

Remarks of Margo Walerysiak
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
February 27, 2008

Good afternoon members of the Education Committee and the Program Review and Investigations Committee. My name is Margo Walerysiak and I'm a kindergarten teacher in West Hartford. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST Program.

BEST Program aside, my first two years were the most mentally and physically exhausting months I had ever experienced in my entire life. It was literally a shock to my system. My degrees from Connecticut College and Harvard couldn't quite prepare me for the sheer emotional, psychological and physical stress I would encounter at the beginning of a career I had dreamt of since I was a child.

Teaching was my passion. Teaching was what I wanted to do as my life's work. If these thoughts were true, why did I hate nearly every minute of it? I felt like I had been robbed. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I knew it would be demanding, but nothing quite like this.

I worked around the clock. I would be at school by 7 am and stay until 7pm. When I got home I still did more lesson planning. When I went to sleep I dreamt of school. And then I would wake up and do it all over again. Then came the BEST Portfolio seminars and workshops. These severely cut into my precious after- school planning time and conversations with my mentor.

As a brand new, first-year teacher in West Hartford four years ago, I was fortunate enough to be assigned a mentor who is an experienced and well respected kindergarten teacher in my building. She played a critical role in my development as a beginning teacher and still continues to do so to this day in my fourth year of teaching. In this "sink or swim" profession, my mentor was my life preserver through those tough and confusing times. Her insights provided me with hope and the conviction to keep going. They gave me inner strength and the comfort that this was only the beginning of a journey filled with promise. Although it took some time, I now absolutely LOVE the teaching profession.

My life as a beginning teacher would have been dramatically better had the following recommendations for the BEST Program been in effect:

Recommendation 7- Reduce mentor's classroom workload: Although all of the recommendations being set forth are essential to improving the BEST Program, the most important one is reducing the mentor's classroom teaching workload and creating a schedule that coincides with a beginning teacher's prep time. More time would enable mentors to effectively service new teachers. This incentive would certainly attract educators like me who are highly interested in mentoring the next wave of teachers. However, I refuse to support a program that does not take care of its teachers.

With the exception of lunch, my mentor and I didn't share a common prep period. We tried coordinating some times where I would observe her teach and she could come observe me, but it hardly worked out. With a full teaching load, my mentor needed her prep time just as much as I needed mine. With a substitute teacher shortage, it wasn't even possible to have someone come in to cover my mentor's classroom so she could fulfill her mentoring duties.

As a result, my mentor and I would have spontaneous, informal conversations after school to discuss what materials, resources, and strategies I needed to stay afloat in my classroom. I was lucky to have a mentor who did this with me on a regular basis.

However, most of our “informal” discussions would last anywhere between 30-90 minutes and potentially end around 5/5:30 pm. I would then stay at school to implement everything we had just talked about until 6:30/7pm! Had my mentor had the time during the school day to conduct these mentoring sessions with me, I wouldn't have needed to stay at school until 7pm everyday and feel as burnt out as I did.

Recommendation 11 - Standardize the frequency of mentor-beginning teacher meetings: As I had stated in the previous paragraph, my life would have been much easier had there been a common time during the school day where my mentor and I could meet to discuss how to best support my teaching. There are people I know who hardly ever had a chance to talk to their mentor because of schedule conflicts. I guess I was one of the “lucky ones”!

Recommendation 9 - Allow retired teachers/administrators, teachers on leave and college professors serve as mentors: This recommendation would be especially pivotal in schools where there is a shortage of mentors or where an ideal mentor-mentee match is not possible (i.e. same grade level). Even having multiple mentors would help lighten the duty of servicing beginning teachers who need a tremendous amount of support.

Recommendation 15 - Mentors required to complete “update training” every three years: Although my mentor is a highly trained and experienced professional, she admitted that it had been a few years since she had undergone BEST training. From my experience, there is an inherent disconnect between what veteran teachers like my mentor interpret as “effective teaching” and how the BEST Program defines and interprets it. How can it be that the administrator, curriculum specialist, and mentor in my building felt my portfolio was at least worthy of a 3 or 4 score while the state simply deemed it as a 2? When I received my scores in August 2006, I was extremely dismayed by how the scorer remarked that my teaching focused on “students’ weaknesses and errors” and how my reflections described “limited connections between teaching practices and students learning”. I found this feedback to be

nonspecific and superficial. When I submitted my portfolio, I was completely aware of the fact that I would not be able to get it back. I would like to dispute this part of the process. As educators, how were I and my mentor supposed to understand *where* I had faltered in my portfolio if I did not receive *specific* and *thoughtful* feedback? How were we supposed to use this feedback to "evaluate my strengths and weaknesses" and "further professional growth" without my actual portfolio? A mentor "update training" every three years would fulfill this purpose.

In conclusion, the BEST Program is not successfully meeting the needs of beginning teachers and their mentors. It is setting them up for failure. Teachers are no longer staying in the profession for 35 years. They are looking to other careers that afford them more opportunities and support. I strongly urge the committee to consider reducing mentors' workloads so that they can meet with beginning teachers on a more consistent and meaningful basis. Mentors need to have the most up-to-date training. Moreover, retired teachers, administrators as well as teachers on leave should have opportunities to formally support beginning teachers. These changes would truly revolutionize the BEST Program so it may reach its goals

Thank you for your time.