Remarks of Kathryn Balkan
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
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Good afternoon members of the Education Committee and the Program Review and Investigations Committee. My name is Kathryn Balkan, and I'm a third year teacher in Windham. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program the need for strong mentoring for beginning teachers.

The support I received from teachers and administrators in my school during my first three years of teaching has been invaluable. I learned numerous techniques that work with the population of students I teach. There is nothing more powerful than being inspired, encouraged and guided by colleagues in this profession. Had BEST been my only learning experience as a beginning teacher, I would not be teaching today because I would have lost faith in the profession. It was my colleagues and students who kept me motivated. My school set up a support system separate from BEST for beginning teachers, which was an immense help, and where the majority of my learning occurred. It is my belief that the focus of teaching should be on the students. Mentoring allows beginning teachers to grow as educators, while maximizing their students' learning. I wanted to be able to aid in my students' performance and not to have to worry about additional tasks, like the BEST portfolio I needed to complete. That process did NOT make me a better teacher. Mentoring made me better. In the course of the school year I work early mornings, late into the night, and on weekends. I always try to use all of my time and resources to help my students achieve their individual learning goals. Having to complete the BEST portfolio only added to my stress and took away from the kind of instruction my students deserved and required. Had I been given more time to have a mentor guide my teaching, rather than complete a portfolio (whose focus is not on the students real needs), my students last year would have gained more.

Strong, consistent mentoring could really help the teacher induction process and allow it to be a more pertinent, meaningful and nurturing experience. Beginning teachers should work with a mentor a couple of hours each week in the classroom and with the students. In doing so, beginning teachers would be able to develop stronger organizational skills, classroom management, assessment skills, modeling and scaffolding techniques, and an overall stronger knowledge base in order to be the most effective teacher possible. Not only would the teacher grow, but the students would benefit right then.

Working in an urban district there was a lot of new information that I needed to learn. Although I received a lot of in-class support I would have wished for more in-class support from a mentor, rather than spending the majority of my year completing a portfolio with my mentor.

The BEST portfolio is not the most effective way to measure a teacher's application of the state's teaching standards. In my district, I learned to apply the teaching standards by working with my mentor and through formal observations conducted by my principal. These evaluations encompass about fifteen pages of written lessons, a formal observation, and a post conference. My principal provides instant, useful, and meaningful feedback in a written report. During our post conference together I am able to ask specific questions and gain further feedback. I also participate in valuable in-services twice a month. My principal conducts informal monthly walk-throughs to view our teaching and lesson plans. I meet with the superintendant twice a year to show the data of my students' progress. I am being assessed often and adequately by respected and trained professionals in these evaluations.

Ultimately we want more effective teachers, not more stressed teachers, especially in urban districts that serve students with extraordinary needs. I would like to urge the committee to thoughtfully consider the need for strong mentoring for beginning teachers. The impact that this would have on teachers, students and the profession would be immense and invaluable.

Thank You