

Remarks of Kathie Sochacki
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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 Kathie Sochacki and I am the BEST District Facilitator in Bridgeport. I am here to comment on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program.

In Bridgeport, the largest urban district in Connecticut, solid mentoring is the one component that new teachers cite as being the key to a successful start of their teaching career.

Mentors are assigned by the building administrator within the first two weeks of school. Matches are not always made according to the beginning teacher's grade/content area. This is due to the fact that in Bridgeport we hire approximately 150 new teachers a year and we do not have enough teachers willing to take on the responsibilities of mentoring due to a lack of time in their busy day.

In Bridgeport we do not mentor in Year Two with an assigned mentor. However, because many teachers choose, on their own, to continue the mentor/mentee relationship into Year Two, "unofficial" mentoring takes place.

In Bridgeport, mentors are paid a \$500.00 stipend for Year One for their first mentee and \$100.00 for each additional mentee. Some teachers take on three or four mentees a year. This stipend is only offered in Year One. Each mentor keeps a descriptive log of the activities which take place in the mentoring session. This log is signed by the mentor, mentee, and building principal. It is submitted to the District Facilitator.

In Bridgeport, in Year Two, the Portfolio Year, Bridgeport makes use of a cadre of trained "mentor coaches" on the elementary level. These mentor coaches were trained through CES, our local RESC. These highly trained coaches work with the Year Two teachers on a "per request" basis. That is to say that the Year Two teacher contacts one of the coaches from a list of names provided by the district. Once the coach is contacted, they must try to arrange a time and place to meet after school hours, mostly on week-ends, due to the lack of time in the school day. The coach keeps a detailed log of the work accomplished and is paid a \$29.00/hour stipend for their time. This year Bridgeport has lost two of these coaches "due to a lack of time" to adequately assist the teachers.

In the secondary and content specific areas, support is provided by portfolio scorers who come from districts in the area. These scorers come into Bridgeport and provide after school workshops for the teachers doing a Portfolio in their area. They are paid a stipend also. Attendance at these after school workshops is poor with less than 50% of the teachers attending. The reason for poor attendance is always related to lack of time after school. Many of our teachers tutor after school or have child care issues within their families.

In a busy day filled with teaching and professional development obligations, the mentor does not have the extra time to meet with his/her mentee. Short meetings may be held before school because most often common planning time between mentors and mentees does not coincide. The mentor/mentee sessions are "squeezed in" whenever 15 minutes can be found.

A set time for mentors and mentees to meet should be built into the school day. Mentors should be able to visit and observe in new teachers' classrooms. These observations, and the dialogue which follows, is especially helpful when it occurs outside the less threatening atmosphere of the formal evaluation process conducted by an administrator.

Unlike most other fields in which new hires spend years training and building up to more challenging assignments, first year teachers take on the same duties and responsibilities as those veterans who have taught 20 years or more. It is the rule in an urban that a beginning teacher is left to "sink or swim," hence so many urban teachers leave the district to look for "greener pastures."

To teach effectively takes time, support, and observation. These attributes can be developed and heightened through the mentor/mentee relationship. This relationship gives the new teacher an opportunity to learn from more experienced educators as they move from being a student to having students of their own.

The growth process is lengthy. It takes planning. It takes commitment. The mentors are willing to give of their time. They plan with the intensity of a general. The district needs to make the commitment to providing the time necessary to complete this process.

School districts which provide high levels of support for beginning teachers not only retain more teachers but have better teachers---and students will reap the rewards of a more positive learning environment.

