

"Teachers make a choice every day whether they should stay silent or risk their jobs by reporting," Lundahl said. "The DOE code of silence is real, and we must break through it before more students are hurt."

High school English teachers Alcala and Bennett testified about the retribution they suffered from former supervisors when they took issue with school policies detrimental to kids.

Bennett, who transferred to the Petrides School on Staten Island in 1998, raised a host of professional and money issues. At one point, she questioned the spending of \$40,000 to \$60,000 on a two-day retreat for teachers, some of which went to a university that also hired her principal to teach. She also questioned why so much of the school's overtime budget went to administration, much of it to the principal. At the same time the school was doing that, she added, the administration was sometimes failing to hire substitute staff to provide mandated services to special ed children when regular staff was absent.

The retaliation took a host of forms: letters in Bennett's file, \$600 docked from her pay for failing to fill out a form, and four verbal-abuse investigations against her.

"I hesitate to speak of these things," said Bennett, who became her school's chapter leader. "The charges were untrue, but they were also humiliating. That was the point. To get blood on me. To silence me. And more important, to silence my colleagues by example."

Brooklyn Tech HS teacher Alcala put herself in the line of fire for questioning the removal of a mythology course, a pre-requisite for understanding Western literature, from the curriculum. When the assistant principal, Tracy Atkins-Zoughlami, refused to discuss her decision, Alcala organized a petition signed by 19 members of the English Department requesting a meeting to discuss the course's cancellation.

The day after the petition was sent, the then principal, Dr. Lee McCaskill, summoned Alcala to his office and accused her of disloyalty. He cancelled a Shakespeare course that she had spent years creating, only to reinstate it under pressure from outraged students and teachers. He

Instead, DOE General Counsel Michael Best submitted a letter calling the bill unnecessary and potentially troublesome.

"The language in the bill is so broad that even 'bad apples' within the public school system would be protected," Best wrote. "As written, the bill could prevent the department from taking action against an employee for misconduct or incompetence simply because the employee has made a complaint about a school policy or procedure."

Several Councilmembers, while supporting the

How the law would work

The proposed amendment to the city whistle-blower law would enhance protection for "whistle-blowing" educators in the following way:

- The scope of whistle-blowing would be expanded to cover city educators who report a school policy or practice that, while not illegal, nevertheless hurts the health, safety, general welfare, or educational welfare of students.

- School employees who believe they have suffered an "adverse personnel action" in retaliation for making a complaint could inform the school system's special commissioner of investigation.

- The commissioner would have three months (six if necessary) to complete an investigation and produce a written report of his findings.

- If the commissioner substantiated

the complaint, the chancellor would have three months (six if necessary) to take remedial action. If the chancellor didn't act, the commissioner would have to relay the matter to the mayor.

- A school employee could file a civil lawsuit to seek redress if either the commissioner dismissed the complaint or the chancellor refused to act on the commissioner's finding.



UFT President Randi Weingarten comforts Petrides School teacher Jackie Bennett, who fought back tears as she told her story of whistle-blowing and reprisal.

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NEWCOMER CHECKLIST

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