

Remarks of Dr. Linette Branham  
Education Issues Specialist  
Connecticut Education Association

Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education  
Concerning the proposed literacy specialist certificate

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Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Linette Branham. I'm a certified teacher and school administrator, and currently work as an Education Issues Specialist at the CT Education Association (CEA). I'd like to provide further comments on the proposed literacy specialist certificate.

The Connecticut Reading Association (CRA) testified at the April 5<sup>th</sup> hearing and has submitted a written document to the State Department of Education supporting one level of literacy specialist certificate. But they have concerns, just as CEA does. There are several areas in which CEA and CRA agree, but we don't always agree on how the issues should be resolved. The first two points are related. We agree that there is confusion in districts, especially among administrators, about the difference between the 102 (remedial reading) and 097 (reading consultant) endorsements, and that reading teachers and reading consultants are incorrectly used interchangeably in schools, and this practice shouldn't continue. We disagree on the resolution to this problem. CRA believes it's easier to combine the two certificates into one certificate, so there won't be a possibility of confusion and misuse. CEA believes that the roles, as stated in the current regulations, are distinct, and should continue to be distinct, clarified, and reinforced by the SDE. CRA has suggested that administrators be required to have some preparatory background in reading so they understand the roles of a reading teacher and consultant, which CEA agrees with. CRA has recommended clear job descriptions for reading

teachers, which CEA agrees with. We also believe that the SDE should work with groups that represent teachers and administrators (such as CEA, AFT, CRA, CAPSS, and CFSA) to promote, clarify, and reinforce the distinction between the roles of both positions. Teachers, especially, respond to correct information and their own assignment to roles when they know that, if they are placed in a position for which they aren't properly certified, they run the risk of losing retirement service credit while working in that role.

The third point CRA and CEA agree on is that, in the current economic climate, districts won't hire two high-level specialists in reading. CRA believes that hiring one literacy specialist, with the proposed certificate, will increase the emphasis on classroom reading programs, reading instruction will improve, there will be fewer remedial students, and having a literacy specialist who can play all roles will be most economical for districts. CEA views this issue quite differently. We believe that, with a potential 51 credit program to earn and retain the literacy specialist certificate, fewer teachers will want to pursue this certificate, potentially creating a shortage of literacy specialists. The fact also is that, currently, districts have *already* placed many teachers in the role of intervention support teachers, especially focusing on SRBI interventions, and have trained their teachers accordingly. Districts *are* hiring teachers for this role because they know that additional support is what will help students achieve. It's also conceivable that, with having to earn so many credits to retain the proposed literacy specialist certificate, that teacher would use those credits as part of a program to earn a Sixth Year Certificate, making the cost to districts even higher.

The final point of agreement between CEA and CRA is that appropriate preparation for a literacy specialist requires more than 30 credits. The CRA has stated that a teacher should be

allowed to earn a master's degree in reading but not be given a title. Teachers can already do that, and many do earn degrees but don't apply for the certification they are eligible for; they earn the degree in that field because they know it will enhance their ability to work effectively with students. CRA has also said that reading is a complex field, and we need leaders and teachers who are well prepared for their roles. CEA couldn't agree more. The issue that needs resolution is that of how we can assure that reading teachers and specialists have the in-depth preparation they need for their distinct roles, through a certification system that makes sense. CRA has stated that *"Higher education groups will need to devise an integrated and rigorous preparation program such as a Master's and Sixth Year program for the Literacy Specialist certification."* IS CRA is suggesting that literacy specialists should earn a Sixth Year Certificate to retain their certification in that field? If so, that would add heavily to the cost to districts to hire literacy specialists; this contradicts their statement that having only one level of literacy certification would be more economical for districts. Furthermore, if the field of literacy is so broad and complex that it requires more study than a master's program can provide in order to prepare literacy specialists for all the responsibilities that would fall under the proposed certificate, doesn't that suggest that the literacy specialist is expected to take on too many responsibilities? How could she or he be expected to do them all well, if there would be fewer literacy specialists in a school or district?

CEA also believes that the preparation program for the proposed literacy specialist is inadequate. There are areas of study that are missing, and areas of study that shouldn't be expected in an initial preparation program. For example, the preparation focuses very heavily on the prospective 'literacy specialist' being able to teach reading. But there is no background

study required in how to teach writing, speaking, listening, and viewing skills, all of which are critical literacy skills for students to learn. There is coursework required in how to *develop* language arts K-12 programs that include all the skills, but knowing how to go through the process of developing a program is different from knowing how to teach these skills in a classroom. It is possible to develop a program without knowing how to teach the skills. Is that adequate preparation for a literacy specialist? The proposed preparation program for the literacy specialist includes "*Reading in the content areas, including new literacies in technology;*" this is rather vague. The program should include separate preparation in how to teach *all literacy skills* through the content areas.

The proposed preparation program is also inadequate because it includes study in areas that are far beyond the knowledge and skill level of a new literacy specialist. Coming to understand and be able to use knowledge in areas such as 'developing measurable school goals,' 'overcoming barriers to school change,' and 'coaching,' as they apply to the field of literacy, requires that the teacher has a solid base in many other areas of study first. That base has to include content knowledge, and the skills to put that knowledge into practice. Reaching this level of development takes time. Trying to cram study in higher-level areas, of which there are many in the proposed literacy specialist certificate, is worthless. Chances are strong that the teacher won't incorporate what she or he 'learned' into everyday practice, because the teacher has to have a strong grasp of the basics first.

We need to find a way to create a win-win situation in the preparation and certification of literacy teachers. The questions that need to be answered are complex, and readily apparent solutions often appear to be contradictory. The choices are there: push through the

proposed literacy specialist certificate, and hope for the best, or look at more options for preparation and certification. The goal should be to create a preparation program and certificate that will provide the greatest benefits for both teachers and students.