

Series 2003-2004
Circular Letter: C-5

TO: Superintendents of Schools

FROM: Theodore S. Sergi
Commissioner of Education

DATE: August 19, 2003

SUBJECT: Improving Teacher Quality through the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program – 2003-04 Update

The Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program helps 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 various teacher leader roles, such as mentors, master mentors, portfolio assessors and trainers.

This letter will highlight Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) initiatives to continually improve the BEST Program. In addition this letter will remind districts about allowable uses of Title II state grants (e.g., supporting mentorship, providing teacher professional development and promoting teachers as leaders); remind principals about their role in supporting beginning teachers in the BEST Program portfolio process; and provide an update on the summer 2003 portfolio scoring process.

Department Actions to Improve the BEST Program

Promoting Teachers as Leaders: The BEST Program has been an important vehicle in developing teachers as leaders by: (1) building teachers' knowledge and understanding of teacher and student standards, effective teaching practices and coaching strategies through BEST Program mentor and portfolio scorer training; (2) developing skills and strategies for teachers assuming leadership roles in their districts through BEST Program Teacher Leadership academies in science, mathematics and special education; (3) promoting new models of teacher leadership through the BEST Program Master Mentor Program; and (4) providing opportunities for exemplary teachers to serve as BEST Program teachers-in-residence at the CSDE.

Enhancing Support to Beginning Teachers and their Mentors through the Master Mentor Program: During the 2002-03 school year, 15 districts participated in a pilot program to train 26 exemplary teachers as “Master Mentors.” Master Mentors are exemplary teachers trained to serve as school-level “portfolio experts” and trainers/coaches of mentors and support colleagues of beginning teachers. Through Master Mentor training, teachers are provided with new and expanded leadership roles and the opportunity to improve school-based support to beginning teachers and mentors as well as promote school cultures that emphasize collaboration between teachers and a focus on improving student achievement.

An additional 12 districts have nominated 33 teachers to be trained as Master Mentors during the 2003-04 school year. Interested districts should contact Beverly Hartstone, Program Manager for the BEST Program, for further information on participating in this important initiative. She can be reached at (860) 713-6820 or via email at beverly.hartstone@po.state.ct.us.

Encouragement of districts to use Title II grant funds to support beginning teachers: During this past year a number of districts were able to use these funds to enhance their teacher induction programs. We hope that in the 2003-04 school year, many more districts will take advantage of allocating a portion of their Title II sub-grant funds to cover expenses related to supporting beginning teachers in the BEST Program. The new consolidated grant application makes these allowable uses for the funds more explicit than in the past. 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.

New “on-line” resources in BEST: On-line resources for BEST significantly increased during the 2002-03 school year by making available new and expanded BEST Program information on the CSDE website and a BEST communications and training registration website developed by EASTCONN. The website addresses and resources are as follows:

CSDE Website for General Information about the BEST Program and the portfolio assessment: <http://www.state.ct.us/sde/>, click on BEST. Resources contained on this website include:

- the Guide to the BEST Program for Beginning Teachers;
- portfolio handbooks in 10 subject areas and portfolio-related forms;

- portfolio feedback rubrics;
- Common Core of Teaching ; and
- “On-line” seminars for beginning teachers: Seminars are available on this website in the 10 portfolio subject areas. Each session highlights key elements of the BEST Program portfolio requirements and can be accessed by the beginning teachers whenever they wish. These electronic seminars are supplemented by “in-person” seminars (scheduled at regional sites).

The BEST Communications and Registration Website: <http://www.ctbest.org>:

This website has been established for two purposes: (1) to provide an email link to beginning teachers and other constituents in the BEST Program, such as mentors and district facilitators; and (2) as a registration site for all BEST professional development courses for beginning and experienced teachers. This year, this site will also introduce a link back to the documents found on the CSDE site referenced above.

Important Roles for Principals in the BEST Portfolio Assessment Process

We wish to stress the importance of the principal becoming familiar with and involved with the BEST portfolio assessment and process. The principal has several important roles to play in the process:

- (1) **Supporting beginning teachers in successfully completing the BEST Program requirements** and improving their instructional effectiveness by providing released time for collaboration with a mentor or content colleague and encouraging the beginning teacher to attend portfolio clinics/seminars and/or access the on-line seminars;
- (2) **Providing assurances of the authenticity of the portfolio** by carefully reviewing the videotape, student work and commentaries to assure that the teacher has not re-configured the class for purposes of the portfolio assessment, the student work is authentic and corresponds to the classes/unit profiled in the portfolio, and the commentaries are written by the teacher. It should be noted that there have been a number of instances over the past several years in which there has been sufficient evidence to warrant notifying superintendents that the portfolio submission was not authentic and/or the teacher has violated the Code of Professional Responsibility for Teachers through inappropriate conduct towards students; and
- (3) **Building upon or incorporating data from the portfolio into the local district evaluation process** during the second or third year—that is, using both live and video observations, reviewing a teaching unit, examining student work, and asking teachers to reflect upon the learning of their students and their teaching.

Principals and other administrators who would like to gain a better understanding of the BEST portfolio may attend a one-day Portfolio Support Training offered at the RESCs this fall.

Update on Summer 2003 Portfolio Scoring and Reporting

This summer, approximately 550 experienced educators have convened over a four-week period to score nearly 2,000 beginning teacher portfolios. These experienced 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 are reviewed independently by at least three scorers/trainers. Additional independent reviews are provided for portfolios which do not meet the acceptable performance standard.

Portfolio score reports will be released on or about September 2, 2003. Superintendents will also receive a composite list of results for all their beginning teachers within one week of that date.

Note that approximately 90 percent of teachers who submitted portfolios during the summer of 2002 met the portfolio performance standard with their first submission. Those who failed were given a second submission opportunity in February 2003, with a third submission opportunity available during the summer of 2003, if requested by the superintendent. Teachers who do not meet the BEST Portfolio assessment standard have an opportunity to re-enter the teaching profession by successfully completing an approved program of intervening study and experience¹ and re-qualifying for an initial educator certificate.

A report on the results of summer, 2003 scoring as well as cumulative scoring results from 1999-2003 will be provided to the State Board in December.

This next year will be challenging for all of us as we continue to 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 guided and supported through their novice years. Improving the effectiveness of new teachers helps to improve student achievement, reduce teacher turnover, and prevent potential teacher shortages. We will continue to make improvements to the BEST Program each year based on your feedback.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Catherine Fisk Natale, Acting Chief, Bureau of Educator Assessment, at 860.713.6831 (katie.fisk@po.state.ct.us) or Betty J. Sternberg, Associate Commissioner, Division of Teaching and Learning, at 860.713.6700 (betty.sternberg@po.state.ct.us).

Thank you.

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¹ The intervening study requirement consists of successfully completing 6 undergraduate or graduate credits in courses related to the beginning teacher's certification endorsement; the intervening experience requirement can be met through a university-based teaching internship or year-long supervised service as a long-term substitute or teacher in an out-of-state or private school.