

Remarks of Michele Ridolfi O'Neill
Education Issues Specialist
Connecticut Education Association

Before the Program Review and Investigation Committee
November 14, 2011

Good afternoon Senator Fonfara and Representative Rowe, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee. I'm Michele O'Neill, an education issues specialist with the Connecticut Education Association. I've attached to my written testimony that of a frustrated guidance counselor whose situation I'd like to summarize, as it supports the need for an educator professional standards board.

Mr. Gonet is an experienced guidance counselor who came to CT from Chicago and applied for a guidance counselor certificate. After several attempts to submit attestation from Chicago Public Schools that he was successfully employed as a counselor there, the State Department of Education (SDE) issued him an interim provisional certificate, valid for one year. He was told he would have to take and pass the Praxis I exams to demonstrate basic competence in reading, writing, and mathematics, or submit a transcript of his 30-year-old ACT exam scores. He learned that legislation was proposed that would waive the competency exams for teachers coming into CT if they held a valid certificate from another state, and had either taught for three years under it, or had a master's degree in the subject in which they were seeking CT certification.

Mr. Gonet asked the SDE if the waiver would apply to him, and was told that guidance counselors didn't fall under the category of 'teachers,' and the wording of the legislation referred to those holding 'teaching certificates.' The SDE's explanation was that CT issues three types of educator certification: teacher, special services, and administrator. Bill 6901, they said, had separate sections that addressed the administrators and teachers, but not special service personnel. We believe this is an arbitrary interpretation of statute. Bill 6901 states that the competency exams may be waived for anyone who holds "*a valid teaching certificate....in the subject area or endorsement area for which such person is seeking certification in Connecticut.*"

A 'subject area' would apply to a classroom based teacher. An 'endorsement area' would apply to those who are not traditionally classroom based, such as school guidance counselors, school psychologists, and others. There are several places in which statute defines 'teacher' as "*each certified professional employee below the rank of superintendent employed by a board of education in a position requiring a certificate issued by the State Board of Education.*" If each certified professional employee below the rank of superintendent is classified as a 'teacher,' it follows logically that those professionals hold 'teaching certificates.' This would include classroom based teachers, school guidance counselors, and many other categories of professionals.

Why is this important? It appears that the SDE has made an arbitrary interpretation of statute, which, we believe, occurred because of a lack of experience and knowledge of what a 'teacher' really is. An educator professional standards board composed of practicing educators would have understood the role that special service personnel play as 'teachers,' would not have had the same interpretation as the SDE did in this situation, and Mr. Gonet would have been issued a certificate. A deep understanding of educators' roles, based on experience in the field, would reside in an educator standards board and be used to set standards and make decisions that make sense. It's time we moved in that direction.