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Connecticut State Department of Education
165 Capitol Avenue (room 301)
Hartford, CT 06106

Dear Board Members:

Recently I have seen my own teachers union, the CEA, make many negative comments about the BEST program. The comments of my colleagues are disappointing. The exchange shouldn't be inflammatory; it should be a conversation taking the whole process into consideration. The spirit of the BEST program is not pejorative. Rather it is designed to encourage and cultivate healthy self examination; helping teachers to grow.

Today I am writing this letter as

- A teacher having completed the BEST program
- A mentor teacher
- And as a BEST scorer.

Ten years ago, I had to pull together my own BEST portfolio. I can sit here and relive all the stressful feelings of that time as if they just happened last year. I agree it is a stressful time in a teacher's life and back then it *seemed* like a lot to expect from a second year teacher. Even after finding out I passed with grade of 2 I was resentful of the process. I was incredulous that "they made me" do so much as a young teacher to prove my merit.

Most of all I HATED to admit that I had actually learned something in the process. I learned the necessity to reflect on my lessons, on my students and on my role in their learning. If someone had asked me ten years ago if the BEST program should be eliminated, I would have eagerly proclaimed "yes" but not for the right reasons- only because of the work it entailed in my young career. On a less aggressive note back then, I would have suggested moving it to year 3.

It wasn't until years later that I could comfortably admit that there is value in the BEST process. The program showed me, a beginning teacher with *much* to learn, the attributes of what makes a good teacher. I knew in my heart I was a good teacher but now, after successfully completing my portfolio, I had the tools to become a great teacher.

I credit my mentor teacher for helping me to succeed on my portfolio. Even though I was resentful of the process at the time, she helped keep me focused and convinced me to ride it out. She knew in the end I would appreciate the work we had put in and that it would

help me to grow. She was right. The process forced me to stretch and take me out of my comfort zone and start thinking outside my little box. It led me to meaningful conversations with experienced teachers about how students learn and what my role was to facilitate that. It forced me to consider my students needs and not just focus on what would be easy for me. It made me work harder than I ever would have worked that year which, in the long run, accelerated my development through the continuum. It made me curious about what I would really be able to do and how I could develop my craft to be an effective and engaging teacher.

A few years later I trained to be a mentor so that I could help beginning teachers through the difficult moments that are unavoidable in any period of growth. It is so important that our beginning teachers get the right support. These new teachers must be matched with experienced colleagues in their content area who care about their success and value the process.

The depth of my understanding comes from these experiences and further training I received as a BEST scorer. Now, as a scorer, I fully grasp the full value of the BEST program in all its worth. Having an inside look at the scoring has provided me a comprehensive view of the mechanics, and all the elements of this evaluation. I feel as though I have solid knowledge of the BEST process from beginning to end: from writing my own portfolio to now scoring others.

Positive opportunities are there for those that wish to improve. Interaction and engagement throughout the preparation of a teacher portfolio will lead to success. Good work is not targeted, nor is unacceptable work dismissed.

There is much taken into consideration in scoring each individual portfolio. Each one is evaluated thoroughly by classroom teachers who have obtained the rigorous training to become a scorer. These are teachers who know the classroom and the challenges that may lie therein. This program does NOT demand extraordinary things from a beginning teacher. They are evaluated on knowing their content, knowing their students and engaging them in their own learning. It is not too much to ask a beginning teacher to reflect on their work and make modifications as necessary for their students to achieve their highest academic potential.

I think unfair judgments have been made on the program from people who do not know the components of the actual scoring process. Before passing any judgment, one needs to have a view of the whole picture. Just like modifications that can be made to any classroom lesson, this program may be in need of a few "tweaks". But adjustments are different from discontinuation. In the process of attending to those changes, we must look at the **data** and not opinion- and certainly not without truly knowing the details of the scoring process. I would urge you to make an informed decision by examining passing portfolios and those that did not pass. In analyzing that data, I am convinced it would be clear to you the significant differences that went into planning, student work, reflection and technique (as seen in the video segments) that separate the passing score and the non-passing score.

Though rigorous, the BEST program keeps good teachers and offers opportunities for all of us to turn weaknesses into strengths. The BEST program has done a lot of good. It holds Connecticut teachers to a high standard and sets an example for other states to follow. That says a lot.

Keep Connecticut's standards high.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at howards33@rsd17.org or call me at 860-345-8541 x207

Sincerely,

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BEST Portfolio Scorer
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Cc: The Honorable Edward Meyer, Co-Chair
Julia B. Wasserman, Co-Chair
Legislative Program Review and Investigation Committee
Dr. Mark K. McQuillan, Commissioner of Education

