

Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham
Education Issues Specialist
Connecticut Education Association

Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education
Concerning the proposed changes to certification

April 29, 2010

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Linette Branham. I currently work as an Education Issues Specialist at the CT Education Association. I'm a former classroom teacher, school-based curriculum specialist, and school administrator. I hold a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in curriculum and instruction, with my doctoral research focusing on what's known as 'transfer of learning,' which, in this case, applies to how teachers transfer their own learning into the classroom. This concept is one part of the foundation for all learning. My testimony will, I hope, help clarify why the proposed preparation programs for special education teachers and literacy specialists are inappropriate.

Transfer of learning is defined as the ability to use what you learn in one context to other contexts. For example, if you learn how to drive by first driving a stick shift car, can you transfer your ability to drive by also driving an automatic, or a truck, or a motorcycle? Transfer involves several key principles:

1. You need initial learning for transfer to take place, all learning is based on previous learning, and learning with understanding is more complex than memorizing facts or procedures;
2. Transfer involves integrating information; the more complex the information, the more time it takes to integrate it;
3. Transfer is an active, dynamic process;

4. Transfer is affected by the context in which the original learning took place; and
5. Transfer is hindered by trying to cover too much in a learning experience at one time.

For teachers, transfer of learning results in performing at a certain level in the classroom. For new teachers, this requires a tremendous amount of study and practice to reach a basic level, because there are thousands of facts and processes a new teacher must learn and connect.

Transfer is more challenging because students themselves are different every day; what worked one day in the classroom may not work the next day. Experienced teachers become more efficient at transferring learning because they're more aware of how they learn, how to help themselves learn, and how to adjust to the ever-changing classroom context.

Because transfer of learning for teachers involves making changes in how they do things in the classroom, another complex concept interacts with transfer, and affects whether or not it is successful. That concept is called 'levels of use,' and refers to how proficient a teacher is at using something relatively new in the classroom, or changing something s/he has been using. Initial use of something new takes time, and is very mechanical. The teacher may have to 'unlearn' the old way, and implement the new way, of doing something. It easily takes an experienced teacher 15-20 attempts at using something new before s/he begins to feel comfortable doing so. Introducing something new into the classroom involves using thousands of pieces of information, and integrating that with the teacher's repertoire of teaching methods and knowledge of students. To make it more complex, while the teacher is implementing these changes, s/he has to monitor how every student in the class responds. For the teacher, this process is a continuous complex cycle of information integration, trying something in the

classroom, monitoring its impact on students, analyzing that impact, making further changes so the teacher can be more effective, and so on. Considering that students change every day, and what worked one day in the classroom won't necessarily work the next day, or what worked with one group of students won't work with another, it's understandable that transfer of learning is difficult, at best.

For the experienced teacher, this is exciting, unless the teacher is expected to change too much, too soon, or too frequently. Then it becomes a dizzying disarray. For a new teacher, the processes, even at the most basic level, are mindboggling. The student teaching experience is designed to emulate the 'real' classroom, and help the transfer of learning take place. In reality, it does that at a minimum. Either way, two of the basic principles of transfer of learning are essential to remember: transfer takes more time when the learning is complex, and the process is hindered when there is too much information to be learned in the learning experience.

How does this tie to the proposed special education and literacy specialist certificates? The proposed preparation programs for those certificates include too many areas of study and experience, some of which are highly complex. Special education includes 13 areas for a 30-credit program, and literacy specialist includes 9 areas for a 30-credit program. In each of those programs, at least 6 credits are 'reserved' for clinical practice. With the complexity of the areas of study for the proposed certificates, the teacher can't possibly be expected to learn and integrate the information and begin to make a successful transfer of that learning within the clinical practice experience. If the proposal is adopted as planned, the result will be underprepared teachers and inadequate service to students. The only way to assure successful

transfer is to decrease the number of areas of study and restructure how the prospective teacher will acquire the knowledge and begin to transfer it for classroom use. This, in essence, is what teachers have been saying will work, and we stand ready to work with the SDE to make this happen.