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Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham
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Before the Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement
On Senate Bill 382, An Act Concerning Teacher Certification
&
On Senate Bill 384, An Act Concerning Teacher Preparation

March 13, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Bye and Representative Willis, and members of the Committee.

My name is Linette Branham, I'm the Director of Policy and Professional Practice for the Connecticut Education Association, and I'd like to comment on Senate Bill 382 regarding elementary certification for teachers and Senate Bill 384 regarding teacher preparation.

Without knowing the history and rationale for the proposed bill, it's difficult to grasp exactly what the goal of the bill is. We know that it would do two things: (1) eliminate kindergarten from the current elementary certificate, and (2) include kindergarten as a grade in the comprehensive special education certificate. My assumption is that the proposal's focus is on assuring that kindergarten teachers are better prepared to teach special education students. If that assumption is correct, then in order to teach kindergarten under this bill, a teacher would have to hold an early childhood certificate, which is based on a preparation program that prepares the teacher to teach in either a regular or special education classroom at the primary level.

That, in itself, is a laudable goal.....if special education needs of students are identified and addressed in the classroom at an earlier age, by teachers who are well prepared to do so, students benefit greatly. However, the bill has a major impact that may well not have been anticipated by those drafting the language.

The bill states that, beginning this July 1, all elementary endorsements will be valid for teaching grades one through six. If passed, this legislation would, essentially, eliminate the validity of teaching kindergarten that is now part of the elementary certificate. It would prevent the thousands of teachers who currently hold a K-6 certificate from being eligible to teach kindergarten in the fall of 2012. Connecticut had this problem occur previously, when kindergarten was removed from the elementary certificate and superintendents had to search for teachers who held the early childhood certificate to fill those positions. The result was a year of anxiety until kindergarten was restored to the certificate through the legislative process. While this is probably not the intention of Senate Bill 382, this could easily happen.

Another potential problem lies in the area of teacher preparation. Eliminating kindergarten from the elementary certificate doesn't give higher education institutions the time they need to either design and seek approval for a program to certify early childhood educators, or expand their current programs to handle what may be the increased number of students who would apply to the programs so they could earn the early childhood certificate. Again, Connecticut could be left with a

period of at least a few years when we don't have enough qualified teachers to teach in one of the most important grade levels.

There are two sections of Senate Bill 384 CEA supports and urges you to pursue. The first is that students be required to have student teaching experiences beginning in their first year of the teacher preparation program. Students are currently required by most, if not all university programs, to have field experiences prior to student teaching, but the nature of these can vary from one university's preparation program to another. We encourage a requirement for universities to have a more common approach to what constitutes either 'field experiences' or 'early student teaching' so there is more consistency in what students in different programs receive.

CEA also supports the practice of teacher preparation programs providing information about subject and geographic teaching shortage areas to students. However, by the time students are in the preparation program, most of them have already completed the subject area course requirements for their degree, and the subject may not be one of those that is a subject area shortage. Where teachers are needed – as it pertains to both subject area and geographic area – needs to reach the hands of our students while they are in high school, and then continue to be reinforced when they first enter college. While we're not looking to create more requirements for high school guidance counselors to fill, we would encourage you to create more incentives that would move universities and school districts to work even more closely together to inform students of the need for teachers.

With this in mind, we encourage you to withhold support for both Senate bill 382 and 384 until other possible ways to achieve the goals of these

bills are explored. Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective with you.