

Remarks of Suzanne Duesing
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
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Good afternoon, members of the Education Committee and the Program Review and Investigations Committee. My name is Suzanne Duesing and I'm a numeracy coach, that is, a teacher on special assignment in Bridgeport, Connecticut. For the past five years, I have served on a special task force in Bridgeport, specially trained to assist beginning teachers make their tortured way through the BEST portfolio process.

As the result of my personal experience and that of my colleagues, I urge you to support Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330 pertaining to the BEST program and particularly C.G.S. Sec. 10-220a which "shall be amended to require a reduced classroom teaching workload for BEST mentors as determined by the school district...."

The BEST assessment for new teachers is a subject with which I am very familiar. I became a teacher nearly 20 years ago, in the wave of the Education Enhancement Act that was a bold and visionary legislative initiative. Increased teachers' salaries, the Common Core of Learning, standards-based curriculum, the Alternate Route to Certification (ARC) and the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program to support and assess new teachers, were the overarching principles of this powerful educational reform.

After attending ARC in the summer of 1998, its second year, I became an elementary school teacher in Bridgeport. Although this was my third career (including one in graphic design and advertising) and I was over 40 years old with a daughter in college, teaching was the most challenging professional experience I had ever encountered. My first year, I was assigned a mentor who was a special education teacher with six difficult kindergarten students. In contrast, I was responsible for 34 pre-pubescent sixth graders

with a whole lot of issues. My mentor was not very helpful to me and I struggled. My second year, I moved to fifth grade and requested a mentor who had more experience with a regular education classroom. I was fortunate enough to be assigned a mentor with whom I am still friendly today. Although she taught second grade and I taught fifth, my new mentor was far more familiar with my students' and my needs and had more strategies for dealing with the complex issues I faced daily in the classroom. This made a world of difference to me and partly explains why I persevered and kept teaching in an urban setting.

I experienced nine assessments from the State through the BEST Program during my first two years of teaching. This was far more stressful than teaching itself. Two assessors would observe a lesson in my classroom, scripting everything I said. Some time later, I'd find out if I passed or failed, with no feedback at all.....just pass or fail. Teachers hate that! We are taught to reflect and give constant feedback to our students and we expect the same treatment when we are assessed.

Now, nearly 20 years later, we face a number of crises related to teacher retention, specifically in urban settings. New teachers in urban districts face challenges that other beginning teachers do not encounter. Their class sizes are larger by contract. There is often less support from parents for the educational process. Fewer children attend pre-school in the urban centers than in the suburban districts. Urban teachers are confronted daily with students who come to school unprepared and/or unwilling to learn. Sometimes up-to-date teaching materials are a problem and keeping up with technology has consistently been a challenge for urban school districts. As a result of No Child Left Behind, teachers in urban districts are barraged by professional development designed to improve their delivery of instruction. Although this is a "double-edged sword" insofar as teachers do learn a lot about effective pedagogy, they are also out of the classroom attending workshops regularly. This interferes with continuity of instruction. And finally, teacher morale in city schools is often quite low as a result of the aforementioned conditions.

Aside from the innumerable demands placed on second year teachers, the State requires them to create a 60 to 100 page portfolio that demonstrates best teaching practice. At the elementary level, the portfolio includes a video of lessons in reading and math and a series of about 10 lessons. The video segment alone often drives teachers to the brink. Equipment is not available, or fails, and a whole lesson can be lost, creating panic and depression. Teachers are scored from one to four. One fails; two, three and four are passing. Aside from the rubric, there is little feedback to guide new teachers or to help them improve their instructional practice, especially when they fail. The pressure on them is enormous and the role of the mentor is absolutely critical!

As a trained mentor to beginning teachers going through the BEST portfolio process, I truly understand the pressing need for more support for these new teachers. Of necessity, BEST mentors in Bridgeport have been offered portfolio support in the early morning hours before school, in the evening, and on weekends, because there is no time allotted during the regular school day. I believe Bridgeport has voluntarily implemented many of the recommendations offered in these Raised Bills with the goal of retaining more teachers in the district. Despite the fact that beginning teachers in Bridgeport are supported by a cadre of trained BEST mentors who are paid a small stipend by the district for their services, all mentoring must occur apart from the regular school day. Although I am a teacher on special assignment, I am coaching teachers in mathematics and adhere to a demanding schedule that leaves little extra time to work with teachers compiling a portfolio during regular school hours. Ideally, if I had time earmarked for mentoring portfolio candidates during the school day, I could be far more effective and beginning teachers would have the support they need when they need it.

Research has shown that strong, multi-year support for beginning teachers produces a number of positive results including lower costs to school districts due to reduced teacher turnover, and positive gains in student performance which result from more effective teachers. Beginning teachers and mentors will benefit from more time allotted to them during the school day and students will benefit from this collaboration by experiencing more effective teaching strategies.

Another important consideration is the connection between the use of the Common Core of Teaching in teacher preparation programs and as a guide for mentoring a new teacher. One of the PRC recommendations is that the State Department of Education assures that all teacher preparation programs be aligned with the Common Core of Teaching standards. Implementing this suggestion might help provide consistency in what pre-service teachers learn. As a consequence, if those same new teachers are then mentored using the Standards to guide instruction, their transition into the profession could be smoother and they could develop into more effective teachers more quickly. However, this cannot occur without adequate time for mentors and new teachers to work together in the classroom.

Please seriously consider voting in favor of Raised Bills 329 and 330 that would make the long overdue and critically needed changes to the BEST program.

Thank you for your time and consideration.