

Remarks of Melissa Gagne-Grosso  
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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 Melissa Gagne-Grosso. I am a high school special education teacher in Waterbury and I'm here to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330, pertaining to the BEST program recommendations, specifically in regards to mentoring in an urban district.

As a beginning special education teacher teaching English in Bridgeport, I was given a mentor mid year for my first year. She was a Special Education English Teacher, but never discussed anything with me about what was needed to begin my portfolio. The beginning of my second year, I came to Waterbury and was given a new mentor. She was a regular education teacher with no experience with the special education portfolio. I did complete my portfolio and handed it in during May of 2005. My mentor said that my portfolio was "Good" and I should have no problems. I failed.

My third year as a teacher I was assigned to teach special education science, working with intellectually disabled students (whose IQs average around 70, and who were functioning on a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade level) and needed to complete the portfolio again. The problem I faced was that the BEST special education portfolio was only to be completed in English or Math, I taught science, so I had to complete a portfolio using science content, but with an English focus. This time, with no mentor, I began the process again. I had met a woman at a meeting for my previous BEST portfolio who was a BEST trainer for portfolio scorers, and she told me if I needed her to assist me, she would help. When I contacted her, her reaction was that my portfolio was "too high" for my students and she did not believe that my students were capable of the type of work I described in the portfolio. She asked me to "dumb down" the work, which I did,

dreading every minute. I handed this portfolio in during January 2006. Again I failed, being told that my portfolio had to focus more on English than on science.

I now needed to complete a third portfolio with no mentor to help me, to be handed in during June of that same year. I was still teaching special education science, so completed a portfolio focusing more strongly on English with science as the discipline. I used language arts objectives directly from their individual education plans (IEPs), but again, with no mentor or support, I failed. In addition, I lost my teaching certificate.

My district special education supervisor and my colleagues were shocked that I had not passed the BEST portfolio and that I lost my certificate. I had excellent evaluations from my supervisor, and the district wanted to keep me in the system. In order to regain my certificate, I had to go through a state-approved 'year of intervening study,' and work as a substitute teacher for a year, which Waterbury had me do in the classroom I had been in all along. During this past summer, I was issued another initial educator certificate, and am once again considered a 'year one' teacher in BEST.

I now have to complete the portfolio process again from the beginning. I will be in my sixth year of teaching. My new mentor is a Regular education Science teacher, also with no experience with a Special education Portfolio. What's wrong with this picture??

I need a mentor in Special Education Science. I need a mentor who understands, and has experience, working with intellectually disabled high school students. My supervisor is pleased with my work, but I know that, as a new teacher, there is still more for me to learn. Being a special education teacher in an urban district is very challenging; in order to grow to be the most effective teacher I can be, I need and want a mentor who can spend time working in my classroom with me on issues that relate to teaching my students, not on compiling a portfolio that doesn't really show what I do in the classroom.

A new teacher in an urban district has to learn so many things that can't be taught in a teacher prep program, and can only be learned on the job. These include the district curriculum; how to do long-term planning for students who have serious disabilities, yet whose needs may change every day; how to work most effectively with the colleagues in your building so your students benefit; how to choose the best

materials for the students from those the district has to offer; how and where to find supplementary materials for a particular population of students; what the culture of the school is like, and how, as a new teacher, to fit into that culture successfully; all of the record-keeping and 'administrative' tasks a teacher has to complete to fulfill district requirements; and understanding the cultural, economic, social, academic, and psychological backgrounds of one's students. These are the things I want a mentor to work on with me. Having a mentor who can come into my classroom on a regular basis, watch me teach, and discuss my lessons with me is what will help me become a better teacher.

The items in Raised bills 329 and 330 that pertain to mentoring are most important to beginning teachers and their students. I urge you to provide strong direction that will create changes in BEST that will make these a reality.

