

Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham  
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Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education  
Concerning the proposed literacy specialist certificate

April 12, 2010

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Linette Branham. I'm a certified teacher and school administrator, and currently work as an Education Issues Specialist at the CT Education Association. I hold a master's degree in reading and a Ph.D. with a specialization in how teachers transfer what they learn to the classroom. I'd like to comment on the responsibilities outlined in the role of the proposed literacy specialist.

The proposed literacy specialist could have responsibilities in 7 broad areas:

- (1) Providing direct instruction to students in literacy
- (2) Curriculum development and revision of both school- and district wide programs
- (3) Working with classroom teachers to improve instruction in LA
- (4) Professional development and training to teachers who are literacy coaches
- (5) Training, supervising, and evaluating reading tutors
- (6) Training other school personnel in all content areas to improve reading
- (7) Participating in PPTs or interdisciplinary teams regarding literacy interventions for students with disabilities.

Three of these responsibilities – all pertaining to training other educators (#4, 5, & 6) - are inappropriate and unrealistic for a new literacy teacher and should be part of a higher-level program of study for literacy specialists. Learning to become a trainer doesn't happen overnight, and doesn't happen because a teacher takes coursework in it. Becoming an effective trainer is a process that incorporates, and is based on, several factors.

The first factor is a deep knowledge of the content to be taught. Having deep knowledge doesn't come from coursework alone. It comes from knowing the facts and

understanding individual concepts; knowing how those concepts interact and influence learners; knowing how the knowledge base has changed over time, as more has been learned about it and how to teach it to students; and knowing how those concepts “look” in different contexts. In the field of literacy, this applies to knowledge and skills that pertain to reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing....a tremendously wide body of knowledge.

The second factor is knowing how to, and being able to, teach that knowledge and those skills to students of different ages and different levels of development, skill, ability, and interest. Knowing how to teach and being able to teach are 2 different things. I can learn how to teach by reading books, taking courses, watching videos, or in any of a variety of ways, but that doesn't mean I can actually teach. Learning how to teach takes a great deal of practice that involves trying out a method to teach something, analyzing my performance and the impact it had on my students, evaluating whether or not I was successful in teaching, and whether or not my students really learned what I set out to teach them, and determining what my next steps should be. I need to know what worked for my students, what didn't work, and why. I need to know how to observe my students as they work in class and respond to instruction, and adjust my instruction in the middle of the lesson, if necessary. I need to know how to use a variety of teaching methods simultaneously. I need to know which students are ready to move on, which students need further instruction in the same area, and how to make sure both of those things happen at the same time in my classroom. I need to know how to provide effective guided practice, give meaningful homework assignments, and design, give, interpret, and use results from meaningful assessments. Not only do I have to know how to do these things....I have to be able to do them, and do them effortlessly. Being able to teach will

require me to practice. Research has shown that a good teacher needs at least 15-20 attempts at trying new strategies in his or her classroom, before she or he begins to feel comfortable using those strategies. Reaching the stage where teaching is much more smooth takes more practice, and this cycle has to be repeated with everything a teacher wants to teach.

Put a new literacy specialist into this process. Being a teacher with at least a few years of experience in the classroom, the specialist will still have to go through the cycle repeatedly because the content she or he is teaching to students is at least slightly different from the content she or he was teaching before. Learning how to, and being able to do the non-instructional tasks that are new to the literacy specialist (such as developing school- and district-wide curriculum for literacy) will require the same cycle of practice before proficiency is reached. Basic 'proficiency,' however, isn't enough for a trainer; a trainer must reach a high level of proficiency before being able to teach others, which brings me to the third major factor.

The third major factor involved in becoming a successful trainer is that of knowing how, and being able to, teach adults how to work more effectively with students. The same principle applies, in that knowing how to do this, and actually being able to do it are two different things. Adults are not just bigger people than students....they're more experienced and more complex, and bring all of that to their learning experiences. Learning how to teach adults requires the literacy specialist to go through the same learning, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing process cycle, with an additional step. The literacy specialist who trains other educators needs to know the literacy content, how to teach that to students, the 'content' about teaching adults, AND how to use that 'content' combined with literacy content to teach other educators so that students will benefit.

All of this requires time and practice. Trying to turn a deep learning process that should be based largely on actual practice into coursework as part of a 30-credit preparation program, especially when the prospective literacy specialist hasn't yet worked in that position, makes no sense. Again, we run the risk of educating literacy specialists who have a broad, yet very shallow, knowledge base. That sets the specialist up for failure. The question is, then, if the 3 proposed responsibilities pertaining to training other educators don't belong in this certificate, where do they belong? This merits much more discussion.