

STATE OF CONNECTICUT
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Series 2001-2002

CIRCULAR LETTER C-15

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: February 8, 2002

SUBJECT: Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program—Mid-Year Update

The August 17, 2001, Circular Letter described steps that the Connecticut State Department of Education was taking to improve the program during the 2001-2002 school year. All of these improvements are moving forward, despite a reduction in program funding. The intent of this letter is to provide a mid-year update about the BEST Program.

Governor's Recommendations Regarding Fiscal Year 2001-2002 Surplus Appropriations Impacting BEST

In an effort to reduce this year's state deficit, the Governor's Office has recommended the special appropriation that had been earmarked for stipends to mentors (worth approximately \$170 per mentor/mentor team) be eliminated. Until the legislature makes the final determination concerning this proposed reduction, the funds cannot be released to districts as originally intended. You will be informed when the status of these funds has been determined.

Changes to BEST Professional Development Funds Policy

The BEST Program will provide districts with \$150 per beginning teacher to be used to support beginning teachers and their mentors. This is less than in previous years, due to state savings plans implemented for 2001-2002. It is critical that these funds are used directly to support beginning teachers and comply with the BEST statutes and regulations that require adequate support and release time for mentors and beginning teachers.

The Department is also instituting a change to the Professional Development Fund payment policy beginning this year. Payment will be made on a reimbursement basis, instead of a direct payment of \$150 per beginning teacher. The use of these funds will be restricted to:

- (a) reimbursement of substitutes for beginning teachers and their mentors/mentor team members;
- (b) honoraria for mentors/mentor team members; and
- (c) professional development activities for beginning teachers and mentors.

Appropriate documentation must be submitted with the reimbursement request. Details will be forthcoming.

Portfolio Scorer Recruitment for 2002

The BEST Program needs your support to encourage the involvement of your teachers, department chairs, and principals to serve as BEST portfolio scorers. In particular, educators with elementary backgrounds are needed this year. Your district will benefit from the training that portfolio scorers receive in:

- Standards-based teaching, learning and assessment;
- Evaluation of teaching using multiple data sources; and
- Strategies to support beginning teachers in developing effective teaching practices.

Scorers receive:

- 5.0 – 8.0 CEUs for training and scoring;
- CEUs for administrators which meet the statutory requirement of 15 hours of training in the evaluation of teachers; and
- Payment of \$100 per portfolio scored.

In order to recruit a more diverse scorer pool, including administrators, initial scorer training sessions have been scheduled in March and April. Portfolio scorers participate in scoring over a two-week period in July. This year, administrators may opt to score for only one week, provided they agree to score for two more summers.

Mentoring of Beginning Teachers—Modifications to Policy Regarding Timeframes

As noted in the August 17, 2001, letter, many districts have voluntarily extended support to new teachers in their second year of teaching, in order to support beginning teachers as they complete the portfolio assessment. The BEST Program statutes and regulations do not, however, require two years of mentorship (with the exception of beginning teachers who are graduates of the Alternate Route to Certification or holders of Durational Shortage Area Permits). Instead, the only requirement is that the placement of a beginning teacher with a mentor or mentor team occur within 10 days of assignment to a school building (Sec. 10-220a-7).

In response to requests from districts for more flexibility, the timeframe for mentoring is now modified. As long as the 10-day reporting requirement is met and mentorship is provided during the first year of teaching (as required by regulation), districts will be permitted to adjust the timeframe. For example, a district with an extensive beginning teacher orientation program in the first few months of the school year may opt to assign mentors or mentor teams from January of year one to January of year two. Such arrangements would also encourage mentors and mentor team members to interact with beginning teachers as they complete the portfolio seminar series and prepare for the portfolio assessment in year two (see below for more information).

BEST Support Seminars—Update on Introduction of On-Line Learning

This year's BEST Support Seminar series includes two on-site seminars and four on-line learning seminars. Seminar 1 (on-site) began in January 2002, and the on-line modules will be

available starting March 1. The on-line seminars include: (1) lessons and *exercises*, designed to focus on important elements of effective teaching in their discipline; (2) conferences, which provide forums for interaction between beginning teachers and a seminar leader; (3) *portfolio corner*, providing direct links between the content of the seminars and the portfolio requirements; (4) mentor *corner*, providing a structure for focused discussions between beginning teachers and mentors; and (5) resources, including actual portfolio samples, recommended websites and more. Mentors, principals and other interested educators can enter the online seminars on a “view only” basis.

BEST Program: Knowing the Facts

Attached is a two-page highlight of the principal features of the BEST Program, designed to answer some of the commonly asked questions about the program. We hope you circulate this information to your principals, department chairs, and other individuals who work with beginning teachers.

The BEST Program is one of Connecticut’s most important initiatives to support and retain high quality teachers in the classroom. School districts play an active and sustained role in support of their own teachers. As the state faces continued teacher shortages, it becomes even more critical for every district to provide ongoing support to each beginning teacher. Beginning teachers are vital resources in a school and should be nurtured, guided and supported through their novice years. In addition, those districts which actively reach out to their beginning teachers and make them an integral part of the school community tend to have less attrition and turnover. We will continue to seek feedback from superintendents, beginning teachers, mentors and other constituents about ways to improve the program.

Thank you for all your efforts in implementing the BEST program.

TSS:kfe

Attachment

Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program: Knowing the Facts

The Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program is a two-year comprehensive induction program of *support* (district-based mentorship in year one and state-sponsored professional development for beginning teachers in year two) and *assessment* (content-specific teaching portfolios submitted in year two). As of the 2001-2002 school year, approximately 6,000 first and second year beginning teachers in the areas of elementary education, English language arts, mathematics, music, physical education, science, social studies, special education, visual arts, and world languages are participating in the BEST portfolio induction program.

Connecticut's Comprehensive Plan for Education for 2001-2005 credits high standards for teachers coupled with high standards for student achievement as integral to Connecticut's success over the last decade in raising student achievement and promoting an agenda of excellence and equity. Since 1989, the State Board of Education and the legislature have consistently supported funding of the BEST Program, even in periods of economic downturn.

What is Connecticut's Continuum for Teacher Quality?

Connecticut's Common Core of Teaching (CCT) embodies the knowledge, skills, and competencies that teachers need in order to ensure students learn and perform at high levels. These standards are applied across teachers' careers as follows:

- Connecticut colleges and universities are developing performance-based systems based on the CCT to ensure prospective teachers have the requisite knowledge and skills to be recommended for initial certification;
- Beginning teachers participating in BEST must demonstrate teaching competency through submission of a teaching portfolio based on the CCT in order to be eligible for the provisional certificate;
- Local school districts are developing teacher evaluation and professional development systems based on the CCT and which incorporate multiple sources of evidence of teaching and student learning; and
- Experienced teachers may demonstrate excellence in teaching by earning voluntary advanced certification through the portfolio-based assessment system of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, whose standards are closely aligned with the CCT.

What is the Purpose of the BEST Program?

The mission of the BEST Program is to ensure that all Connecticut students are taught by highly competent and caring teachers with high expectations for their students. The assessment of teaching competency as part of certification assures the public that teachers have attained the necessary skills to promote student learning. Once employed, local districts apply their local evaluation criteria to make decisions about a teacher's continued employment.

What is the BEST portfolio assessment?

The portfolio documents a unit of instruction with one class over a five to eight day period of time. It includes: (a) teacher lesson plans, (b) videotaped segments of teaching (usually two 20-minute segments), (c) the work of two students in the class, and (d) reflective commentaries on the teaching and learning that took place during the unit.

How much written information must be submitted in the portfolio?

Teachers submit daily lesson logs for the unit they are teaching and written commentaries, with pages limited to usually no more than 30. Teachers also submit copies of student work and teaching materials used in each lesson such as handouts and assignments.

Who scores the portfolio?

Portfolios are scored by at least two highly trained assessors with extensive classroom experience in the same content area as the beginning teacher. It takes approximately four hours to evaluate and score a teaching portfolio.

How many beginning teachers meet the assessment standard?

On average, 85% of beginning teachers successfully complete the portfolio standard at the end of their second year. Those who do not meet the requirement may submit an additional portfolio in year three. Only three to five percent of beginning teachers do not meet the requirement at the end of the third year of teaching.

What feedback do beginning teachers receive?

Beginning teachers receive an individualized performance summary describing their performance as well as their score on the portfolio. Beginning teachers who do not successfully complete the portfolio assessment are contacted directly by Department staff to schedule a “BEST Portfolio Conference,” in which a portfolio scorer/trainers meets with a beginning teacher to help him/her interpret their score report and discuss strategies for improvement. Feedback workshops are offered to beginning teachers who pass the assessment, but who want additional help in improving their teaching.

Are beginning teachers required to attend BEST seminars or clinics?

State policy is that attendance is **voluntary**, with the exception of graduates of the Alternate Route to Certification Program—who, as part of their certification requirements, must complete BEST training in their first two years of teaching. Some school districts, however, require their beginning teachers to attend the seminars.

Is there any evidence that the portfolio assessment causes teachers to leave the profession?

We see no evidence of this. In fact, as compared to other states, Connecticut has relatively low levels of beginning teacher attrition—about seven to eight percent annually for beginning teachers in Connecticut as compared to a national average of 10 percent.

Why did the State replace the Connecticut Competency Instrument (CCI) with the portfolio assessment?

The CCI was based on the 15 Connecticut Teaching Competencies, adopted in 1984, which defined generic teacher behaviors. The portfolio assessment is based on Connecticut’s Common Core of Teaching (CCT), which expands the definition of teaching competencies beyond generic teaching behaviors to the knowledge, skills and competencies that promote student learning both across and within specific disciplines. As a result, the CCI no longer effectively reflects the standards inherent in Connecticut’s Common Core of Teaching and was eliminated from the BEST Program.