

Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham  
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Before the Education Committee  
On Senate Bill 24, Section 28  
Teacher Certification

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Good afternoon Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee.

My name is Linette Branham, and I'm the Director of Policy and Professional Practice at the Connecticut Education Association. I'm here to comment on Senate Bill 24, Section 28, regarding teacher certification requirements.

Over the last few years we've heard a lot about the achievement of students in high-performing countries, and how we in the United States, or in Connecticut, need to do more so our students will achieve at the same high levels. At an event at Central Connecticut State University on February 7, Governor Malloy remarked that "We need to resolve to become more like some other societies in our appreciation for teachers. We really need to celebrate and appreciate the careers of people who dedicate themselves to raising up our next generation." More than once recently I've been told to "think Finland!" I decided to do just that, and recently picked up Pasi Sahlberg's book, published in 2011, titled *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* It didn't take long to realize that Senate Bill 24 would lead Connecticut in the opposite direction of what led Finland to develop an educational system that results in students being among the highest performers in the world. Many people would say that we can't compare the United States, or even Connecticut, to Finland because of its homogeneous population. However, the factors that Finland focused on to build its education system have nothing to do with cultural or ethnic diversity.

Let's look at the fundamental differences that pertain to teacher certification, evaluation, and professional development:

1. In Finland, all teachers are required to have a master's degree in order to begin teaching. Teacher education is based on and supported by scientific knowledge, and focuses on developing thinking processes and skills needed to conduct educational research. This helps Finnish teachers understand educational research so they are able to keep up with the changes they must make to provide appropriate instruction for their students. Teachers are strongly grounded in the subjects they teach and the pedagogical skills to teach those subjects. National reports in our country have stated over and over again that one critical factor in effective teaching is deep content knowledge. Unfortunately, Senate Bill 24 eliminates the requirement that *all* teachers must have an

- advanced education, and relegates that to an *optional* certificate. It devalues one of the primary factors in effective teaching. This is not a 'Finnish' practice.
2. There are no formal teacher evaluation measures used in Finland; 'evaluation' occurs by teachers and colleagues as they work together in the school day, reflecting on their teaching, and learning from each other. There are no external standardized tests of student progress that are used to determine whether or not a teacher is 'effective.' Finnish educators believe that using external standardized tests leads to narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, and unhealthy competition. CEA is NOT advocating that teacher evaluation be eliminated...we support an *appropriate* evaluation system that leads to professional development to improve teaching and learning. Senate Bill 24, unfortunately, requires that teachers be 'rated' using terms that aren't defined, and that this be used to determine certification and a teacher's ability to teach in any district in the state. There is no research to support such a practice, which, again, is not Finnish in nature.
  3. While teachers in Finland are required by contract to participate in three days of professional development each year, professional growth is truly embedded into their daily work. Teachers in Finland have time for curriculum development and planning, designing assessments that measure their students' progress, and other school improvement projects. By working together and reflecting on their teaching, practice improves. Teachers in Finland are given a high degree of autonomy to do their jobs, and exemplify the concept of a 'professional learning community.' Senate Bill 24, on the other hand, stipulates that school districts 'may' make professional development available with "the advice and assistance of teachers." The implication is that the local district leaders know best what will meet teachers' professional growth needs. This goes directly against research findings that one of the most important factors in designing effective professional development is teacher involvement in critical areas of decision-making.

Overall, Senate Bill 24 doesn't come close to modeling professional practice in Finland. It doesn't "celebrate and appreciate the careers of people who dedicate themselves to raising up our next generation." Instead of promoting collaboration and trust, it devalues professionalism and promotes a culture of mistrust. If we ever hope for our students to be in the same league of performers as Finnish students, we need to reject these provisions in Senate Bill 24 and work together to create a system for professional practice modeled after that in Finland.

As Pasi Sahlberg put it " All of the factors that are behind the Finnish success seem to be the opposite of what is taking place in the United States and much of the rest of the world, where competition, test-based accountability, standardization, and privatization seem to dominate."<sup>1</sup>

Sahlberg, Pasi. *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press, New York, N.Y., 2011. p. 11.