

Remarks of Peter J. Ruppert

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Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education
Concerning the proposed changes to certification in Teacher Leader

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Good afternoon. My name is Peter Ruppert and I am the Co-Coordinator of the GE Foundation's Developing Futures™ in Education Program in Stamford.

The proposed Teacher Leader Certificate (TLC) as written, especially the failure to grandfather existing leaders and the one-size-fits-all approach, is a bad idea that penalizes existing teacher leaders while negatively impacting students, teachers and school and district administrators in Connecticut's public schools. Additionally, the failure to seek teacher input into how a Teacher Leader Certificate might be appropriately implemented carries on the failed tradition of top-down decision making which has long ignored the voice of teachers, the very people with experience and expertise, who most directly impact student outcomes.

The proposed TLC, which will not grandfather existing teacher leaders, is an affront to dedicated teachers who have put in much effort and time to take on leadership roles in their schools or districts, often at the risk of their

professional reputation. These teachers have undertaken extensive professional development; which is then transferred to the teachers they work with. This vast depository of knowledge and skill would be grossly limited by the proposed certification change, forcing existing teacher leaders to undergo the hardship and expense of another certification, or worst yet, keeping them from sharing their accumulated knowledge.

The negative impact on students would be seen when the experienced teacher leader is no longer in a position to readily pass on their knowledge and skills to colleagues. Fellow teachers would lose out on the professional knowledge and experience that existing teacher leaders bring and the rapport that has been established. School and district administrators would be forced to replace existing leaders with unknown and untested quantities. Added expense and time to meet narrow certification mandates would severely curtail the number of teachers willing to step into these roles, and risk the momentum of positive change already underway in our schools. Imagine a major league ballplayer like Derek Jeter being told he was not a leader because he failed to hold the title of batting champion or Gold Glove. These proposed narrow certification limits would do much the same, keeping true, respected teacher leaders from the opportunity to most positively impact teachers, students and schools.

My own role, as a coordinator of a large grant in my district, demonstrates the faulty logic of the one-size-fits-all model. The grant has transformed math, science, literacy, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), data-driven decision making, and middle-school reform throughout our district at all levels. Would I or similarly situated teachers be forced to be certified in each one of these areas in order to assist or support efforts to develop teacher skills? Which certification would qualify a teacher leader for the job? How many narrowly certified teacher leaders would be required to coordinate this type of grant? The narrow certification requirements do not make sense in this case and would fail to honor the district's discretion in its placement of staff.

Similarly, the idea that changes like these to teacher certifications could be made without teacher input is absurd. For too long, and far too often, failure to include teacher voice in decision making about teachers has led to solutions or paths that are untenable. The many teacher leaders existing currently have an accumulated knowledge and skill base that can ensure, if changes should be made to certification, that those changes are reasonable in light of the true nature of the job. What purpose is served by failing to seek the input of those with the most knowledge and experience to inform the decisions being made?

The concept of teacher leadership, while important, is relatively new in the field of education. Limited research has been done, and none of it is conclusive at this point. There is a need for clear standards, for role distinctions and to identify the appropriate skills needed to successfully serve as a teacher leader. Pushing through certification changes before these are in place and without the collective knowledge and skill of existing teacher leaders is the wrong tack.

The State Department of Education (SDE) should immediately rescind the proposed changes to certification. At the same time the SDE should act to establish a protocol to review the research on teacher leaders, investigate other states' experiences with teacher leadership, seek the input of existing Connecticut teacher leaders, and collaboratively work to develop a reasonable model for teacher leader certification if that course is deemed appropriate.