

Series 2002-2003

CIRCULAR LETTER C-5

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: August 15, 2002

SUBJECT: Improving Teacher Quality through the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program—2002-2003 School Year Update

The Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program is one of the Department's important initiatives to improve the quality of the state's teacher workforce by supporting new teachers in the critical induction years and providing opportunities for experienced educators to serve in the roles of mentors and assessors. The BEST Program plays a major role in ensuring that all Connecticut students are taught by highly qualified teachers.

This letter will highlight **recent Department and Board actions** to continuously improve the Beginning Educator Support and Training Program; provide an update regarding **summer 2002 scoring of portfolios**; discuss the impact on recent and possible future adjustments to the 2002-2003 state budget on the BEST Program; and remind districts about **allowable uses of Title II state grants** to support mentorship, teacher professional development, and teacher leadership.

Department Actions to Improve the BEST Program

Modifications to timeframe for submission of portfolios by third year teachers: In order to provide more time for beginning teachers who have failed to meet the portfolio performance standard in their second year to work with their mentors or school district personnel to improve their performance, the submission deadlines for portfolio submissions of third year teachers have been changed as follows:

February 1: Deadline for all third year teachers to submit portfolios. Results will be sent to the candidate and district by April 1.

June 1: Deadline for submission of a third portfolio only available upon request of the superintendent for those third year teachers who have already submitted two portfolios (by May 1 in year two and by February 1 in year three) and not yet met the acceptable performance standard. Results will be sent to the candidate and district by August 15.

Deferral of portfolio assessment requirement for holders of Durational Shortage Area Permits (DSAPs) and Nonrenewable Interim Charter School Certificate: The BEST portfolio was designed to assess the content and pedagogical knowledge of individuals who are graduates of teacher preparation programs (both traditional and alternate route) and who have passed PRAXIS II subject area testing requirements. Because holders of the DSAP or Nonrenewable Interim Charter School Certificates have not yet met these requirements, the Board approved deferral of the portfolio assessment requirement for these individuals until they complete all coursework and testing requirements for the initial educator (in the case of DSAPs) or temporary 90-day certificate (graduates of the Alternate Route to Certification). These teachers will subsequently have to meet the same standards (including successfully completing the portfolio assessment) as other individuals participating in the “portfolio induction program.”

Science Safety CD-Rom: During the 2001-2002 school year, the BEST Program distributed to all science department chairs and middle school principals a CD-Rom version of a science safety assessment activity that can be used evaluate beginning teachers’ knowledge of laboratory safety management. This assessment activity can be administered as a formative or summative assessment at the discretion of the school district, with feedback on performance accessible through a password provided to the science department chair or principal.

Because Connecticut and federal OSHA standards require that science teachers be trained in all elements of science safety, we strongly encourage districts to require that their first year teachers complete this activity. The BEST Program will continue to provide technical assistance to districts in using this CD-Rom.

Principal’s Role in Ensuring Authenticity of Portfolio Submissions: Beginning teachers are required, when submitting their portfolios, to submit a “Teaching Portfolio Authenticity Sign-off Form” in which the beginning teacher attests that he/she is the sole author of the commentaries and other written responses in the portfolio, that the videotape is that of his/her students/class, and that the student work is authentic and that of his or her students. The form also requires the principals to sign-off that those statements are accurate. There have been a few occasions recently in which portfolio submissions have been invalidated due to violations of these guidelines.

We wish to reinforce the importance of the school principal in providing these assurances and to encourage principals to carefully review the portfolio and videotape before signing the forms.

Increasing Technology-based BEST Communications and Training: Last year, we piloted a web-based version of three BEST Program discipline-specific seminars for beginning teachers. During the 2002-2003 school year, we will continue development and implementation of on-line seminars, as well as increase access to these seminars for mentors, principals and other educators. These web-based seminars—which include models of exemplary portfolios—will be augmented by “on-ground” seminars for beginning teachers scheduled at regional sites throughout the state.

We will also begin pilot-testing in the fall of 2002 web-based registration for BEST training sessions through EASTCONN as well as develop an electronically-based communications network for communicating with beginning teachers, mentors, principals, district facilitators and

other BEST constituents. In addition, CD-Rom-based technology will be used to disseminate Beginning Teacher Guides and BEST Portfolio Handbooks to educators statewide.

Update on Summer 2002 Portfolio Scoring

Scoring Process: This summer, over 600 experienced educators have convened over a four-week period to score nearly 2,200 portfolios submitted by second year teachers. These educators, who receive over 50 hours of training, are required to meet rigorous proficiency standards to demonstrate that they can evaluate a teaching portfolio in a reliable and consistent manner. Assessors spend four to five hours per portfolio collecting evidence, interpreting data, and assigning a score. Portfolios which do not meet the acceptable performance standard have been re-read independently by at least two additional assessors and the final score confirmed by a chief trainer.

Impact of Appropriation Reductions on BEST Program and Possible Uses of Title II State Grant Funds to Support Beginning Teachers

In the recent special session of the General Assembly, the appropriation for the BEST Program was reduced by 10% from the previous year's appropriation and it is possible that, due to the growing state deficit, further rescissions are possible later this year. We are making every possible effort to maintain important services to beginning teachers, mentors, and school districts in these difficult times. We anticipate, however, that professional development funds—which were reduced last year from \$200 to \$150 per beginning teacher—will be eliminated.

Districts may wish to consider, when submitting their Consolidated District Grant Applications, to allocate a portion of their new and increased Title II subgrant funds to cover expenses related to supporting beginning teachers in the BEST Program. Allowable uses of these funds include:

- Providing stipends or other financial incentives for mentor teachers or “master mentors,” who train and provide assistance to mentors and content colleagues who support beginning teachers in completing the portfolio process;
- Expanding the support of beginning teachers into their second or third year of teaching;
- Providing workshops or other professional development for beginning teachers and their mentors as well as principals around effective teaching practices and the portfolio process; and
- Providing released time for collaboration between beginning teachers and their mentors and/or content colleagues.

This next year will be challenging for all of us as we face leaner budgets at the state and local level. We hope that districts continue to implement the many exemplary induction practices that have been developed over the last several years. Beginning teachers are vital resources in a school and should be nurtured, guided and supported through their novice years; with the goals of making them more effective teachers, thereby improving student achievement and reducing teacher turnover and potential shortages. We will continue to make improvements to the BEST Program each year based on your feedback. Thank you.

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