

Dear Mr. Friis,

16 March 2009

I'm writing in regard to the State Department of Education's desire to require certification of part-time faculty at institutions like The Educational Center for the Arts (ECA) in New Haven. I am on the faculty at ECA in the writing department, and I sincerely believe that such a requirement would quite simply spell the end of one of the most successful public arts magnet schools in the country.

First of all, it is critically important to realize that ECA is far exceeding other schools in accomplishments and graduation rates—98% of our seniors go on to college, and many of them go to top-flight schools. When you read the State Department of Education's own draft for improving high school education, ECA perfectly fits, already, the descriptions of what the state would like to see happen in the future in Connecticut. In the draft, again and again, phrases like “more rigorous programs of study” and “authentic education” come up. ECA's program, modeled on the college classroom, where students work with professional practicing artists as apprentices, should be taken as a model for “authentic, rigorous” education. In the writing department, for instance, our students edit and publish a perfect-bound professional-quality journal of their writing that goes out to many high schools in the community. Our writing students are also actively engaged in submitting their work to state-wide and national literary contests. We just recently received word that ECA students received 22 regional awards for the prestigious Scholastic Arts Award (there are only 30 students in our department). Last year, 5 of our students went on to win this award at the national level (where only 22 awards are given nation-wide and there are thousands of applicants)—that's nearly ¼ of the national awards given to one small arts program in Connecticut! Another of our students just won the regional Thornton Wilder award, which is the third year in a row that an ECA student has won this award.

These amazing successes come directly as a result of the mission of the school—to have talented and gifted high school arts students work directly with college-level faculty who are also professional practicing artists. A vast majority of the faculty at ECA hold advanced degrees and teach at area colleges. I have taught a wide-range of courses at Yale University, and I taught full-time for 9 years before reducing my teaching load to concentrate more on my writing career, and I have published numerous articles and short stories in national magazines. My own degree is a 4-year, 60 credit hour M.F.A. with doctoral equivalency—advanced foreign language requirement and oral defense of a creative thesis—from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I have worked hard and invested untold amounts of money on preparing myself in my chosen fields—as a writer and college-level teacher.

ECA pays me by the hour for a limited number of hours each week (10 hrs, which includes 5 class hours), and provides no benefits. If there's a snow day, I don't get paid. If I have to stay home because I am sick, or one of my children is sick, I don't get paid. On average, it takes me 15-20 hrs to plan classes, read and comment on student work, write letters of evaluation, etc., often bringing my hourly wages down to around 20/hr. I,

and all of the part timers at ECA, do this because the school is such a wonderful place to work, the students so excited and talented, the atmosphere so refreshing. For many of us, the job feels a bit like community service. We also do it in addition to our professional careers, which means that weekends and summers are used to pursue our own work.

There is simply no time left in our very busy schedules to get certified, even through the ARC program. To do ARC would be a double-edged financial burden for us. First we would have to pay for the program, and secondly we would have to suspend our professional careers, which for many of us generate a significant percentage of our income—giving up weekends and/or summer. I'm certain that most of the faculty would sadly take on more college-teaching assignments rather than add one more burden to their already full schedules, and the school would be forced to close, or radically change its mission. Another serious concern is that when faculty did leave, the school would be hard pressed to find replacement faculty. In the work force there simply aren't people with advanced degrees, a record of professional success as practicing artists, who also are certified to teach high school. These are two separate career paths, the school would face an ongoing crisis in hiring appropriate faculty.

The State Department of Education argues that we should stop complaining and simply do what every other high school teacher in Connecticut is required to do, but this line of reasoning makes little sense. What makes ECA strong specifically is that we don't look like other high school teachers. I came to ECA with 15 years of college teaching experience and more advanced training in my field of expertise than any average high school teacher. ECA is specifically using a different educational model, and that model is remarkably successful for our more advanced students, who are already doing college-level work and who require the extra challenge to succeed. ECA's philosophy for over 30 years has been to put these advanced students under the tutelage of advanced instructors. The State Department of Education is now trying to upend a model that has had nothing but a strong record of extraordinary success.

I strongly urge you to vote down the requirement for part-time, highly skilled professional artists to become certified by 2014. Other states have found work arounds for the NCLB requirements—NY and Kentucky, I believe, have a simple licensing procedure in place for arts faculty. Even in Connecticut, Voc-tech instructors have special exceptions for these requirements. The push to have us certified is a classic case of educational bureaucracy trying to fix what isn't broken. Plenty is broken in our secondary educational system, and I hope the state and the legislature can focus their attention on far more pressing needs.

Sincerely,

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