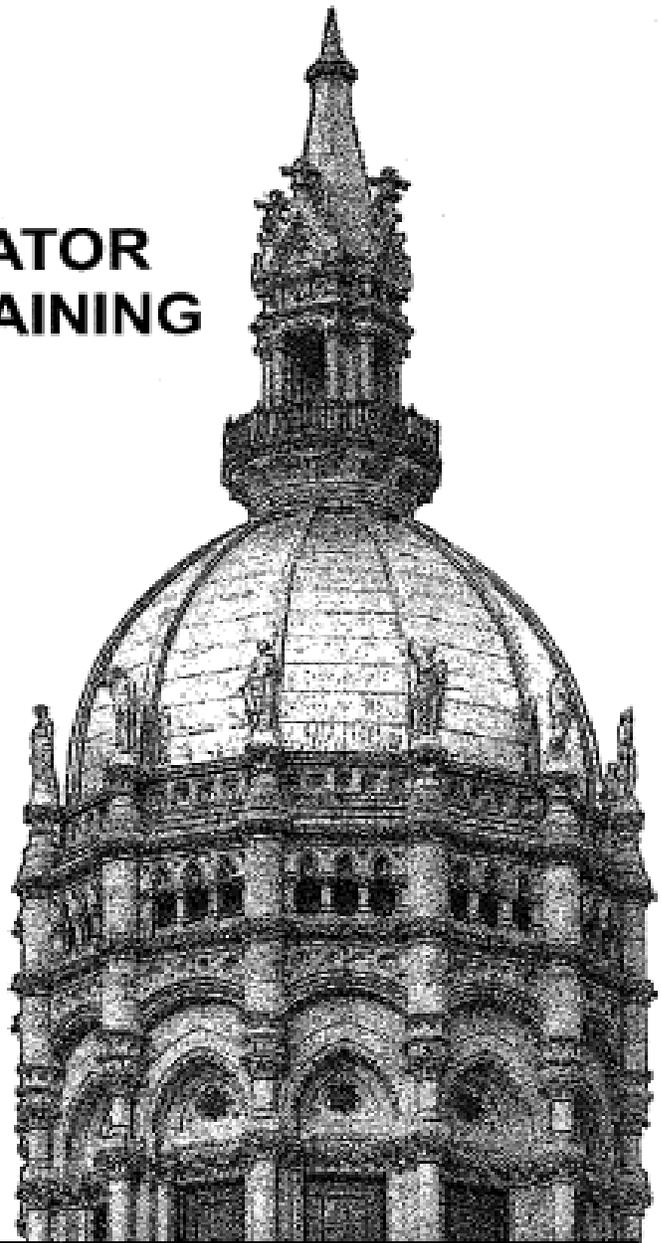


# BEGINNING EDUCATOR SUPPORT AND TRAINING PROGRAM

Executive Summary  
December 18, 2007



**PRI**

**Legislative Program Review and  
Investigations Committee**  
Connecticut General Assembly

# Executive Summary

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## Beginning Educator Support and Training Program

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee authorized a study of Connecticut's Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program in April 2007. The study focused on the effectiveness of BEST in achieving its intended objectives of supporting beginning teachers in Connecticut and assessing their overall skills and qualifications. The program's overall purpose is to ensure public school students in Connecticut are taught by teachers who have been determined competent in accordance with the teaching standards approved by the State Board of Education (SBOE). For this reason, the BEST program is most appropriately viewed as one component of Connecticut's educator continuum structured to ensure teacher effectiveness. Findings and recommendations accordingly were made in several areas, including proposals to ensure the state's teacher preparation programs instruct future teachers in how to teach according to the state standards and BEST, to improve support provided to beginning teachers, and to make the assessment more effective.

The program review committee believes that if the state expects its teachers to teach according to the principles contained in Connecticut's teaching standards and measured through the BEST assessment, three critical components must be coordinated. First, prospective teachers in Connecticut need to be instructed in the state's teaching standards and the BEST program starting during their teacher preparation. Second, the BEST program – in both its support and assessment components – must ensure teachers learn and use effective teaching practices as embedded in the state standards. Third, teachers must be held to those same standards for the rest of their careers in Connecticut. Although entire the educator continuum was not part of the original focus of this study, there is agreement among State Department of Education (SDE) personnel, program staff, administrators, and teachers' union representatives that more than just the BEST program must be strengthened if Connecticut expects its teachers to fully learn and consistently implement the state's teaching standards.

## Background and Resources

The Beginning Educator Support and Training program was developed as the state's teacher induction program during the late 1980s by the State Department of Education in conjunction with input from educators throughout the state. Changes to the program's support and assessment components have been made over the past two decades, although the program's goals have remained the same. Most notably, the BEST assessment method changed to the current portfolio<sup>1</sup> in the late 1990s, concurrently with the adoption of new state teaching standards that emphasized the importance of student learning. For the 2006-07 school year, a total of 42,843 certified teachers provided instruction in Connecticut public schools with just over 4,900 beginning teachers participating in the BEST program in some capacity.

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<sup>1</sup> Under BEST, a portfolio is a structured document developed by a beginning teacher around a unit of classroom instruction. The portfolio includes a written part and a video component of the teacher in the classroom. Both components are interrelated and are based on specific questions (i.e., prompts) developed by SDE.

The financial resources available to BEST declined sharply in the early 1990s. The program's budget currently is about \$4 million. BEST is administered by SDE with contracted assistance from the six Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) around the state and a firm specializing in occupational assessments. Overall, the committee found SDE has focused mainly on the assessment component of BEST, to the detriment of the support component.

### **Teacher Preparation Programs**

Future teachers in Connecticut receive their first instruction in how to teach (i.e., pedagogy), as well as their first teaching experiences, during their teacher preparation. The state's 20 teacher preparation programs are required by regulation to teach their teacher candidates according to BEST and the state's teaching standards. The committee found, however, it is unclear to what extent the programs' curricula are aligned with BEST or the standards. Further, an analysis of BEST assessment data revealed few significant differences among the rates at which teacher preparation programs graduates fail the BEST assessment.

### **Support**

All educators new to teaching in Connecticut must receive BEST support. Support is given mainly by designated mentors, with a range of supplemental support provided by other teachers and administrators at beginning teachers' schools and districts, SDE, and the RESCs.

The committee found the area of BEST in most need of attention is the level and quality of support for beginning teachers. A key goal of the support component of BEST is to familiarize beginning teachers with Connecticut's teaching standards, which are the foundation of the BEST assessment and describe how all the state's teachers are supposed to be teaching. For a large portion of beginning teachers in Connecticut who responded to the committee staff's survey, however, this level of meaningful support is not reached.

The committee recommended changes be made to ensure beginning teachers receive proper support through BEST during their initial years of teaching in the state. The goal of the recommendations is to ensure all beginning teachers receive substantive mentoring from trained mentors with relevant expertise. Improved support will better prepare beginning teachers for the BEST assessment and for teaching according to the state's teaching standards. In addition, national research indicates strengthened support may lead to other positive results, including lower costs to school districts due to reduced teacher turnover and positive gains in student achievement resulting from more effective teaching. With the committee's recommendations, the BEST support component should provide beginning teachers with more consistent and substantive support that builds up to the BEST assessment.

## Assessment

By the end of their second year, approximately 90 percent of beginning teachers must complete the BEST assessment, which currently is a portfolio.<sup>2</sup> The committee study determined the portfolio – as an assessment method – is a valid and reliable instrument. The portfolio assessment generally meets the program’s key goal of ensuring all beginning teachers are at or above the minimum level of competency as measured against the state’s standards within the Common Core of Teaching. There is a low percentage – usually ten percent annually – of beginning teachers who do not pass their portfolio assessments on the first attempt, and only one to two percent ultimately fail after three attempts. It stands to reason that the higher the pass rate, the stronger the indication that teachers meet at least the minimum standards for effective teaching established in Connecticut.

At the same time, the committee determined several changes to the BEST portfolio assessment would make it a more meaningful process from which beginning teachers will learn. Generally, the recommendations focus on making the portfolio process less arduous for beginning teachers, while maintaining the state’s goal of making sure beginning teachers meet specific teaching standards.

Changes to the BEST assessment – in conjunction with those made in the teacher preparation and BEST support areas – are designed to make the current BEST process a more useful and relevant experience that fully captures what beginning teachers have learned about effective teaching in their teacher preparation, through classroom experiences, and from their mentors during the initial years of teaching in Connecticut. Taken together, the committee’s recommendations have the ability to positively impact and advance the knowledge and skills of Connecticut’s beginning teachers.

## Recommendations

The Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee adopted the following recommendations.

- 1. The State Department of Education should undertake a comprehensive review of the alignment of all the accredited teacher preparation programs with the state’s teaching standards as contained in the Common Core of Teaching. The review should also examine how the program approval process can be used by the department of education to ensure teacher preparation programs fully align with the state’s teaching standards.**
- 2. The State Department of Education should require teacher preparation programs to use a standards-based student teaching rubric. The department should require each program to either adopt the rubric already developed, adding on to it if desired as currently is permitted, or to submit its own rubric for approval or rejection. If a**

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<sup>2</sup> Beginning teachers in elementary education, music, physical education, language arts, science, math, social studies, special education, visual arts, and world languages must submit a BEST portfolio. Beginning teachers in other content areas, such as technical education and home economics, are not required to submit a portfolio because the requirements have not yet been developed for those areas.

program's own rubric is rejected by the department of education, the program should be required to use the standards-based rubric until a sufficient rubric is submitted and approved.

3. The State Department of Education shall examine why disparities exist in support for beginning teachers in school districts within District Reference Group I (as designated by the education department) compared to other school districts throughout the state and report its recommendations for addressing the disparities to the legislature's committee(s) of cognizance by February 1, 2009.
4. The State Department of Education should develop a data collection and evaluation system for accurately monitoring the mentoring component of BEST. As part of the data collection system, the department should require the name(s) not only of the mentor, as is currently expected, but also, when assigned, of mentor team members to be submitted by the district as part of the beginning teacher's staff file within SDE. The data collected should be used to improve the quality and relevance of mentoring required under BEST.
5. The State Department of Education should keep its mentoring monitoring efforts separate from any surveys or documents relating to assessment submitted by the beginning teachers to their mentors and/or to the department.
6. The State Department of Education should create and implement a collection of sequenced support modules based on the state standards contained in the Connecticut Common Core of Teaching, effective teaching methods, and beginning teachers' needs, through which mentors will guide their assigned new teachers. Starting no later than the 2009-2010 school year, the department should require mentors and beginning teachers to use the module system and to submit proof of its completion to their appropriate building-level administrators. Each school district should submit annual statements to the department certifying the progress of its beginning teachers in successfully completing the mentoring requirements.
7. C.G.S. Sec. 10-220a shall be amended to require a reduced classroom teaching workload for BEST mentors as determined by the school district. Those mentors who simultaneously teach part-time must have a substantially lower caseload. The workload reduction shall be structured to coincide with a beginning teacher's daily preparation time. Districts may choose to provide full-time mentors instead of, or in combination with, mentors who have a reduced classroom teaching workload. Districts shall be required not to exceed a caseload of 15 beginning teachers per full-time mentor.
8. The state shall provide funds to districts to reduce their costs of: 1) hiring additional personnel to fill classes for mentors who are currently employed as teachers; and/or 2) the salary or hourly wages for those educators hired solely to be mentors. Mentors who are employed simultaneously in another capacity shall receive their same salary.

9. **C.G.S. Sec. 10-220a shall be amended to allow not only current teachers, but also retired teachers, retired administrators, teachers on leave, and education faculty from the state's various colleges and universities to become mentors.**
10. **The State Department of Education should work collaboratively with local school districts, Regional Educational Service Centers, and other constituencies associated with BEST to identify, recruit, and train an expanded pool of mentors.**
11. **The State Department of Education should standardize the frequency with which beginning teachers and their mentors/mentor teams are required to meet. The standard should take into consideration the frequency necessary to enable mentors and beginning teachers to successfully complete the mentoring module system recommended above.**
12. **C.G.S. Sec. 10-220a shall be amended to require beginning teachers to receive formal mentoring during their first two years in the BEST program upon receipt of their state initial teacher certification.**
13. **The State Department of Education should develop guidelines requiring any potential mentor to first be approved by: 1) his or her current district, for those who are employed, certified teachers; 2) his or her last school district, for those who are retired certified administrators or retired certified teachers; or 3) his or her current supervisor, for those who are employed as university professors specializing in education, or his or her former supervisor, for retired university professors specializing in education.**
14. **The State Department of Education should require the beginning teacher's building-level administrator to assign mentors and, where necessary, mentor team members.**
15. **The State Department of Education should adopt the following mentor training requirements: 1) mentors who received initial or update mentor training up to three years ago must complete an update training; 2) mentors who received initial or update training more than three years ago must complete an initial mentor training; 3) all mentors should be required to complete a mentor update training every third year since their last initial or update training; 4) all mentor trainings, initial or update, should be provided by the State Department of Education in conjunction with the Regional Educational Service Centers, and should be focused on instructing mentors in how to work through the new mentor module system (as recommended above); and 5) anyone who fails to complete these training requirements no longer will be considered eligible for assignment to a beginning teacher, until another initial mentor training is completed.**
16. **C.G.S. Sec. 10-220a shall be amended to require each beginning teacher to be supported by a mentor or mentor team member who has recent experience or expertise in either: 1) the same, precise content area as the beginning teacher, for a new teacher not in elementary education; or 2) the same, precise grade level as the beginning teacher, for a new teacher who teaches elementary education. If such a match is not feasible, the**

beginning teacher shall be supported by a mentor who has recent experience or expertise in: 1) a similar content area, for a new teacher not in elementary education; or 2) a similar grade level, for a new teacher who teaches elementary education.

17. The State Department of Education should offer district facilitators training to enable them to understand and carry out their full scope of BEST duties. The department should work with the Regional Educational Service Centers in developing and offering the training.
18. C.G.S. Sec. 10-145b(l)(1) shall be amended to require administrators acting in an administrative or supervisory capacity at least 50 percent of their assigned time to complete a certain number of hours of training, as determined by the State Department of Education, in new teacher induction during each five-year certification period.
19. The State Department of Education should review the current Common Core of Teaching standards to determine if changes or modifications are necessary. Such review and update of the standards should be completed by July 1, 2009, and every seven years thereafter.
20. The State Department of Education shall conduct a review of possible, practical alternatives to assessing beginning teachers' knowledge and application of the state's teaching standards specified in the Common Core of Teaching. At a minimum, the review shall identify the potential costs and overall logistics associated with transitioning to another assessment model. A report summarizing the department's findings should be submitted to the legislature's committee(s) of cognizance by February 1, 2009.
21. C.G.S. Sec. 10-145f(d) shall be amended to allow teachers to complete the professional knowledge clinical assessment required for state teacher certification purposes no later than their third year of teaching in a public school in Connecticut. The provision whereby teachers, after not fulfilling the requirements of the assessment within the designated time, may petition the department to approve a plan of intervening study and experience shall be eliminated.
22. The State Department of Education should modify the BEST program to provide beginning teachers the option of when to submit their BEST portfolios. Teachers will have a choice to submit the required portfolios either in their first, second, or third years in the BEST program. Teachers will only be permitted to submit one additional portfolio upon not achieving a passing score on their first portfolio.
23. The department of education should continue to make a concerted effort to fully examine portfolio requirements across all content areas with an emphasis on identifying areas of redundancy and streamlining overall requirements. Included in such review for the 2008-09 school year should be a determination whether: 1) elementary education teachers should have a choice between submitting only a literacy- or a numeracy-based portfolio; and 2) the requirement for separate writing and literature lesson plans within

the English language arts portfolio requirements is necessary or if the two components should be combined within the English language arts portfolio requirements.

24. The education department should supply prompt and sufficient notice to all teachers, mentors, administrators, district facilitators, and Regional Educational Service Centers indicating the department's approval for teachers to use DVD technology for the video portion of their portfolios beginning with portfolios submitted in May 2008. The department should also devise ways to ensure beginning teachers in the poorest urban school districts have access to equipment to fulfill their portfolio requirements. At minimum, all teachers should be informed that equipment is available for loan at each Regional Educational Service Center.
25. The State Department of Education should replace the video component of the BEST portfolio assessment with on-site classroom observations, with the state reimbursing school districts for any resulting additional costs.
26. The State Department of Education should implement a revised scoring scale for BEST portfolios based on the final ratings of: "competent" and "not competent."
27. The education department should adopt ways to include feedback language that is as detailed as possible with portfolio results to provide beginning teachers with a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as shown by their portfolios. This includes incorporating the full scoring rubric indicating where on the performance continuum the teacher scored for each performance indicator contained in the rubric as part of the formal portfolio feedback teachers receive. The department also should consider differentiating the feedback provided to teachers who fail the portfolios to include more substantive language indicating teachers' strengths and weaknesses than is currently contained in the scoring rubrics, on which the feedback is based.