

Remarks of Pat Moffett

First Grade Teacher

Peck Place School, Orange, CT

Before the State Department of Education and State Board of Education
concerning the proposed special education and literacy specialist certificates

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Good afternoon. My name is Pat Moffett and I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you and to comment on the proposed special education and literacy specialist certificates, and the impact these new requirements will place on a small district such as mine.

I am a first grade teacher at Peck Place School in Orange, as well as the President of the Orange Teachers' League. My school system is a small one, with a pre-K and kindergarten school servicing approximately 200 children, while three other elementary schools grades 1-6 each serve approximately 300-400 students. Our students then feed into the Amity Regional System. Like many districts, Orange is and has been struggling with budget issues; so far our Board of Education has been able to maintain smaller class sizes especially in the primary grades. It would not take much to disrupt that practice - a practice which studies have shown to be one of the most significant components for higher student achievement.

Like other school districts, our teachers rely upon the expertise and support of the special education educators and reading teachers in our buildings to provide the best possible education for our students. In turn, their efforts are enhanced by paraprofessionals and our students are the recipients of personalized education which addresses social, emotional, and academic needs. This delivery of services would greatly be impacted by any change which might potentially decrease the number of individuals with expertise who service our students.

My concern is three-fold. First, it centers on the proposed requirement for new special educators to have a prior certificate and a master's degree in order to obtain initial certification in special education. Secondly, it is focused on the proposed literacy specialist requirements to have a master's degree in reading for the initial certificate, and additional coursework for the professional certificate. Lastly, it is focused on experience.

The cost of higher education has increased dramatically, outpacing even the cost of living. It also frequently takes students five rather than four years to complete their coursework, adding significantly to the cost. Requiring prospective special education teachers to have a certificate in a content area, and then a master's degree on top of that just to get their "foot in the door" is unrealistic, especially in our current economic situation. Those individuals, who are unable to continue their higher education for whatever reason, will be unemployable. Those who are fortunate

enough to obtain their master's degree will still be at a disadvantage, as systems like Orange struggle to hire new staff members at a master's level. Many systems like Orange will face the dilemma of hiring a teacher at the master's level and letting paraprofessionals go, as there will be just so many dollars to go around. Workloads will increase which will not attract new teachers, teachers within the system will be stretched thin, and ultimately and most unfortunately, students will not receive the level of service we have come to expect for our children.

The same principle holds true for literacy specialists. My highly qualified colleagues with years of experience and expertise have stressed the importance of keeping two levels of reading certification, since the roles are separate and distinct. If the two certificates are rolled into one, with a higher price tag attached to hire a new, inexperienced specialist, we may again, be forced to hire fewer specialists. Our students again will experience a decline in service, which is educationally unsound.

The lack of actual experience these individuals would bring to the school setting is another grave concern. Allowing a teacher with no practical experience, including student teaching at the very least, to hold a position which affects so many students seems counter-intuitive. It is an area I strongly feel needs rethinking.

Part of my job as a classroom teacher is to advocate for all of the students in my district, ones who may not have a voice in a process such as this. As a local leader and long-time educator, I strongly urge you to listen closely to what teachers are

saying they need in order to be able to continue to provide the best possible support and services for students. These are the people who truly understand all of the implications from these proposed changes.