

*Remarks of
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Before the Education Committee
On Senate Bill 24, Section 28

February 21, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischman, and members of the Education Committee:

My name is David Olio, and I'm an English teacher in South Windsor. I am here today to voice my comments on Senate Bill 24, Section 28. I am vehemently opposed to the proposal that would eliminate the current regulation requiring a master's degree in order to maintain one's certification after the initial educator certificate.

I speak not on behalf of my English teacher colleagues but as one who shares with them a passionate voice for learning. I consider myself a practitioner in a profession, not a cog in a machine, which would value the performance of its parts—the end result—to the exclusion of the quality of an individual mind—the quality of instruction—and the quality of learning.

As an English teacher, I can speak directly to the value of thinking deeply and clearly through reading and writing. I immerse my students in text-rich experiences, contextualized in larger ideas, underscored by skills, to foster thought: to foster analysis; to foster synthesis; to foster creation; to foster students' confidence in their abilities to think, the stakes could not be higher, as these young people will soon be sitting in our seats, as democratic citizens, arguing for the public good...or will they? I will return to this question.

I would like to focus us on the following: in order for one to craft lessons over the course of an entire year, guiding 130 or more students in that journey, one needs not only preparation and experience but also deep education in his or her discipline. To accomplish all this, one needs to be a learner, and having a master's degree has allowed me space to grow and learn.

Initially, teachers struggle to learn the craft. Given nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years, according to National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, we know teaching is a complex, dynamic process that requires support; however, to be an excellent teacher, one must draw from many sources, especially one's reflective capacity to learn. As one proceeds as a professional, then, one improves. One learns. One applies. To deemphasize learning in one's discipline is to decrease the chances more teachers will remain and thrive after the five-year precipice. Instead, the master's degree fosters life-long learning in one's discipline.

I have learned my content over the years and applied that knowledge to create engaging learning environments for my students, as a result of my master's degree. For example, this month, we began a unit of study in my Advanced Placement/Early College Experience Literature class on the African American novel. In preparing to teach this unit, I have drawn on all of the following, which are a direct result of my master's degree at Trinity College: Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple stories; Jacques Derrida and deconstruction theory; W.E.B. De Bois and "The Souls of Black Folk," Stanley Fish and linguistic confidence, Mississippi John Hurt's lyrics, and Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, which has launched the famous line that ends his novel, "who knows, but on the lower frequency I speak for you." The unit offers a compelling look into the nature of literacy, the power of language, and a part of

our history where men and women used language to speak about the American experience—to give voice to it. And I can offer this experience because I am expert, in large part as a result of my master's degree. At Trinity College, in the rare book room in the basement, my ninety-five page thesis sits for anyone to read—I challenge anyone to read that paper and claim I'm not a better teacher because of it.

According to Anders Errikson, a professor of psychology at Florida State University, “expertise can refer to the mechanisms underlying the superior achievement of an expert, i.e. ‘one who has acquired special skill in or knowledge of a particular subject through professional training and practical experience’ (Webster's dictionary, 1976, p. 800). The term expert is used to describe highly experienced professionals such as medical doctors, accountants, teachers and scientists, but has been expanded to include any individual who attained their superior performance by instruction and extended practice: highly skilled performers in the arts, such as music, painting and writing, sports, such as swimming, running and golf and games, such as bridge and chess.” The key words here are “professional training and practical experience.” Yoking deep learning with classroom practice produces effective craft.

Let's face it, this is an issue about economics, not education. There's a growing popular belief in restructuring teacher pay, as “education economists believe this idea can't be ignored forever, because teacher pay is the biggest part of education budgets and the salary schedule drives that spending,” according to the HuffPost's Education newsletter article of February 20, 2012. There is a specious if not anti-intellectual attitude that says that we should not reward additional education. To quote Nancy Flanagan in *Education Week*, who summarizes the issue succinctly: this policy “encapsulates our national ambivalence about the value of education, doesn't it? It's no wonder that we're always looking for cheap, short-cut answers to the persistent, looming question of how to better educate kids in poverty. If only we could do it without those annoying and expensive teachers, schools and resources...” I dare say even our Education Secretary Arne Duncan, in recent speeches, has bolstered this pernicious thinking with his assertions that master's degrees do not produce more effective learning. He fails to mention he does not hold a master's degree—in anything.

For sure, we should be pushing our masters programs in education toward more critical skills and ideas; but, to lump master's degrees in the disciplines with those of the educational programs is to miss the mark. Do not let folks argue successfully that a master's degree does not influence student performance. There is no research that proves this. No research disaggregates the data between discipline-based and education-based programs. We need more research on this. We need to learn. And that's what I hope this committee does—learns that education is “Best-Practice.”

After all, you are gathered here to improve education. One would be hard pressed to argue that less education would produce more educated teachers. So, I ask: “Will we create policy that fosters high-test scores or deep learning?” Will we “produce” wickets for industry or will we inspire participants in our democratic society. Will we support an educational institution that honors individuals' voices as learners? Will those people sit here in the future and value an education?

Thank you~

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