

For the Program Review and Investigations Committee

February 27, 2008

Good afternoon members of the Education Committee and the Program Review Committee. My name is Scott Yeo and this is my third year as a high school social studies teacher in Lebanon, CT. I am here today to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

It has taken me six years of school and tens of thousands of dollars to become a certified teacher in the state of Connecticut. I have passed all of the state's mandates on the Praxis exams for teachers – the highest required scores in the nation today. I have a stack of glowing reviews from first person observations by my evaluator, an administrator at my school. I serve as the faculty advisor of our student council. I coach two sport teams. Two of our schools' most popular clubs – the outdoors club and the ski and snowboard club – have formed under my supervision and my voluntary hours. Serving my school and the greater community has been an endeavor that has brought me great pride. I have passion for this profession. I bring enthusiasm to the classroom. I care about my students and I love my job.

But none of this counts with the BEST program. All that I have worked very hard for is about to be taken away me by a process in which no person has ever stepped foot in my school or my classroom. I submitted an over 90 page portfolio in the precise format required for BEST and along with my failing score I got twelve generic sentences as feedback. I met with a scorer for over an hour and emerged with no idea as to why I had failed or what I needed to do to pass the next time. As you know, there is no way to appeal this. I don't get to see my portfolio or meet with the individual who assigned the score. There is no transparency and no due process.

What exists today under the banner of BEST is the exact opposite of the original format and intent. It was once the teachers' job to do just that – provide quality educational experiences while igniting curiosity, bestowing knowledge and honing skills to serve the students as lifelong learners and constructive members of the community. The BEST program sent people into the classrooms to make sure that all these things were being done. Not only did a series of first person observations provide the assessor with much more of the vital information needed to make an accurate evaluation, but it allowed the teachers to do their important work.

The portfolio process of today is an enormous burden. The extra work required along with the high-stakes involved was enough to make me physically ill during my second year of teaching. I am not alone in this. You have heard the testimony that the portfolio process actually hurts the quality of teaching while it is being done. Given these facts I find it incomprehensible that it exists at all, let alone as an instrument for licensure.

The portfolio program also serves to insulate the State Department from the actual realities of today's classrooms and the challenges faced by today's teachers and students alike. This is what I find most frightening. The idea of assessing a professional educator without actually witnessing his or her teaching first hand is an extremely dangerous concept. It lacks common sense and contradicts essential qualities of true education. For this reason I cannot endorse any recommendations of the Program Review Committee that remain hinged on a portfolio-based assessment for licensing purposes. Furthermore it makes me genuinely concerned about the distance between the State Department of Education and the front lines of our schools. Let us recall that during the hearings in September – a hearing ten years in the making – within a half hour of convening not one representative from the state department was in attendance. If this is any indication of the department's attitude toward listening to the input of actual teachers, the immediate future of this state's public education is in great jeopardy.

The PRC's own findings states that, "Although changes to the BEST portfolio are *necessary*, it is a valid and reliable assessment instrument and should continue as the state's assessment of beginning teachers *until* an effective alternative is deemed valid..." (Section III, my emphasis). Here, the PRC seems to admit that the program needs major changes and will ultimately be replaced, but will continue to wreak havoc in Connecticut's education for the time being. It's like admitting miscarriage of justice, but failing to afford a retrial. It also ignores the evidence that the portfolio is not a valid or reliable assessment instrument (e.g. Failing portfolios that were resubmitted only to receive scores of 2's and 3's, vast discrepancies between opinions of trained scorers who look at the same portfolio, and the overwhelming testimony of the professionals involved). Therefore, I will recommend that both committees give serious consideration to legislation that would allow the teachers that have been forced out of their livelihood by this program a chance to regain their licensure.

As far as the Committee's recommendations regarding the mentoring process I will only comment that while the mentoring process is important, it appears to me that most of the Committee's recommendations operate primarily by placing more requirements and burdens on local schools and their limited resources.

You have been provided, in my opinion, with enough evidence to convince anyone (who is not financially involved in the program), that it is not something the state needs to improve education. It is an embarrassment to the state that will only exasperate the rapidly deteriorating situation in our schools and shortage of desperately needed teachers.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Thank you in advance for the prompt action that you will take with this abomination.