

Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham, Retired teacher
and retired CEA Director of Professional Practice, Policy, & Research
To the
Joint Committee on Education
Regarding
Raised Bill SB183
An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the Department of Education

My name is Dr. Linette Branham, and I'm a retired public school educator. I served in CT public schools for 20 years, and worked for the Connecticut Education Association for 18 1/2 years as both an Education Issues Specialist and as the Director of Professional Practice, Policy, and Research before my retirement in September 2015.

In 2008, the Education Committee voted overwhelmingly to sunset the Beginning Educator Support and Training program (BEST) because as it was administered by the State Department of Education, it had lost its focus of support and training. It had become a high-stakes testing program that was inconsistently implemented and often unfair to beginning teachers. As an Education Issues Specialist at CEA at the time, I was heavily involved in researching alternative approaches to mentoring, training, and supporting new teachers, and advocating for a more collaborative, consistent approach.

A task force consisting of educators from various organizations worked collaboratively throughout the 2008-09 year to lay the framework for a new mentoring program, then left a smaller group to design the details of what became the TEAM program. I served as part of that TEAM design group, and offer the following for the Education Committee to consider regarding the recommendations in SB183.

First, the underlying philosophy of the TEAM Task Force and subsequent design team was that CT couldn't afford *not* to provide adequate funding to support the TEAM program, as we had seen what had happened with the BEST program as its funding was cut over time. A strong mentor program would help to retain new teachers, as research has shown that lack of support is one of the primary reasons new teachers leave the profession. A strong mentor program would require highly trained mentors, training for new teachers, training for reflection paper reviewers, and support for district facilitators and district TEAM committees. The legislature agreed. It was also clearly recognized by the legislature that, without high-quality training, the program couldn't be administered consistently across districts, which could lead to

a system that was as unjust as BEST had become. Support for TEAM came through the design and establishment of the TEAM web site and the TEAM database, which were both critical to a smooth state-wide program implementation. All of this required funding, which the legislature recognized and appropriated. As a result of the extensive support and training provided by the state for TEAM, the TEAM program became very successful quickly, and has been nationally recognized as one of the top mentor programs in the country.

SB183 proposed to eliminate the TEAM database, which has been an integral part of the program since its inception. This database is used by districts, mentors, and beginning teachers to track and monitor program implementation. It contains a wealth of information mentors, beginning teachers, and district facilitators need and use throughout the program. Resources are updated and easily accessible to everyone at the same time. Verification of successful completion of the TEAM modules is done from the superintendent's office to the SDE with the click of a button. Registration for TEAM training is posted and accessible on this site. The sophistication, yet ease of use, of the database facilitates smooth implementation of TEAM across districts. If the TEAM database is eliminated, as the SDE proposes in SB183, how will these tasks be completed in as smooth and consistent a manner across districts? This is one strong example in which the use of technology has helped to reduce paperwork and save time for those involved. Because TEAM is a state program, under the direction of the SDE, the use of this database should continue to be required, and paid for through the SDE budget.

Second, TEAM was designed to provide consistency in implementing the program across districts, with program standards and requirements that were the same from one district to the next. This is why mentor training was required for any teacher wishing to serve as a mentor. This is why district TEAM committees were required to follow the same procedures in implementing the program in their districts. This is why the content of the TEAM modules and the criteria for TEAM reflection papers written by beginning teachers were the same for all beginning teachers across disciplines. This is why a consistent successful completion standard enabled superintendents from different districts to recommend that new teachers move to the next level of certification.

SB183 would decimate the core quality standards of TEAM by eliminating the required reflection paper as the culminating activity in the TEAM program modules. The reflection paper has been a critical piece of the modules in two aspects: first, it guides the new teacher as s/he

synthesizes all that has been experienced through the module; this is where the new teacher's learning comes full circle, and where the new teacher learns and refines how to think about his or her own teaching and how to improve. *This is the essence of teacher growth.* Second, it has served as the standard that *all* teachers must reach in order to successfully complete the module and full TEAM program. Since all new teachers have had to complete reflection papers, the standard for completion of the program has been consistent across districts. The current language in the TEAM statute (and in SB183 lines 704-707) states that beginning teachers shall *"submit a reflection paper or project....that summarizes, describes, or analyzes what has been learned by the beginning teacher and their students..."* Since its inception, all beginning teachers have completed reflection papers, not 'projects.' The original TEAM design group did not create criteria for 'projects' to be used within TEAM because there were simply too many things that could fall under that category, making it more difficult to create and maintain a uniform standard for beginning teachers to meet. We also believed that writing is based on solid, critical thinking, and in order to grow as a teacher, demonstrating that thinking and growth through clear writing was essential. Eliminating the required reflection paper altogether, as SB183 proposes, would decrease support for teacher growth and eliminate a consistent high standard for all new teachers to meet.

Under SB183, it appears that superintendents would no longer recommend teachers for the provisional level of certification upon successful completion of TEAM. This raises two questions: What will the 'successful' completion of TEAM look like? If the superintendent doesn't attest to this completion, how will a new teacher be recommended for the next level of certification? How will districts be assured that new teachers who hold the same level of certification have met the same quality standards their students deserve?

Third, *all* educators agreed, right from the beginning work of the Task Force, that teacher evaluation on the district level and completion of the TEAM program had to be separate and distinct. Teacher evaluation is a process used, in part, to make employment decisions, especially with new teachers. TEAM was designed to provide support, and upon successful program completion, lead to the next level of certification. To blur the lines between the two processes - and especially to draw TEAM into the evaluation arena - would decrease the ability of the mentor to establish a trusting, supportive relationship with a new teacher. This, in turn, would diminish new teacher growth and could easily lead to new teachers leaving a district and possibly the profession much sooner.

TEAM has been a highly successful, nationally recognized mentoring program. A high-quality TEAM program, which is the most successful program CT has had, requires adequate state funding and a high degree of structure created collaboratively, with checks and balances for all involved. The RESCs have been an integral part of creating and maintaining the TEAM program since its inception, due in large part to their close relationships with the districts they serve, and the successful continuation of TEAM should continue to be based on strong RESC-SDE collaboration to support beginning teachers, mentors, district facilitators, and districts. SB183 eliminates the core of the program, dismantles the structure, and weakens the checks and balances. Our beginning teachers deserve the support TEAM has provided over the past several years so they can continue to be the teachers our students deserve. I urge you to oppose SB183 and instead, work to strengthen the TEAM program and advocate for its funding. Thank you.