

Oral Testimony:

Good afternoon.

One day this year, my Haitian students taught me about the lougawou — a shapeshifter who removes their skin at night to survive. I realized that's what I'd become as a teacher. I change myself every day to be hopeful when hope is gone, to keep going when everything in me says stop.

I have been a teacher for 24 years. My students are everything to me. I think of each of them as a pearl on a string that I carry in my heart.

Nothing prepared me for this last year.

A 17-year-old student — a child — was pulled off a roofing job site by ICE in July and deported immediately. His sister, left behind with two young children, called me from detention a few weeks ago asking me to take custody of her kids. Ages six and thirteen. I had never met them. They don't speak English. I had a panic attack and vomited in my classroom trash can.

I drove to the DHS building — which shares a parking lot with our Board of Education — and sat there for three hours, shaking, while ICE officers asked me to sign custody papers for children I had never met.

That's when it hit me. This is why I could never get help from my school system. This is why there are no support groups for these kids, no emergency funding — why students were threatened with expulsion for participating in an anti-ICE walkout. The parking lot tells you everything. It is all the same problem.

I am currently on paid administrative leave for my actions that day. I have not been told what I did wrong. I have not been asked to participate in the investigation.

This is not the ending to a 24-year career I imagined. But I am unwilling to look away.

Please vote to enact this bill. Thank you.

Written Testimony:

Good Afternoon,

Haitian culture is full of spiritual tales. One day in January, I overheard some of my students discussing the "lougawou" in a very animated way. This piqued my curiosity and drew me into their conversation. I found myself becoming a student, learning about shapeshifters — spirits who remove their skin to transform into other creatures at night, becoming entirely different organisms to accomplish their bloodthirsty goals. The story unsettled me, which usually means I need to sit with it. I came to the realization that this is what I'd become during the last year as a teacher, minus the bloodthirsty part. I literally have to change myself to do my job every day — not to spoil a mother's milk or prey on the vulnerable, but to be hopeful when hope is gone, to navigate the un navigable, to keep going when everything in me says stop.

I'm a teacher, and I have been for 24 years. I have three professional degrees, I've earned tenure in three counties, been nominated for Teacher of the Year many times — including this year — received tens of thousands of dollars in grant funding, sponsored clubs and beach clean ups and taken kids on so many trips that I giggle thinking about it. This journey has brought me the most wonderful people I know: my students. They've taught me lessons my abusive family did not. They've loved me for who I am, on my worst and best days. I've been with them through pandemics, school shootings, family deaths, breakups, babies, jobs, college, and first drives.

I think of each of them as a pearl on a string that I carry in my heart.

Nothing prepared me for what has happened in the last 12 months. Nothing.

The first distress signal came from a student whose father was detained and deported to Mexico in 2024. There are four kids in the family. Mom was suddenly alone here with no way to earn a living. She went to the DHS office in Salisbury for a check-in and to obtain her work permit. When she arrived with her two-year-old, they told her someone needed to come get the baby because she was not leaving. She was sent to Louisiana within days, leaving her four children alone without a parent. I brought dinners, groceries, and birthday cakes, and tried to help them navigate this surreal situation. Luckily, the oldest sister was able to act as a standby guardian and keep the kids in the home. Mom was released after about a month and returned to her children — no husband, no job, but with her kids. I reached out to my school system for help and kept hitting walls. I was either ignored completely or told the county had no way to help. I remember thinking, "They'll have a whole system in place next year."

Over the summer, an instructional assistant in my classroom reached out in desperation. He'd lost his protected status and was going to have to return to Haiti — a country he described as very dangerous. I tried to help him navigate the laws and the system. I was not successful. ICE activity was increasing in Salisbury that summer, and I had deep fears for my immigrant students.

I spent the first weeks of school this year tracking kids down. I tell them I take attendance with my heart every day. There were many missing faces. These humans, or bodies as ICE refers to them, have names, they have families, hopes, dreams and more than likely an untold tragic story related to immigration and ICE. We are being fed lies about what is happening in our communities. The lies sweeten the hatred and make it go down a little easier for the casual observers. They have decided to wrap this toxic hatred up in our flag, in our story, our immigrant story, and we cannot allow that to happen. We are good, kind people and what is happening is a disgrace.

My first deported student was 17. He shook my hand after the first day of class. He told me later he knew right away I was a kind person. He worked part-time as a roofer — I used to remind him to wear his harness. He was living here with his sister, brother-in-law, and their two young children. His father is deceased and his mother remained in Honduras. ICE rolled up on his job site in July and took him and his brother-in-law, deporting them immediately. He was 17 — a child.

I'd stayed in contact with his sister, who had been his guardian while he was in my class. When I reached out, she was distraught — stuck in this country, no job, no money, no family, terrified. I helped where I could: arranging rides, bringing groceries, assisting with paperwork.

She called me at school one morning a few weeks ago. She'd been detained by ICE and was asking me to take custody of her two children, ages six and thirteen. I had never met them. They don't know me. They speak Spanish and I do not. Both parents were now detained. How could this be happening? I had a panic attack and vomited in my classroom trash can. I knew I couldn't stay at school, so I called my admin, requested a substitute, and left.

I drove to the DHS building, which shares a parking lot with the Board of Education. I rang the buzzer and tried to plead my case, sweaty and shaking from the panic attack. There was no empathy on the other end of that metal grid. I went back to my car and called anyone I thought could help, while watching a steady stream of darkly tinted cars drop off landscapers, mothers, and condo cleaners at the back of the building. I was shaken to see Board of Education employees getting their lunchtime exercise by walking the perimeter of the DHS building.

At one point, two masked and armed DHS/ICE officers came out to my truck to ask who I was and what I wanted. I identified myself and explained the situation. They promptly asked me to sign for custody of the two children, telling me the mother was being deported without question and I needed to sign to keep the kids out of foster care. I said to them, "You don't know me, these kids don't know me, and you're about to let me take them. Don't you see a problem here?" They didn't answer. They walked back into the building. I never saw them again.

I sat there for three hours — watching, having another panic attack, vomiting again — and came to a realization. This is why I never got help when I pleaded to department heads or the superintendent. This is why our kids are not being supported as they navigate very adult problems. This is why there are no support groups for them, no emergency funding, why they were told they'd be expelled for participating in an anti-ICE walkout. It is all the same problem.

I drove home and collapsed in my husband's arms, without words for what I'd experienced. I was unable to go to work the next day. I am currently on paid administrative leave for my "actions" that day. I have not been told the scope of the investigation, nor have I been asked to participate in it. They want to meet in person — in the building next to DHS where all of this happened — with a list of at least ten people present. I've requested a virtual meeting and have been denied. I've had to seek significant medical care for the impact these events have had on my body.

I don't know how this will end. This is not the swan song to a 24-year career that I imagined. But I am unwilling to look away from what is happening in this country. I encourage all of you to follow that lead — just look, put yourself in that other person's shoes, follow the golden rule, remember what you learned in kindergarten. We must ensure that people on the front lines with vulnerable populations have the ability to speak out. I've shown you the way.

Please vote to enact this bill. Thank you.