

Remarks of Carrie Federico
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
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Good afternoon, members of the Program Review & Investigations Committee and Education Committee. My name is Carrie Federico, and I'm a kindergarten teacher in Groton, CT. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

My first year of teaching, I taught only afternoon kindergarten. I was assigned a mentor who was a kindergarten teacher in my school. I was grateful to have a mentor who was not only experienced but also in the school where I taught. The second year, the year I had to complete the BEST portfolio, I was switched to second grade, yet continued to have the same mentor that had never once in her career taught second grade. I needed to learn the curriculum, face the challenges in an urban district, and work on my portfolio. I knew it would be difficult but I honestly thought I could do it if I worked hard. If I had had a mentor who had experience teaching second grade, I would have had a better chance of succeeding.

I signed up right away for all of the seminars offered by my district and LEARN. I emailed my mentor all the dates of the seminars in advance, yet she could not make it to any of them. So, I went to each one and took careful notes. I worked all year on the portfolio. My mentor said she would look it over when I finished, but she did not know the curriculum or second grade, so she did not think she could be of much help.

I continued to go to the seminars and changed my idea for my portfolio numerous times. The other second grade teachers in my school had never gone through BEST, but I had them look over my ideas to see if I was on the right track with the curriculum. These colleagues did what they could to fill the gap in my mentor's ability to help me. I also had a woman from LEARN look at it and she gave me some constructive criticism, which I gladly took. My mentor wanted to look it over for grammar so I gave it to her. Last, I gave it to my principal who read it and signed off on it.

Then, I found out I failed. At the feedback conference with a portfolio scorer I was told that my portfolio did not follow the format in the handbook. Yet, I know I answered each question presented in the book to the best of my ability. The scorer said they wanted less emotion. The scorer said she "did not care if I love my students, only if I could teach them." It was at this point, that I thought I was in the wrong profession, because I did and do care for my student's emotional, social, and academic growth.

I really enjoy the teaching profession and I am not scared of hard work, so I thought I would give the portfolio another chance during my third year of teaching. At this point, the district switched my grade back to kindergarten and notified the teachers that the school would be closing in December. My portfolio was due in the beginning of February. Again, my mentor was very limited in helping me with planning lessons, reflecting on them for writing the portfolio, and helping me help my children adjust to the big changes they would face. So, I had to pack and move my belongings and classroom materials to a new school, work on my portfolio, and try to have it complete before Christmas break, because I knew after we came back in January it would take the kids a while to adjust. In addition, I did not realize that I would be gaining four new students when I came back to school, because some children with parents in the military had moved to the area. This, coupled with the fact that I was still going to the seminars alone, presented another obstacle.

Doing a portfolio with kids who were so new to kindergarten was difficult. I was not sure how I would present what they were learning when they were just barely writing actual letters of the alphabet. I went to the conferences for teachers who had failed the portfolio and I explained my dilemma. I was told that because my school was closing and I was moving to another school I could have a two week extension. I was also told that there were "unwritten rules" for kindergarten teachers by one of the two women who were giving the seminar.

I was told I could write the children's answers. What I said and what they said had to be "scripted." So, I wrote down everything and did the best I could. I would have felt much more comfortable doing all this had I had a mentor working closely with me. I then had trouble getting the video tape from our Central Office. There was a waiting period to get the VHS recorders, yet BEST requires that you do your lessons in a sequence without skipping a day. Furthermore, I could not have the machine for long because other people needed it. There was no one who had time to tape my lesson once I got the machine. My mentor did not feel comfortable using

the machine and did not want to be responsible if something went wrong, so I had to set it up on a tripod and have my aide, who was supposed to be working with a student, move it every now and again to get all the students in view.

While I was at the seminars, I met a few mentors who offered suggestions to my ideas. I found these suggestions extremely helpful. They had the experience that I did not and could tell me if my expectations were too high, low, or just needed to be adjusted. These teachers filled just one of the many gaps in what should have been a much more supportive mentoring experience. Therefore, I urge that the BEST program be changed so that ...

1. Mentors who actually want to work with new teachers are recruited, trained, and assigned to work with them.
2. Mentors have an amended workload so that they can better assist and beginning teacher during the school day. I know my mentor could/would not help me outside the constraints of the school day, but maybe if she had the opportunity to help during the day she would have been more available.

I now fully understand why many teachers are moving out of this state to find teaching jobs. The stress this portfolio and the requirements place on a beginning teacher are unclear and unreasonable. Without the help of a mentor it is almost impossible to meet the standards. I am currently awaiting the results of my portfolio and I know if I do not pass, I too, will consider looking elsewhere for a teaching position.

