

Remarks of Karen DeFelice
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Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education
Concerning the proposed changes to certification in Special Education.

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Good afternoon. My name is Karen DeFelice and I am a special education teacher in Westport, currently in my twenty-fourth year teaching students with special needs at the high school level (grades 9-12). My position requires me to work with students identified with a variety of disabilities in small group and individual settings as well as in co-taught learning situations. I am writing with grave concerns over the proposed changes by the State Department of Education to the special education certification process.

I began my career as a special education teacher with my bachelor's degree in Special Education and a certification in Spanish as well. I student taught in both areas. After twenty-four years of teaching, I can say without a doubt that the best teacher for me has been experience and working with veteran teachers and staff who also had years of experience. The new proposals to certification in special education suggest that coursework at the master's level be the measure of what best prepares a teacher for working with students who have special needs. I cannot disagree more. My ability to provide quality intervention as a special educator has evolved each and every day by being in the classroom, and I have never stopped learning. I do not hold a master's

degree in special education because I chose to get started immediately with the skills and knowledge I had from my undergraduate work. The early years I spent learning from my peers AND from the students was invaluable. My district hired me, supported me, and asked only that I earn a master's degree in any area within a certain time frame. I began a master's program in special education only find that the courses offered a repeat of the topics I had already studied and did nothing to increase my skills and knowledge as a special educator. My own graduate school advisor suggested that I change my direction and pursue a degree in Family Therapy (systems theory), which I did. Since then, I have used these skills in conjunction with my special education knowledge, and it was the best path I could have chosen. I know that there are other special educators with whom I now work who chose this same avenue and share my views on this. It would be very short sighted to suggest that a master's program within special ed. produces better prepared special educators. New teachers, who graduate with any level of degree in education, need to get out there and work with students, staff, and parents. Special education instruction requires skills beyond coursework. Furthermore, it would be a tragedy to even hint that veteran special education teachers with years of experience, like those I learned from in my early years, need to earn another degree in the same area to be effective.

Special education is an area that is constantly undergoing change, and it is necessary to add to the knowledge base for all teachers in this field. Teachers should be challenged by the educational leaders in their districts to be aware of new research and

ways to reach out to students with special needs. They need to be sure that new laws and regulations are understood and followed - by new and veteran staff alike. This is important for regular education teachers and staff as well, as we all work as a team. It is possible to deliver continued special education training through initiatives within each district, and this can be delivered through staff development and workshops. Requiring a certain level of degree for special education certification, in my opinion, will not guarantee a higher quality of service delivery. It is my hope that the State Department of Education will reconsider this new proposal and concentrate its efforts on finding ways to support special educators on the job in a field that is constantly changing and evolving.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my thoughts and ideas.