

Testimony for Jennifer Esty

**Joint Public Hearing of
Program Review and Investigations Committee
And Education Committee**

February 27, 2008

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Senator Meyers, Representative Fleischmann and Representative Wasserman, and members of the Education and Program Review and Investigation Committees.

My name is Jennifer Esty. I am the science teacher at the Polly T McCabe Center, which is a public school for pregnant and parenting girls in New Haven. I have been a science teacher in public and private schools for approximately seven and a half years. I am here today to comment on SB 329 and 330 and my experiences in the BEST program, particularly the portfolio.

If the college or university training of educators is included as part of the BEST program, as I believe it generally is, this part of the program can be considered to work well. Southern Connecticut State University, where I earned my Masters degree in Environmental Education, did a fine job of teaching me educational theory and supervising my student teaching. The rest of the BEST program, however, in my case proved to be thoroughly dysfunctional.

I began teaching in public school under a durational shortage certificate in physics, where I was assigned, as a mentor, a wonderful physics teacher who had the classroom next to mine.

However, after teaching physics for a year, I changed schools and began teaching chemistry, under a provisional certificate. In my new position, I was assigned a very talented English teacher as a mentor. Frankly, in my new position, I was fortunate to have any mentor at all, let alone a mentor in my building.

Because it was my second year teaching in public school, I was told that I had to prepare my BEST portfolio, so I did. I followed the directions that I found online for preparing a portfolio and consulted with my mentor, and in spite of recommendations from veteran teachers who suggested that I lie, cheat and "just tell them what they want to hear", I completed my portfolio honestly.

I failed that portfolio assessment about as badly as it is possible to fail.

I knew that as a fairly new teacher, I was not perfect, but I also knew that I was not as bad a teacher as my portfolio score implied. I also believed that my peculiar teaching circumstances partially led to my failure, and because I felt abused by the entire process I contacted my local state representative, who at that time was Chris Donovan, and complained.

Through his kind intervention, I was contacted by a representative of the state department of education who informed me that I was not supposed to have had to write a portfolio in my first year of teaching chemistry because I had been teaching under durational shortage certification the year before. I was told that I would be allowed to submit a brand new portfolio as if I were submitting it for the first time. I felt that it was completely unfair to have to rewrite a portfolio simply because the portfolio process was not equipped to handle applications from teachers in circumstances like mine.

The second time, I was deemed an educator worthy of initial certification. Quite frankly, there wasn't very much difference between the two fifty-page portfolios, and I am still mystified as to how the second scored so very differently from the first.

In summary, I was misguided by my district, misguided by a well meaning mentor who could not successfully guide a mentee so far out of her field, misguided by the education department, and thoroughly abused by the system. I am still disgruntled enough that when I was asked to train as a BEST mentor, I had to tell the person asking that I did not wish to be associated with the program.

The relation of these unfortunate experiences raises the question of why I am here testifying today. I am here today because I believe that the fundamental aim of the program, to effectively train public school teachers, is essential for the well-being of this state, so I am here today to offer constructive criticism.

As I stated earlier, I believe the college or university preparatory part of the BEST program is largely effective. However, the mentoring and assessment (portfolio) parts of the program are highly dysfunctional.

The mentoring and assessment pieces of the program appear to me to be designed for large schools, where departments are comprised of several faculty members, where classes have consistent enrollment, where students' reading, writing, and computational skills are close to grade level, and where students

have a stable home life. My classroom now, and when I was doing my portfolio, meets none of these criteria. I am the entire science department. My classes have constantly fluctuating enrollment because students enter when they are pregnant and leave several weeks after delivery. My students' reading and math skills, measured for every student upon entry to the school, are on average three to five grades below grade level. All of my students' lives are in a state of change because of their pregnancies. As a result, I suspect that I did poorly on the portfolio assessment because it was not designed to measure teacher proficiency in an environment like the one in my school community. Furthermore, effective mentorship in my school's environment, as the mentoring system is currently conducted, is virtually impossible. Proper equipment for filming, a person to do the filming, and film editing equipment were not always available though the district. Computers for the technological part of the portfolio were entirely unavailable, and there were many other unfeasible technological requirements that were impossible for me to fulfill at my school. However, I believe that all experiences, particularly the painful ones, ought to lead to reflection, education, and hopeful changed behaviors in the future, so, here are my recommendations for the improvement of the BEST program.

Restructure the Mentoring and Assessment pieces of the BEST program as follows:

a. Mentors should:

- i. Be assigned in the same subject area and general grade level as their beginning teacher for the three years before the assessment piece (based on a new time table listed below)
- ii. Be assigned from the same school as the beginning teacher, wherever possible. In a case (like my school) where this is not possible, mentors must be given a schedule which allows them to meet with the beginning teacher according to the recommendations in the next bullet.
- iii. Be given a lighter teaching schedule so that they can observe the beginning teacher two to three times per week and meet with the beginning teacher at least once a week for consultation.
- iv. Be compensated, financially, for their extra responsibilities, probably directly through the state. (Because this would not place another burden on already overburdened school districts, and because in their capacity as mentors, the mentors should report to the department of education, rather than to their districts.)

- v. Be monitored for program compliance, in person (not in the form of submitted reports) by representatives from the state department of education.
 - vi. Be recommended by school principals to the school district and the state as exemplary teachers.
 - vii. Have no more than two beginning teachers under their care at once.
- b. Beginning Teachers should:
- i. Be assigned a mentor who teaches in their subject area and at their approximate grade level for the three years before their assessment (based on a new timeline described below)
 - ii. Be given an extra prep period every week during the year they are preparing their portfolio (according the new guidelines listed below)
 - iii. Write the unit, or assemble the unit, they intend to use as the basis of their portfolio.
- c. The Assessment piece of the program should:
- i. Be based on a unit written or assembled by the beginning teacher, which is designed to address an aspect of the state curriculum for their particular subject and grade level.
 - ii. Be composed of the mentor's classroom observations (over the period of the unit being used as the basis of the assessment and being comprised of no less than four observations.)
AND
Be composed of the beginning teacher's observations of the unit as guided by several questions. (Some examples of questions might include: What aspect of the curriculum does this unit address? How did you present the material to your class? Why did you choose to teach the topic in the way you did? How were the students' educational accomplishments assessed? What modifications were made to suit the special needs of your students? How would you improve the unit for next year based on your experience teaching it this year?)
 - iii. Be completed in May of the beginning teacher's third year of teaching under a provisional educator certificate.
 - iv. Be, along with a Masters degree or the equivalent number of credits and the aforementioned three years of teaching under a provisional certificate, all that

is required for professional certification. (The requirements for later continuing education credits would not change.)

- v. Be submitted electronically to save on paper and postage.

I propose a new three year timeline that would go approximately like this:

Year one: The beginning educator teaches with lots of support from a mentor in the same field as the teacher and at a similar grade level.

Year two: The beginning educator teaches and begins to prepare a unit for the portfolio with lots of support from the same mentor as year one.

Year three: The beginning educator teaches the unit and writes some follow-up notes and reflections on the unit. The mentor also writes reflections on his or her classroom observations. These observations are submitted online, through a secure server, and form the new portfolio. The portfolios are scored by a large committee of mentors including some who teach in schools of a similar demographic to those of the teacher being scored. Mentors are handsomely compensated for this summer work.

Year three, four, or five: The teacher completes a Masters degree or the equivalent, and receives Professional Educator certification.

In closing, I would like to thank the Committees for their time, and urgently request that the committee to completely redesign the BEST program, whose goals are noble, but whose implementation leaves much to be desired.

