STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities
For the Committee on Education
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Submitted by: James D. McGaughey
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Thank you for this opportunity to offer support for two of the bills on the agenda for today's public hearing: **Raised Bill No. 6666, An Act Concerning Teacher Certification;** and **Raised Bill No. 939, An Act Concerning Educator Certification.** Many of the provisions of these measures are quite technical and beyond the scope of our agency's experience. However, there are several aspects that touch on issues with which we are quite familiar.

Our Office supports the requirement in Section 7 of Bill No. 6666 that would mandate local and regional boards of education to provide behavior analysis services to students on the autism spectrum whose individual education plans identify a need for such services. The bill defines those services in such a way as to require them to be provided by individuals who are credentialed through the Behavior Analyst Certification Board – a non-profit credentialing body that is nationally recognized. In our experience advocating for students with autism spectrum disorders, obtaining competent behavioral analysis is a critically important step in developing successful individualized learning strategies. Unfortunately, we have seen some school systems rely on evaluations developed by staff that is not sufficiently qualified to fully analyze student behaviors. While no legislation can guarantee practitioner competence, the requirements in Section 7 of this bill will help increase the likelihood that the needs of students on the autism spectrum will be understood and addressed.

Our Office also supports the concept embodied in Section 3 of Bill No. 939 (lines 251-259). This section would require all candidates for provisional and initial teacher certification to receive training in how to teach students with diverse learning needs, including students with disabilities. This requirement would take effect in 2014.

So many battles have been fought, and are still being fought over special education that it is sometimes difficult to step back and try to imagine how different things would be if public schools had always understood their mission as educating everyone. The notion of "special" education was first articulated over fifty years ago, when educational services were still largely based in residential institutions. For most of its history, the institution of public education had simply rejected students with disabilities, claiming that they could not learn, or that they represented too much of a burden, or that their presence in school would drag others down. Students who could not cut it in the "mainstream" were simply told to stay home. Beginning in the late 1940s and 1950s, parents increasingly began to question those assertions and practices,

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just as they had begun to question the conventional advice they were given about institutionalizing their children. They did not know what their children's ultimate potential would be, and they could not hope to overcome the legacy of prejudice and ignorance so deeply rooted in the belief systems of educators and administrators in the public schools. But they did know they needed some kind of school options for their children, and they wanted those options to be tied to local school systems. So they banded together and lobbied for legislation that eventually required reluctant public schools to provide "special" education for their children.

We have come a long way since those first special education programs were started. Classrooms for students with disabilities are no longer segregated and located in the basement. Expectations for student achievement have risen, and inclusive approaches are widely recognized as benefitting everyone in the school community. Yet institutional barriers to successful inclusion remain. The two-tract system of teacher education and certification is one of those barriers.

There is little to be gained by perpetuating the myth that only specially trained and certified educators can successfully instruct students with disabilities. This is not to say that there is no role for educators with specific training in assessment, curriculum modification and collaborative problem-solving. Indeed, their presence is critically important. In many progressive schools the role of special educators has evolved from direct classroom instruction to diagnostician and consultant. Section 3 of this bill would recognize this shift and move all of Connecticut's school systems forward in this direction. I urge the Committee to support it.

Thank you for considering these comments. If there are any questions please let me know.