



Remarks of Phil Apruzzese  
President  
Connecticut Education Association

Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee  
& Education Committee

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**Connecticut Education  
Association**

**Governance**

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Good afternoon members of the Education Committee and Program Review and Investigations Committee. My name is Phil Apruzzese, I'm a 5<sup>th</sup> grade Wethersfield teacher, I've been a cooperating and mentor teacher, and now serve as President of the Connecticut Education Association. I'm here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

When the Education Enhancement Act was designed in the mid-1980s, CT showed its leadership by modeling how to provide high-quality mentoring and support for beginning teachers as part of their induction into the profession. CEA served as part of an advisory group that supported the BEST program as it was originally designed. But over time, the *support* and *training* components of BEST have eroded, BEST has become synonymous with 'portfolio assessment,' and CT lags behind as a supporter of new teachers.

Teachers have long voiced their opinions to CEA about the need for stronger mentoring and an assessment system that provides useful, specific, immediate feedback to a beginning teacher. We have tried to convey that message to the State Department many times over the past 10 years, but teachers' voices have been ignored. Now the PRC, after conducting a comprehensive review of BEST, has made 27 recommendations for the program, including 12 that focus on mentoring, 9 that focus on assessment of new teachers, 2 that address funding, and 8 that address other structural supports for the program. These are

recommendations that will help to address the major problems we face in inducting and retaining new teachers, and which CEA supports.

We're astounded by the State Department's response to the PRC report....or should I say, lack of response? In the letter from the Commissioner responding to the PRC, the changes they say they'll make in the program pertain only to the portfolio, most are simple, and one is questionable as to whether it helps or hinders new teachers. They've ignored the recommendations about mentoring; alternatives to a portfolio assessment; monitoring and evaluating the BEST program; and the role of administrators and higher education in assessing new teachers. Their concern about funding for BEST focuses solely on whether or not there would be additional funding to implement all of the recommendations, indicating that they're not looking for ways to use the current funding to create changes that would be most beneficial to new teachers. Taking a year to plan what the next steps should be, so that they align with the department's planned revision of the certification regulations, is unnecessary, since the BEST program should be returned to a *support* and *training* program for new teachers, not a state assessment program. Are we advocating for the elimination of an assessment of new teachers? No.

Let me be perfectly clear on this.....CEA has always supported, and continues to support, assessment of new teachers. But we support it being done at the local level, not the state level, by experts in the field. We support clinical and formative assessment that provides specific, immediate feedback that can be integrated into the mentoring process to help new teachers grow.

We agree with the SDE on one point.....we do need to pause, stop what we're doing, reflect on how the BEST program has evolved over time and whether or not it meets the needs of new teachers, study what other states are doing to create mentor programs that work, and then create a new mentoring system that works for us. But we strongly oppose the State Department's request for the agency to be given a full year to work with *their* 'constituents' and the State Board's Policy Committee to define the next steps.

We don't have time to waste. We need to act now, before we lose more new teachers and our achievement gap widens. Our experience is that when the SDE seeks 'teacher' input, they don't work through the teacher and administrator organizations to get that input, but select educators to work with who they are confident share their views. All of the stakeholders need to be part of redesigning BEST, just as we were at the table and active in the original design 20 years ago. The SDE has tightly controlled the BEST program for the last decade, it's fraught with problems, they haven't been interested in hearing what teachers have to say, and now they've "taken a pass" on the recommendations of the PRC and asked for no action to be taken this year. Continuation along this path, while other states forge ahead in retaining new teachers and helping them grow, will continue Connecticut's slide in this area, and is senseless.

CEA is committed to helping bring positive change to BEST. We urge you to provide strong leadership and use the PRC recommendations to put the support and training back into BEST to create an induction program for new teachers that will strengthen mentoring and its impact on student achievement.

