

Remarks of Stephanie Gabriel

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Before the State Dept. of Education and the State Board of Education concerning
proposed changes to certification in Special Education

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Good afternoon. My name is Stephanie Gabriel and I am a veteran teacher of
twenty years in the field of special education at Fitch Middle School in Groton, CT.

Beth Horler, our GEA President has brought to our attention a proposal from the
SDE that requires special education teachers to have a master's degree in special
education and from what I can ascertain will NOT grandfather those of us who
made other choices for our master's degree.

I am wondering, what is driving this proposal and how many teachers will this
affect in the state?

Is it No Child Left Behind and CMT scores? If that is the case, I am wondering if
the word disabled means anything any more. These children are being held to
the exact same standard (except for approximately 1% of those allowed another
option) as their non-disabled peers.

If your concern is why these children who receive special education are not

functioning better, it is because they have disabilities.

To further underscore my point, I would like for those of you who wear glasses to take them off. Now read this letter or look clear across the room. Is it difficult? Well, just try harder! You can do it!! Others around you are able to see or read without glasses.

And if you can't read without your glasses, perhaps there is something wrong with your optometrist? Or with your teacher?

Of course your difficulty is not due to either of their efforts, knowledge or experience. That would be an absurd assumption. You have a mild visual impairment. Only in your case, you are fortunate enough to have any easy "fix" so you can pass your eye exam. You can wear glasses.

Would a master's degree in special education have helped you to pass your exam? No, a proper accommodation or modification helped.

But for students that are autistic, intellectually impaired, mentally ill or have a variety of other barriers that are not so easily remedied, it is not only difficult, not only impossible, but I would venture to say it is criminal to hold them to the same standard as those that are not disabled or have difficulty passing the Connecticut

Mastery Tests.

A few years ago, I once had a student enter my classroom who was from China. She had been in the United States for nine days, did not speak English and had to sit and take the CMT exam. Welcome to America. She cried for days. And I couldn't console her because I didn't speak Chinese! And she wasn't disabled, but the ridiculousness of NCLB is expounded upon in a manner that most (special educators or not) can understand. This lovely Chinese girl was NOT in special education either, but an example of the narrow mindedness of looking at one measure to determine students' achievement.

Most students want to learn. Most try their best. In my twenty years of teaching, I have witnessed systems failing children far more than I have seen children failing systems. The examples above are a testament to this fact. I could write a book, but perhaps by the end of this testimony you might believe me!

I am also a mother of two children who received special education services their entire academic career. I became a special education teacher because of my small piece of personal reality that allowed me true compassion for the student, the teachers, the parent and the system in which they are confined.

I know how parents felt to have children who struggled in school who had their

wings broken. I saw the devastation in my children's self-esteem and confidence due to their experience in public schools that hyper-focused on their weaknesses, while ultimately ignoring their strengths. Their gifts and talents were not measured on any state test.

My daughter had a full scale of 120 in first grade. She is a poet, an artist, a gourmet chef and a creative consultant, none of which were measured on any state test. Is she brilliant? Of course. But the CMT test does not measure those intelligences outside of the linguistic modality. It does not take into consideration those that can play an instrument, draw, and paint, sing, write poetry, dance or are athletes. It does not measure interpersonal skills or intrapersonal skills. And if it did, a whole other section of our population would suddenly be deemed deficient or lacking or disabled. How many of you could create a watercolor of a landscape, or an oil portrait? Would you have ended up in a special education class? Be honest. And no matter how hard you tried, if you were tone deaf, would a bachelor's degree or a master's degree in special ed. have made a difference?

To me, to be a special education teacher is a calling. It is not just a profession.

The burn out rate for us is about five years. Many have entered the field, many

left shortly after. Knowing the requirements are different for a special ed. teacher might deter even those who initially feel the calling. I am fortunate. I have found my niche. I love my work. I am a dedicated teacher and passionate about working with students with disabilities.

While earning my undergraduate degree, or Provisional Certification in special education, I chose to minor in psychology. I graduated Magna Cum Laude. I then chose a Holistic Counseling master's degree because I knew it would serve both my students and me, perhaps parents who have students with disabilities, and teachers who educate students that are disabled or who learn differently.

Few of these students attend school or graduate unscathed from their experience of being told they are less than or failures for some, up to twelve years. They have many emotional underpinnings that result from the identification. No child says to itself, "Yippee! I have made it! I am in special education!"

The communication or counseling skills that I studied for my master's degree that was 56 credits with a 300-hour internship (as opposed to a 30 credit master's degree) has served me well. As a case manager, I communicate with a myriad of professionals from other teachers, speech pathologists, psychologists, guidance counselors, administrators, and other teachers within academia.

I also communicate with parents, private counselors, DCF representatives, doctors, physical therapists and occupational therapists. But mostly, I communicate with children daily--many who have low self-esteem or a distorted self concept and I believe it is due to the standards they are held to in school and are graded upon. They are not graded on their CMT scores. If they are gifted in one of the more right brained activities, say art, it might be the most enjoyable part of their day for their educational experience. To look at only one measure and decide that this is indicative of student progress, I believe, is erroneous.

The skills that I acquired in my counseling program, I believe, make me a better teacher. I am emotionally present for my students and while I attempt to encourage and support them in reaching their full potential, even though it may never be measured or validated on a standardized state achievement test, I also attempt to instill in them their sense of worth and value as a human being. I encourage them to look deeper into their being and know that they too will find their niche in our communities and become worthwhile contributors to our society. Above all, I tell them that what matters the most is that you are a nice and kind person. It doesn't matter how high you achieve on the CMT test; if you

are not nice, no one is going to want to hire you, marry you or become your friend.

And because many of the students that are identified as having disabilities are also not gifted in the linguistic modality, I decided to attend another university where I could learn folktales from all over the world that taught values and character. I received a sixth year in Library Sciences, which focused on storytelling. Particularly because my students might have trouble reading, I could tell them stories that were meaningful and powerful. And now I AM BEING TOLD THAT I AM NOT AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE A MASTERS DEGREE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION? What? Are you serious?

After the 13 courses in special education with my minor in psychology, a counseling degree, and a sixth year, the state determined that yet again, another set of evaluations were deemed necessary. I had to pass the Content Exam, which measured math, reading and writing ability. I had to pass the Content Exam, which focused on my field of expertise entirely. Then I received an initial certification and had to be assessed by the state on six different occasions and also by my supervisor for three other observations in my first year of teaching.

After three years of successful teaching and receiving tenure, I received my Initial Certificate in Special Education. I then had 10 years to complete a master's degree or 30 credits in a "Planned Program." I was a single mother of two children. With one in elementary and another in middle school, I was teaching full time and returned college for another five years.

In 2006, after over 15 years of teaching, it was deemed that special educators would have to go through further evaluations. We were assessed in the areas of Language Arts, Social Studies and Math through the High Objective Uniform State Standard of Evaluation. I passed those evaluations.

Now, I have 20 years in the field of special education, with experience working with a gamut of kids with physical disabilities like diabetes, arthritis, cerebral palsy, hemiplegic, and HIV to learning disabilities, ADHD, Bi-Polar Disorder, Borderline Personality, Opposition Defiance Disorder, Reattachment Disorder, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Intellectual Deficiency, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment or Legal Blindness, and Down's Syndrome just to name a few off the top of head, and now I am told that I need a master's degree in the field of special education. What is it that I am to learn or....just what is it exactly that I am now lacking? I ask again, what is driving this proposal?

There is mass retirement of the baby boomers at the moment. Surely, telling those who are inspired enough to want to become a special educator, that they alone must have a master's degree before they can begin teaching will not attract more teachers. Not to mention the financial difficulty this will place on them during our current economic crisis. And again, I will remind you that being a sped teacher is a calling. The burn out rate is high enough already.

How it can be even entertained that those of us who have been in the field for decades and are near our retirement have to return to school yet again at the age of 55? Why? To learn what? For what purpose?

If you were told today that you were no longer qualified for your position, but had met all the requirements up to the point you were hired and you had dedicated decades to this career and were looking towards retirement, how would you feel if you were told you had to return to school for another master's degree? That suddenly all the courses you had taken and expense incurred was no longer enough. Why?

And I haven't even begun to discuss the socio-economic factors that come into play regarding student achievement. Those who have studied child development know of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Students who do not feel safe, and/or do

not have their basic needs met (shelter, food, health,) cannot learn. I teach in a district where well over half of our students receive free or reduced lunch. Many have parents who serve in the military and live in poverty and they travel the world taking a smattering of *different* state tests. Can you imagine the gaps? Is it due to the efficacy of a special ed. degree?

But that is an entirely different factor that also tremendously impacts children and their achievement and is not entirely relevant in terms of a student receiving special education services, but it is worth considering because again, many of the students I teach have parents in the military. And instead of threatening the livelihoods of those teachers or punishing those school districts, how about supporting them? How about funding them specifically? Do you suppose that might help out a bit?

I want to thank you in advance for your time and consideration in reading this very long-winded testimony. As I mentioned before, I am passionate about my career as a special ed. teacher. To me, it is an honor to be in the presence of children's lives for as many hours a day as I am and one that I do not take lightly. And not until we consider all children to be "our children" do we begin to appreciate our greatest natural resource.