Remarks of Michele Ridolfi O'Neill
Education Issues Specialist
Connecticut Education Association

Before the Program Review and Investigation Committee
November 14, 2011

Good afternoon Senator Fonfara and Representative Rowe, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee. I'm Michele O'Neill, an education issues specialist with the Connecticut Education Association. I've attached to my written testimony that of a frustrated guidance counselor whose situation I'd like to summarize, as it supports the need for an educator professional standards board.

Mr. Gonet is an experienced guidance counselor who came to CT from Chicago and applied for a guidance counselor certificate. After several attempts to submit attestation from Chicago Public Schools that he was successfully employed as a counselor there, the State Department of Education (SDE) issued him an interim provisional certificate, valid for one year. He was told he would have to take and pass the Praxis I exams to demonstrate basic competence in reading, writing, and mathematics, or submit a transcript of his 30-year-old ACT exam scores. He learned that legislation was proposed that would waive the competency exams for teachers coming into CT if they held a valid certificate from another state, and had either taught for three years under it, or had a master's degree in the subject in which they were seeking CT certification.

Mr. Gonet asked the SDE if the waiver would apply to him, and was told that guidance counselors didn't fall under the category of 'teachers,' and the wording of the legislation referred to those holding 'teaching certificates.' The SDE's explanation was that CT issues three types of educator certification: teacher, special services, and administrator. Bill 6901, they said, had separate sections that addressed the administrators and teachers, but not special service personnel. We believe this is an arbitrary interpretation of statute. Bill 6901 states that the competency exams may be waived for anyone who holds *"a valid teaching certificate....in the subject area or endorsement area for which such person is seeking certification in Connecticut."*

A 'subject area' would apply to a classroom based teacher. An 'endorsement area' would apply to those who are not traditionally classroom based, such as school guidance counselors, school psychologists, and others. There are several places in which statute defines 'teacher' as "*each certified professional employee below the rank of superintendent employed by a board of education in a position requiring a certificate issued by the State Board of Education.*" If each certified professional employee below the rank of superintendent is classified as a 'teacher,' it follows logically that those professionals hold 'teaching certificates.' This would include classroom based teachers, school guidance counselors, and many other categories of professionals.

Why is this important? It appears that the SDE has made an arbitrary interpretation of statute, which, we believe, occurred because of a lack of experience and knowledge of what a 'teacher' really is. An educator professional standards board composed of practicing educators would have understood the role that special service personnel play as 'teachers,' would not have had the same interpretation as the SDE did in this situation, and Mr. Gonet would have been issued a certificate. A deep understanding of educators' roles, based on experience in the field, would reside in an educator standards board and be used to set standards and make decisions that make sense. It's time we moved in that direction.

Remarks of Daniel J. Gonet
Guidance Counselor / Teacher
Formerly of District 299 - Chicago Public Schools

Before the Program Review and Investigation Committee
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Good afternoon Senator Fonfara and Representative Rowe, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee.

My name is Daniel Gonet and I am a guidance counselor / teacher. I am here today to comment on why I believe an independent educator standards board is needed in Connecticut. I strongly feel that if there was an independent educator standards board in place when I first started my certification process the outcome of my case would have been very different. The board would have been independent of the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) and the majority of the voting members would have been educators. These educators would have knowledge of the crucial role school service personnel play in our schools.

For the past three years, I have attempted to work with the Bureau of Educator Standards and Certification. On numerous occasions, I have been treated rudely and disrespected by the staff. When first applying for Connecticut certification, I submitted the required application and documentation from the official records on file with the Department of Education and Certification in Illinois. The Bureau of Educator Standards and Certification refused to accept the certification from Illinois. A form letter I received stated, in part, that as far as the CSDE was concerned I was incompetent since I did not meet certain Connecticut requirements. I was told that I needed to submit a Statement of Successful Professional Experience signed by the Superintendent of Schools, Mr. Arne Duncan (former CEO, Chicago Public Schools), this was the only form they would accept, and the signature of an official from the Bureau of Payroll Services, who routinely handled this, was not acceptable. An independent educator standards board would have known that the CDE's request was unreasonable.

I sent a second form to the Bureau and followed up with a phone call. A clerk at the Bureau called me a fraud. I called Mr. Duncan's office and asked for their assistance; Mr. Duncan's

administrative assistant contacted the Bureau to verify my employment and she, too, found that the Bureau refused to accept her verification on behalf of Mr. Duncan. After much delay, I was finally issued an interim provisional educator certificate.

In June, 2009 House Bill 6901 was passed granting a waiver for competency exams for educators coming into Connecticut, if the educator held a valid certificate and either taught for three or more years under it, or held a master's degree in the subject.

According to the CT State Department of Education, House Bill 6901 did not offer testing exemption for special service certification since it only covered teachers and administrators. This is erroneous since according the General Statutes of Connecticut, *"The term "teacher" shall include each certified professional employee below the rank of superintendent employed by a board of education for at least ninety days in a position requiring a certificate issued by the State Board of Education."* There are several instances in statute that define 'teacher' in this manner, yet the Bureau of Educator Standards and Certification misinterpreted the law's definition of "teacher." Educators know how statute defines 'teacher,' and would not have had this same interpretation.

I was told that I either had to take a pre-professional skills test or provide my high school ACT scores, taken over 30 years ago. I would think that my education and experience would carry more weight than scores on a test dating back to my teenage years. I hold six certificates, certification in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, was employed by the Department of Defense as a teacher, and am also highly qualified under No Child Left Behind. The Bureau told me none of this had any bearing on being certified in Connecticut. A consultant in the Bureau of Educator Standards and Certification suggested that I apply for a special education certificate since, I also have a MA in special education. Her reasoning was that the assessment requirement does not pertain to special education teachers. I believe an independent standards board would look on experience differently when it comes to setting standards for certification, and would not have made such a recommendation.

When administrators in several Connecticut schools asked why I was not working full time, I was embarrassed to tell them that, according to the CSDE, I was considered incompetent since I did not provide my high school ACT test scores or prove that I can read and write. These same administrators feel as I do, that school service personnel are part of the teaching force in all Connecticut schools, and questioned the decision of the CSDE to deny me a school guidance certificate since a school counselor does fall under the classification of teacher. It is apparent the CSDE does not have the understanding of this matter.

I strongly believe that if an independent educator standards board replaced the current Certification Bureau, situations such as mine would not be problematic, since the members would be composed of practicing educators who would be keenly aware of the role educators in general, and school service personnel in particular, fulfill as teachers in Connecticut Public Schools.