

Series 2001-2002
CIRCULAR LETTER C-5

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: August 17, 2001

SUBJECT: The BEST Program: 2001-2002

In recent months, I have heard concerns about certain policies and procedures regarding the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program. I welcome this opportunity to reinforce the importance of the BEST Program, clarify some misunderstandings about the BEST program and inform you about steps the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) will be taking this year to improve the program¹.

The role of the BEST Program in Ensuring Equity and Excellence: The mission of the BEST Program is that all Connecticut students are taught by highly qualified teachers. Maintaining a high quality teaching force is integral to ensuring excellence and equity for all Connecticut students. A growing body of research indicates that the quality of teaching has a direct impact on student learning.

The BEST Program has been an important cornerstone in the effort to attract and retain qualified teachers in the classroom—by supporting new teachers in the critical induction years and by providing opportunities for experienced educators to serve in new roles, such as mentors and assessors. As compared to other states, Connecticut has relatively low levels of teacher attrition and turnover—both for experienced and beginning teachers. In the decade to come, retaining good teachers in the classroom will become even more important, as we project nearly 50% of Connecticut’s workforce will retire. A high quality induction program at the state and local level will play a major role in ensuring that Connecticut continues to attract and retain highly qualified educators in its classrooms.

The BEST Portfolio Assessment: We acknowledge that the BEST portfolio is a considerable amount of work; however, the portfolio asks beginning teachers to demonstrate what they are actually doing in their classrooms. They document a unit of instruction conducted with one class over a five to eight day period of time. Beginning teachers provide their lesson plans, usually two videotaped segments of teaching of about 20 minutes each, the actual work of two students in their class, and reflective commentaries on the teaching and learning that took place during that unit. The teacher writes about 12- 16 pages of commentaries plus provides five to eight

¹ Please refer to Attachment A for a summary of the program.

lesson logs depending upon the length of the unit. The rest of the portfolio consists of copies of instructional materials and examples of student work.

Department actions to improve program:

- ❖ **Continue to convene on an annual basis a committee of beginning and experienced teachers to review portfolio handbooks** to ensure clarity of tasks and questions, review page limits (first introduced in 1999), and reduce the amount or number of days of instruction that must be documented, as appropriate;
- ❖ **Post on the CSDE web-site BEST portfolio exemplars** to make examples of effective teaching practice more accessible to beginning teachers and dispel some of the misperceptions about portfolios, such as that they require large amounts of paperwork or that expectations are unrealistic or inappropriate for beginning teachers.

Feedback to Beginning Teachers: A misperception that has surfaced recently is that there is no feedback given to beginning teachers about their performance on the assessment. This is incorrect. **Since 1998, beginning teachers have received an individualized performance summary** describing their performance in the categories of designing and implementing instruction, analysis of teaching and analysis of learning. Feedback conferences have been available to all beginning teachers upon request. Furthermore, **all beginning teachers who do not successfully complete the portfolio assessment are contacted directly by Department staff to schedule a “BEST Portfolio Conference.”** A trained portfolio scorer/trainer meets with a beginning teacher to help him/her interpret the score report and discuss strategies for improvement. All beginning teachers have had the opportunity to meet with a trainer to receive individualized feedback.

Department actions to improve program:

- ❖ **Improve portfolio feedback** by providing score interpretation guides; and
- ❖ **Provide greater availability of assessment conferences** and other forms of professional development for beginning teachers.

Mentoring of Beginning Teachers: State law requires local school boards and the state to provide both *support* and *assessment* for purposes of licensing beginning teachers. State regulations require beginning teachers to have **weekly contacts** with the mentor or mentor team members and local districts to provide sufficient time over the school year for beginning teachers to meet with their mentors. Operationally, we have defined this as the equivalent of 30 hours of “significant contacts” over the course of a school year between beginning teacher and his/her mentor, support team members, content colleagues, the principal and/or district facilitator. Superintendents annually submit to CSDE a written attestation that this requirement has been met and each district maintains records of the support provided to each beginning teacher.

Many districts have recognized the importance of supporting new teachers by developing programs that exceed the mandated regulatory minimums. A recent survey indicated that nearly half of districts provide support to beginning teachers in their second year. Eighteen school districts currently provide local funding of stipends to mentor/mentor teams members—ranging from \$150 to \$3000. On the other hand, 21% of beginning teachers last year did not have a mentor in the same content area, and about 10% were assigned a mentor from outside the school. Content-specific and building-level support is crucial to supporting beginning teachers in the portfolio process.

In the most recent legislative session, a special appropriation of \$600,000 was made to provide stipends to mentors during the 2001-2002 school year. These monies will be included in the professional development fund payments made to local school districts during the 2001-2002 school year, and **districts must use these special state funds to pay mentors or mentor team members assigned to each beginning teacher.** The exact dollar amount will depend upon the numbers of first year beginning teachers registered in the BEST Program as of January 1, 2002. We currently estimate the amount per mentor/mentor team will be \$170, but will notify you regarding the final amount no later than February 1, 2002.

Department actions to improve program:

- ❖ **Analyze and publish the results of a spring 2001 survey of beginning teachers, mentors and other school district personnel** regarding sources and types of support provided to beginning teachers and issues identified by district personnel regarding needed improvements to the BEST Program;
- ❖ **Encourage districts to develop “district beginning teacher support plans”** that are linked to the district’s teacher evaluation and professional development plan and that clearly specify the types and nature of support provided by the district;
- ❖ **Provide models of comprehensive district support plans** on the Department’s web-page (www.ct.state.us/der/publications/teacher_assessment) and
- ❖ **Continue to seek increases in BEST Program funding** to better support beginning teachers and compensate mentors/mentor team members in 2002-2003 and beyond.

BEST Program Clinics and Seminars: 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. We have noted that some school districts currently require their beginning teachers to attend these seminars.

We do, however, highly recommend that beginning teachers attend these seminars and clinics to help improve their teaching and to understand the standards they have to meet in the portfolio assessment. The content-specific seminars, which are taught by exemplary classroom teachers who are trained portfolio scorers, have consisted of six sessions providing about 20-25 hours of professional development over a two-year period. The portfolio and videotaping clinics provide assistance to beginning teachers in compiling a portfolio and plan for videotaping their classrooms.

Department actions to improve program:

- ❖ **Integrate distance learning with regional seminars for beginning teachers**, thereby providing the equivalent of 20-30 hours of on-line and “in person” professional development making the seminars more accessible and available for beginning teachers and their mentors.

Impact of the Assessment: About 10-15% of beginning teachers who submit a portfolio during their second year of teaching do not meet the assessment standard. These teachers are then given a third year in the BEST Program and up to two additional opportunities to submit new portfolios (by December 1 and/or by April 1 in year three). Approximately 3-5% of beginning teachers will not meet the requirement at the end of their third year of teaching. These teachers may re-enter the teaching profession upon successful completion of a program of intervening study and experience, which may be completed in as little as one year’s time.

It should be noted that, based upon our review of districts' teacher evaluation and professional development plans submitted to the Department over the last several months, the majority of districts are using portfolios or similar structures to collect information about teaching using a variety of data sources (in addition to classroom observation). Teaching portfolios are increasingly common as a part of pre-service education. As a consequence, the BEST portfolio is becoming part of a continuum in which teachers document their teaching and their students' learning throughout their careers. We expect that BEST portfolio pass rates will increase over time, as higher education institutions better prepare their teacher candidates for the portfolio assessment.

The Importance of Quality Induction Programs in Keeping Effective Teachers in the Classroom

The record of the last decade is our continuous improvement of the BEST Program and—as you can see from this memo—we are still striving to make a good program even better. The State Board and I believe that the BEST Program is one of Connecticut's several building blocks of success. Many administrators and teachers in Connecticut have stated that BEST has contributed to the high quality of instruction in Connecticut and, therefore, to our students' increased achievement.

I believe we have both a professional and legal obligation to support our new teachers, and that one very important way to address the problem of teacher shortages is to do a better job in retaining more of our newest teachers in the classroom. The BEST Program plays an important role in meeting this goal. I look forward to your continued interest and feedback about the program and will be glad to address any other concerns you have.

TSS:kf

BEGINNING EDUCATOR SUPPORT AND TRAINING PROGRAM: 2001-2002

WHAT IS THE BEST PROGRAM?

A comprehensive two year program of support and assessment for beginning teachers with an option for a third year (if necessary).

WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE BEST PROGRAM?

Portfolio Induction Program: Beginning teachers of elementary education, English language arts, mathematics, middle grades, music, physical education, science, social studies, special education, visual arts, and world language (92% of beginning teachers)

Support Only Program: Beginning teachers of agriculture, business education, health, home economics, technology education, marketing education, occupational and trades-related subjects (8% of beginning teachers)

YEAR ONE:

- School-based support by a mentor or support team
- State-based support (attendance is voluntary) through:
BEST Orientation Sessions
Discipline-Specific Seminars & Portfolio clinics

YEAR TWO (for participants in portfolio induction program):

- School-based support by mentor or support team (optional)
- State-based support (attendance is voluntary) through:
Discipline-Specific Seminars
Portfolio Overview Sessions
Portfolio Videotape Workshops
- Submission of a teaching portfolio in the spring

Feedback to Beginning Teachers:

Each teacher submitting a portfolio gets a score report including an individualized performance summary, which describes the beginning teachers planning, instruction, analysis of teaching and analysis of learning.

Teachers who do not meet the portfolio performance standard are provided with a BEST Portfolio Conference.

A **third year in BEST** is available for those beginning teachers who must re-submit their portfolios. Additional school-based and state-based support is provided.

As of the 2000-2001 School Year, there were approximately 38,000 classroom teachers, of whom:

- ❖ 3,300 were first year teachers
 - ❖ 2,800 were second & third year teachers
 - ❖ 3,700 were BEST-trained mentors or mentor team members
 - ❖ 800 served as BEST assessors or teacher-trainers
 - ❖ 5,700 are teachers trained as mentors or assessors, but not serving in the role
- =16,300 teachers, mentors and assessors trained through the BEST Program
or 43% of Connecticut's current teacher workforce**