

Remarks of Karen Shinkman
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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 Shinkman and I'm a mathematics teacher in Amity High School. I'd like to comment on the proposed changes to special education certification and how I believe they will impact teachers at the high school level.

As a long-time teacher in my school, and the local association president, I have a solid knowledge of what new special education teachers face when they enter the profession. At the high school level, since they work with students across grade levels and content areas, they have to learn a long laundry list of basics: what the culture of the school is; all of the policies, procedures, rules and regulations of the school; who the teachers of their students are and what their working styles are; and the curriculum of each of the students they'll work with. The new special educators need to get to know, and learn about, the students themselves, what makes them 'tick,' how they interact with each of their teachers, how they 'fit' into the social context of the school, and what other

issues, outside of academics, they need help and support with. The special educator also has to establish working relationships with other support professionals in the school – the guidance counselors, school nurses, school social workers and psychologists, speech pathologists, and police community outreach officers (if they work with the high school), to name a few. In addition, the special educator has to establish a solid working relationship with the students' parents.

Because the needs of special education students change over time, creating and maintaining this knowledge base, the relationships, and refining his or her skills is a big part of the special educator's job. And all this doesn't even address the actual academic work the special educator does with students, and the support she or he provides to teachers of those students.

As a long-time classroom teacher, I've seen how the burden on special educators has become heavier each year, which isn't attractive to prospective teachers. If the role of a special educator is expanded, and the new special educator is 'qualified' to take on more, that teacher has less time to spend servicing students and providing support to their teachers, who are classroom teachers like me. How will this help reduce the special education teacher shortage? Why would we expect a new special educator to be ready and able to train teachers and paraprofessionals, when she or he has no full-time, school-

based experience in the position? Why would we expect new special educators to be able to perform high-level tasks that require experience and deep knowledge that experience brings? I've worked with many new special educators over the years, have seen how they struggle as beginning teachers, and know this is not the direction we should be headed in.

You've probably already heard much of this from special educators, but I think I speak for many regular classroom teachers when I say that, based on what I've seen and experienced over more than 30 years in the classroom, this makes no sense. I'd suggest that the SDE talk with practicing teachers – both special education and regular classroom teachers – to design certification that will be supportive of what we all do in our schools with students. Thank you.