

Remarks of David Olio
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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 David Olio. I have been an English teacher at South Windsor High School since 1996. In total, this is my 17th year teaching young people to think, as readers and writers--to be democratic citizens. Today, I would like to tell you about my deep concerns regarding proposed changes to the Special Education certificate.

When I first began at South Windsor, I remember Liz Rafalowsky visiting my room to inform me of my students who had learning disabilities. A special education teacher at South Windsor, she reviewed the Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with me, answered my questions about the nature of each student's disabilities, and collaborated to begin exploring appropriate modifications. Moreover, she regularly checked in to talk about individual students and their progress. I was elated with her support.

In 2002, I began co-teaching with another Special Education teacher, Nancy Carlson. Nancy and I worked together for seven years, teaching

classes that increasing had larger numbers of students with special needs. Together, we modified content for students, allowing them to succeed in ways that otherwise would have been impossible. Nancy and I were particularly proud of challenging these students on high levels. These were not classes where students simply sat and completed vocabulary handouts or answered questions provided by anthologies and teachers. Students read, responded in writing, engaged in inquiry, collaborated and reflected on their own learning. Imagine creating that rich, exciting learning environment with a class of 23 students, with over half of the population with special needs. Imagine monitoring individual needs for content-specific lessons, creating individual modifications, for twelve students per lesson. And imagine doing that alone.

That is what I am faced with today. Although I do have some support from Special Education teachers whose students I share, I no longer co-teach with a special education teacher. Nancy retired last year but the budget would not allow the district to replace her in my classroom. Budgets across the state are under distress, and special services is a particularly area affected. The proposed certification changes will add additional challenges. Having to hire new teachers at a Master's level--the only certification to suffer this burden-- districts are in a difficult spot. My district's situation

demonstrates this quite clearly. Should these changes go into effect, my situation would not improve. In fact, fewer students would receive the individual attention they deserve.

Teachers who do persevere through an undergraduate and graduate degree to earn an initial certificate will not have been required to have had experience in a classroom of students. Planning, modifying, and assessing students is difficult enough, but when I collaborate with other teachers, I should be able to expect my colleague has had some experience with students. Because the proposal necessitates only clinical experience, I may end up spending time training new teachers-- time I should be devoting to students. Imagine, too, a new special education teacher training others, such as paraprofessionals. With expanding roles, juxtaposed with limited experience with students, special education teachers will be stretched to their personal and professional limits--as soon as they enter the profession. Those who are teaching and who have a master's degree but not in special education will have to devote their time to quickly attaining the degree, taking time away from supporting my students. What time would this special education teacher have to devote to our students?

My students will survive. I will survive. I will fulfill my responsibilities to my students. However, is that what the proposed changes

are designed for? Do we want students and teachers to survive? Or, do we want students to thrive in excellence? Under the current proposal, it is difficult to see excellence fostered. I strongly encourage the State Department to reconsider its proposals and consider the two tier approach advocated by the CEA.