

January 5th, 2007

Dear SCHOOL CHANCELLOR,

Please accept this letter as notice that I am leaving my position at THE SCHOOL as seventh grade English teacher on February 2, 2007.

I have enjoyed working with the students here, who are, on the whole, some of the most warm-hearted, respectful and eager students I have ever had the opportunity to teach. My decision to leave is primarily based on two reasons: my physical health, which is suffering from the harmful environmental conditions of living in Shanghai, and my family, who for personal reasons need me home. In addition, I have been very unhappy working at THE SCHOOL.

I would like to provide you some insight into my unhappiness with the school environment in the hopes that this information will be useful to you in your continued efforts to improve the quality of students' education and teachers' employment at THE SCHOOL.

During my orientation to the school I was extremely surprised to learn of the school's high teacher turnover rate, to discover that many of the other teachers were younger and less experienced than I, and to find that the majority of the faculty and staff identify as devout Protestant Christians. None of this information had been presented to me at any stage of the recruitment process, nor did I discover it when researching the school's web site. My surprise turned to unease after I heard THE COMPANY FOUNDER AND CEO address the school faculty at the start of the year. In his address, he listed one of the missions of his work as "preaching the Gospel," which upset me a great deal, as I am ideologically opposed not only to the missionary project, which is inherently colonialist, but also to the values of the Protestant religious community, which are largely antithetical to my own. I am antagonized by the growing influence of these values on American politics and culture, and the irony is not lost on me that I have ended up living and working in a community that is largely composed of people holding such beliefs, some of whom, especially among the elementary school faculty, seem to have sought work in China primarily for missionary purposes. I feel that by working for THE SCHOOL I am condoning THE COMPANY FOUNDER AND CEO's religious mission and the work of other missionaries in the school, which I do not.

Furthermore, you should be aware that a social boundary exists between Protestant teachers and non-Protestant teachers. Because I am not Protestant and do not belong to one of the several Protestant religious communities active within the teaching body, I feel isolated and do not find myself at home in THE SCHOOL teacher community at large.

I am deeply troubled by the aspects of religious worship I see on a weekly basis in the school, from the proselytizing by students who attended the religious retreat in October or go to Oatmeal (Youth Bible Study) groups after school, to the far more obvious signs of the Protestant culture seen during the Middle High School Christmas Program, during

which a seventh grade student was mock-crucified on the stage. I would have been shocked to see this image in any Christmas program, but was quite appalled to find it in a school setting. In addition, I was flabbergasted because, as a person who grew up Catholic, I know that many find the image of the crucifixion sacred, and a live re-enactment of this image seemed trivial and disrespectful juxtaposed with dancing snowmen and Christmas carols. The incidents I list above, and the many other smaller instances of Protestant values that occur within the school day, make it impossible to deny that the activities of the Protestant religious community are implicitly if not explicitly endorsed by THE SCHOOL.

In addition to the teachers and administration, parents also enforce Protestant values in the classroom. I have faced persecution for my agnostic beliefs when, in an open discussion of ideas between myself and my students, I shared personal reasons for opposing the conservative political agenda that Protestant religious groups such as the American Evangelical Christian Churches work for in America. Considering that some teachers have taught Bible stories in the classroom and organized student trips to Christian rock concerts with no complaints from parents or administration, I believe that I was attacked not for sharing religious views, but for sharing religious views not in line with those of the dominant conservative Protestant culture of THE SCHOOL. The administration supports this culture in every way, as THE PRINCIPAL admonished me after this incident and also banned me from showing a PG rated film, *The Dead Poets Society*, in my class after a parent complained of the film's content. (The ban was enforced despite the fact that the film's themes dovetailed with my curriculum, the film has a history of being shown in school settings because of its positive messages regarding literature and creativity, and watching the film was also optional for students.) For the reasons described above, I do not feel comfortable working at the school.

My feelings of distress with the school's religious culture aside, on a purely professional level, I have experienced some successes here at the school. I have had some excellent experiences collaborating with teachers both in and out of my department, and I have benefited from the active guidance and supervision provided to me from my Department Head, XXX. MY DEPARTMENT HEAD has been a true mentor to me, checking in on my work and classes several times a week, providing advice and inspiration for lesson plans, and showing care in the development of my skills as a teacher. She shows concern for the members of the English Department, and has come to know each of us personally. I have learned a great deal as a professional working with MY DEPARTMENT HEAD, and am sad to be leaving her department.

However, outside of my Department Head, I do not see any other school leaders interested in challenging or developing my skills as an educator. As a fifth year teacher who has studied at the graduate level and holds a New York State teaching certificate, I have a clear sense of my strengths as an educator, yet I am still a young teacher in need of support and direction from school leaders like the Principal and Academic Affairs Director. THE PRINCIPAL and ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR provide no guidance, standard or vision for my pedagogical methods, nor do they create an atmosphere conducive to peer-learning or best educational practices, as they could by

giving encouragement and scheduling opportunities for grade meetings and interdisciplinary collaborations. In my experience as both a public and private school teacher in New York City, I have never encountered a principal so removed from the daily activities of both the faculty and the students. For example, I was surprised to find that THE PRINCIPAL did not attend the Middle School-wide awards ceremony honoring the winners of the English Language Speech Competition. Students and teachers alike have little idea who THE PRINCIPAL is or what he spends his days doing. This is not a model of dynamic school leadership.

Direct and active leadership in pedagogical methods is necessary at all schools, but especially one like THE SCHOOL where the majority of teachers have no certification, training or experience. The most direct interest the Principal and Academic Affairs Director have shown in my work has come in the form of grading, where I have faced scrutiny over the issue of accommodating the grades of English Language Developers. The meeting we had on this topic left me with the impression that THE PRINCIPAL and THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR, rather than caring for the academic support and development of every student in the school, look only at the bottom line: performance on standardized test scores and class assessments. Our discussion was not a constructive one about how best to teach students with developing English language skills, instead it was an interrogation of our grading policies and assessment techniques. This impression was strengthened during a faculty meeting in which THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR scolded teachers because too many students achieved Honor Roll at the end of the first quarter.

As the school year has progressed, the tone from the Academic Affairs Director towards teachers has been not only patronizing, but at times it has become downright insulting. THE ACADEMIC AFFAIRS DIRECTOR publicly insulted teachers during the Question and Answer period at the State of the School Address when she told parents that the school is not able to offer quality classes because it suffers from a “human resource problem,” and that parents should help the school seek qualified teachers. No apology or retraction of this statement was offered, leaving me with the impression that teachers are not valued by the leaders of THE SCHOOL.

Unfortunately, the school finds itself now one qualified teacher short in the middle of the year, a situation that, for my students’ sake, I am truly sorry about. However, as I hope this letter makes clear, I have not only reasons for returning to the United States, but there are a number of elements of the social and professional culture at the school that prevent me from feeling connected and happy working here. I hope that this letter has illuminated to you some areas that the school could improve on if it hopes to both attract and keep high-caliber teachers in search of a qualified, diverse and well-led professional body.

Thank you for the opportunity to experience life in China, and best of luck on the school’s future endeavors and growth.

Sincerely,

Brian Gresko
Seventh Grade English Teacher