submitted by William and Sanda Coleman
Re: SB196
Senate Committee Hearings
March 7, 2013
The Jeannine Coleman Academy of Arts and Letters

I love teaching. More specifically, I love teaching high school students who are drawn to literature and drama, who are curious and passionate about the role of art in their lives and in the world.

In class, we talk about poems and stories and novels and essays as though they were the living things that they are: pulsing with the history that made them, both personal and local. We memorize poems so that the memory of what Coleridge called “the best words in their best order”—the memory of someone’s taking the time to find the most meaning in words, rather than using words glibly for political or personal gain—is part of our own remembered story.

As we read together, we listen to one another make sense of what we read, build upon one another’s thoughts, make of each class an unforeseen event that leads us to greater discoveries than we might have made alone.

We imitate the rhythms of others, both by reading aloud and by writing sentences that mimic those of a master—to get a feel for what it must be like to be someone different, even as the words make us feel an inner life that resonates with our own. We extend our sympathies to people long dead or who never lived in order to learn how to do the same for characters in our lives.

We learn what it means to act. We move and talk within another’s world, and learn thereby our sway is not supreme. We learn what the audience of great drama learns, that when living flesh takes on form before our eyes, unmediated by a screen, the catharsis, the laughter, the crying, are more powerful than those to be found anywhere else in the secular world.

We learn to improvise. We play short, rapid-fire games to wrest us from our preconceptions and plunge us into the realm of intuitive thought, into unusual ways of seeing and building upon what only moments ago appeared to be a problem. We learn that no problem exists that cannot be redeemed—even understood as essential to the making of a satisfying creation—through creative thought and action. We learn to trust one another. We learn that what can be made of the interaction of disparate people’s experiences and thoughts and actions is unforeseen, and often better than what we would likely make of our separateness.

In short, we learn some of the qualities that make us human and that will keep us from treating others as though they were not.

All of the above, of course, is analysis. We sometimes speak in those terms, to be sure. We write essays and argument papers, and make a study of the classical means of rhetoric. We do so not to inhibit creativity, but to strengthen it by providing it with definition. And we do so so that we can more fully appreciate and more clearly defend what we love, and so that we may reject what we

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find false with precision, delicacy, and power.

I have taught at Northfield for nearly ten years. I have watched and felt it grow, not only in sheer numbers of faculty and staff, but in the proliferation of classes and activities. I have observed how the demand upon a student's attention—both in school and outside of it—has increased.

What my wife and I would like to do is to create a place where we and the students spend our days in pursuit of those qualities I've described above, a place apart from a traditional school setting, a place more akin to a writer's colony, in which times of solitude spent reading and writing enliven the common times of discussion and rehearsal and performance. We would make meals together, and eat them together.

We would use a house donated by the Love family, one that would provide ample and beautiful space for such communal and individual activities. Classes would be held in rooms containing comfortable chairs and sofas, musical instruments, and books and art of all kinds. Common classes would be held around the wood-burning fireplace. The apartment in the basement would house visiting writers and artists whom my wife and I have come to meet and know in our years of editing and teaching in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. We would also work with local bookstores and music venues to find writers and literary-minded musicians who might need lodging around the nights of their readings or performances. These visiting artists would speak to our students about their craft, and about how life intersects with it.

The back yard would serve as a venue for performances, as well as for lectures from guests, and for fundraising events.

Students would give back to the community by way of public performances of classical drama, public readings, and classes and workshops for grade school children, led by members of our senior class.

Classes would include poetry (reading), poetry (writing), fiction (reading), fiction (writing), memoir, comedy, improvisation, acting, playwriting, public speaking, general reading, Shakespeare (reading), Shakespeare (acting). These would all be taught by my wife and me, who would also live on the premises.

We would also like to offer stagecraft, costuming, music (voice), and visual arts. These can be taught on a part-time basis by teachers we have come to know, some of whom are former students.

The day would be structured in the following way:

- 1) An initial time of solitude—perhaps half an hour—that each student can spend as he or she sees fit, whether reading or writing or playing music.
- 2) Breakfast, in which all of the students create and share a meal

3) Another time of solitude, in which students read from an assigned work

4) Classes

5) Lunch—again, prepared and shared as one student body

6) Reflection, writing, and solitude

7) More classes, rehearsal for drama

Respectfully, we request that you entertain the possibilities of our school as a charter school, as outlined in SB 196, that helps those who are drawn to it to develop their greatest talents and become prepared to go out into the world with a sense of service to build up others in the same manner in which they were helped.

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