

1

Remarks of Tara Smock
Fourth Grade Teacher
Norwich Public Schools

Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee & Education Committee
February 27, 2008

Good afternoon, members of the Program Review & Investigations Committee and Education Committee. My name is Tara Smock. I am a fourth grade teacher in Norwich commenting on Raised Bill 329 and Raised Bill 330, pertaining to the BEST program recommendations, *specifically in regards to mentoring in an urban district.*

The BEST portfolio program is in dire need of an overhaul. One area of the program that needs a special look is the concept of mentors.

As a teacher who has completed the BEST program I can testify to the ineffectiveness of the mentor portion of the program. My mentor was a teacher in my building, however she taught a different grade level. My school district required us to meet on a weekly basis and hand in minutes of our meetings, adding the task of typing up minutes to a new teacher's already busy schedule. Since my mentor was not familiar with the curriculum in my grade level we spent much of our time looking at the curriculum to help her get more familiar with what I was to be teaching. This meeting time should have been spent discussing the lessons I had taught and how I could more effectively teach those concepts. My idea of a mentor was someone who would observe my teaching, discuss my reflections and offer their observations, as well as giving suggestions for what to try and what to tweak. Unfortunately, in my case, the first time my mentor observed my teaching was as she ran the video camera to tape my portfolio lessons. While I was offered release time to travel to LEARN to view exemplar portfolios my mentor was not allowed to travel with me. If she had been offered this opportunity it certainly would have given her a better idea of the magnitude of the project that I was to complete. It would have been nice to view a portfolio in my grade level, but this was not available. As far as help with portfolio topics goes my mentor had nothing to offer. While she did comment on the lessons that she taped, she had no suggestions for teaching topics that would be good for portfolio purposes. I do not

believe that her poor mentoring skills were entirely her fault; she was simply another victim of the BEST mentoring system.

As the president of my local association, the Norwich Teachers' League, I see the maladies of the mentoring program through the eyes of our new teachers. As an urban district in need of improvement, according to NCLB, we are under great pressure to improve test scores. In the beginning teachers' first year of teaching a mentor is assigned; finding time to meet with this person is where the trouble comes in. New teachers need to learn curriculum, run after school tutorials, collaborate with their grade level partner and worry about the BEST portfolio all at the same time. New teachers and mentors in Norwich have a difficult time because the chance that your mentor teaches in your building is slim and the chance that your mentor teaches your grade level is even slimmer. Not having a mentor in your building makes meeting with your mentor a hardship; remember, new teachers are teaching after school programs. Not having a mentor in your grade level means that you need to teach curriculum, that you are learning yourself, to your mentor before the actual mentoring can begin.

Another problem with mentors in Norwich is that they are stretched by having to mentor multiple new teachers. There are not enough mentors to go around because there is no incentive to become a mentor. All veteran teachers want to help new teachers succeed, but the demands of being an effective teacher and an effective mentor outweigh the desire to get involved. Another problem that mentors face is having time to visit the classroom of the new teacher and observe their teaching. If a mentor/teacher team share a building, budget constraints leave no paraprofessionals in the building to cover a class so that teams can observe each other. Also, in most cases, common planning time does not exist, so teachers are forced to try to find time before or after school to meet. Since new teachers are tasked with teaching CMT prep courses and after school tutorials, time is at a premium. Lastly, many mentors have not been trained in many years and are not familiar with the requirements of the BEST portfolio. Many mentors have never completed a portfolio themselves, and as such, do not understand the great demands of the process. New teachers are encouraged to attend seminars on the sections of the portfolio; mentors should be required to attend annual seminars to update them on the ever-changing portfolio requirements.

Mentors can be a very effective tool for a new teacher. Teaching is a profession that lends itself to collaboration and sharing of ideas. Effective mentors can greatly impact and improve the BEST portfolio program. Properly trained mentors that share a new teacher's grade level and building would help a new teacher become a better teacher, more so than actually completing a portfolio. As you look at the BEST portfolio program please give great consideration to the area of mentors. Mentors need proper training, release time, and some type of compensation for their efforts in assisting new teachers to improve their teaching. The benefit will not just be for the new teacher, the children of Connecticut will benefit from more effective teaching as well.

