

Remarks of Annie Irvine  
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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 Annie Irvine. I am a teacher in East Hartford 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.*

I began teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in East Hartford in August of 2006, during Year 2 of the BEST process. It was a turbulent transition, as my prior teaching experiences were limited to suburban districts with small teacher and student populations. Although open to this challenge, I was not prepared for the lack of building-level support regarding new teachers and the completion of their BEST portfolios. Through discussions with other BTs, I learned that my experiences regarding BEST were, by and large, universal to our urban district. One of the most significant deficiencies with the current BEST program is the dearth of meaningful, structured relationships between the mentor and BT. Incompatible prep periods, coverage shortages, and lack of formal, scheduled meeting times all affect the amount of support that a mentor is currently able to provide. Furthermore, the qualitative relationship between BT and mentor has eroded and wandered off from its original intent-to provide substantive support for a beginning teacher through consistent and frequent feedback and discussions about effective teaching strategies. The district and the schools have not established the time or the inclination for these critical networks between new and experienced teachers to develop.

I did what many other teachers did to survive their portfolio without formal, quality mentoring; I sought support from other resources. The East Hartford Education Association was instrumental in providing this. They received a grant from the National Education Association to provide mentoring support for new teachers, and EHEA called

on CEA to help in doing this. We met once weekly and used the materials in the Mentor's Toolbox, developed by teachers through CEA, to guide our portfolio pacing, commentary drafting, videotaping, and editing/revising, among other things. In December, the town of East Hartford also provided another mentor session at the Board of Education, which I attended. These meetings were invaluable to me in terms of developing inquiry-based lesson sequences and planning my time wisely.

I would be remiss not to mention the "informal" mentoring that I received from other teachers within my building that had just recently completed their BEST portfolios. Luckily, these 3 teachers approached me to make sure that I was getting the help I needed with the portfolio, and-more importantly- with teaching in general. We had professional discussions relating to positive behavior supports, as I was struggling with behaviors of the 5 new students that I had received in my classroom throughout the year. These teachers were not compensated for their time, but without their help I feel that I would not have succeeded as well as I did with the portfolio, and more importantly, with my teaching and student learning.

Although East Hartford provides multiple opportunities for new teachers to receive town-wide supports regarding the BEST portfolio, there are many shortcomings with the current mentoring system on its most fundamental level - within the school itself. This is especially having an effect on urban schools, where the "small fish in a big pond" dynamic can too easily overwhelm, isolate, and dishearten new teachers. In fact, East Hartford has lost dozens of these bright, eager teachers during the past 2 years because there is not enough classroom support on a consistent basis to scaffold effective teaching strategies. Additionally, there is a shortage of trained mentors who are aware of the most current and best practices for effective teaching; and even those who are highly trained in these practices are not given ample time to impart their knowledge and wisdom to their BT.

The PRC recommendations would put in place a structured system that would guarantee a specific amount of support time for all new teachers during their first 2 years, regardless of urban or suburban locale. This support would be broader than, but still relate to, its current application to the portfolio process. It would include direct observation of student learning and immediate feedback to the BT regarding his/her

teaching practice. This new mentorship system would also require BTs to reflect upon and proactively adjust their teaching on a more frequent basis, which would ultimately impact student achievement. Lastly, it would keep the most talented and enthusiastic teachers in the places where they are arguably most needed-working with our state's inner city children, Connecticut's rising stars of tomorrow.

