

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

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Good afternoon. My name is Robin Bressette and I have been working as a special education teacher for the past 27 years in Stonington, Connecticut. In my opinion, the proposed changes to the certification requirements for special education teachers are not in the best interests of students. Many highly qualified people interested in pursuing the field of special education may be prevented from doing so due to the requirement of having a master's degree.

In my experience the best training for special education is not solely additional coursework and degrees, but practical experience working with children. The preparation program of 30 credits over and above courses required for a prior certification does not begin to address the various needs that special educators have to successfully teach children with such a variety of needs and concerns.

The comprehensive special education endorsement describes possible responsibilities that special educators would have. My job includes providing direct instruction, interventions, and intensive services for students in any setting, administering diagnostic assessments, interpreting results of

assessments, developing behavior intervention plans, developing Individual Education Plans, monitoring student progress, consulting with teachers, coaching paraprofessionals, determining types of support services needed including assistive technology, providing training in assistive technology, coordinating services, case managing, and completing re-evaluations. I am required to work with students of any age or grade with any disability. I am required to provide their services sometimes in the general education classroom and sometimes outside of the classroom, depending upon the individual needs of my students.

My job requires practical experience working with students with different types of needs. I need to be as ready to support a student with extra reinforcement with a reading recognition skill as I need to be ready to teach that skill in an alternative way or an entirely alternative skill for a student who is significantly impaired. I need to be ready to work with a student with significant cognitive disabilities one minute and a student with significant behavioral concerns the next.

My job requires practical experience working with other teachers and being sensitive and knowledgeable about their individual styles. Some teachers welcome a co-teaching model where both the general educator and the special educator are equal partners when working with students in the classroom. Other teachers may prefer to be the specialist in the classroom and use the

special educator to assist in the instruction of students. I must be as able to work in the classroom of a teacher who provides much structure for students as I am able to work with a teacher who provides little structure and routine in their classroom.

My job requires practical experience in being flexible in the ways that instruction is provided and thinking on your feet when planned activities do not work or schedules change. When a planned activity is not successfully assisting a student in learning, the special educator must have a bag of tricks up his/her sleeve ready as a back up.

My job requires practical experience in thinking outside the box, creating alternative strategies to meet students' needs who have not been successful with traditional instructional strategies. Many students who are currently included in the general education classroom are significantly impaired in their ability to participate in completing the tasks that their peers are completing. It is often the special educator's role to provide strategies to enable those students to participate at their instructional level in whatever way that they can.

How can 30 hours of coursework hope to address the *how-to's* of all of these responsibilities? Learning the theory without the application of the skills doesn't provide educators with the ability to be proficient in any one of these responsibilities. Placing an educator in a position in which they were given these responsibilities with only the six semester hours of clinical practice, and

theory to assist them, in my opinion does not prepare someone to be a highly qualified special educator.

I am also concerned about these certification changes because I do not currently hold a bachelor's degree or a CT certificate in early childhood, elementary, or secondary education. Nowhere in the proposal does it address whether current teachers will be grandfathered into the program. I do have a master's degree in special education with a sixth year in assistive technology. Will I no longer be a certified special education teacher in the state of Connecticut? Many of my colleagues in Stonington are in the same situation.

In my opinion the new certification requirements for special education teachers are harsh. No other teacher certifications require a teacher to have a master's degree to be certified to teach in the state of Connecticut. I feel that these new certification requirements will further decrease the number of highly qualified special educators in Connecticut. The State Department of Education cites the following rationale for the proposed special education certificate:

“The role of special educator requires a high level of experience and expertise.” Greater knowledge in general education curriculum and instruction does not prepare a special educator with the experience and expertise needed to complete the many responsibilities required of a special educator. Practical experience does.