

Remarks of Sheila Cohen
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Before the State Dept. of Education and State Board of Education
Concerning the proposed special education certificate

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Good afternoon. My name is Sheila Cohen. I am a third grade teacher from the Orange Public Schools and Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association. I'd like to comment on the ramifications we believe will occur if the proposed special education certificate is adopted.

The list of teacher shortage areas that was distributed by the State Department of Education (SDE) at the State Board of Education meeting on April 7 shows that, for the 2010-2011 school year, special education is the #2 shortage area. This is consistent with special ed's ranking over the past decade, when it has usually been either #2 or #3 on the shortage list, recognizing that on the 2005-06 list, special ed was #4 on the shortage list, and for 2007-08 it was #5 on the shortage list. Over the past ten years, special education has had more positions left vacant at the time of the fall hiring report than any other content area, with the exception of this year, when there were more vacancies for speech and language pathologists. Special education has also consistently ranked high

over the past decade in the number of DSAPs (durational shortage area permits) granted by the SDE.

The shortage has been so consistent that the State Department of Education approved an Advanced Alternate Route to Certification program for special education, designed for experienced teachers who wish to become certified to teach special education. The Advanced ARC program is now in its 5th year of operation.

At the certification hearing on April 7, the SDE stated that there is a shortage of special educators nationwide. If special education has been on the teacher shortage list so consistently for the past decade and we need an AARC program to certify teachers to teach special education, why would we want to make it more difficult for a teacher to obtain special education certification by requiring a master's degree for the initial certificate and eliminating the bachelor's degree? This makes absolutely no sense. Some teachers have testified at other hearings that they've gone through a master's program in special education because they wanted the knowledge, but they don't want the certificate. The proposed certificate, with expanded responsibilities for a new special educator, will not attract teachers to the field.

One of the reasons teachers don't enter, or leave the field of special education after a short period of time, is because of the increased demands on them. Rather than help alleviate this, the proposed changes seek to expand the role of the special educator. This, too, will drive teachers from this field.

The State Department of Education's drive to push special education into a master's-only level preparation program has, since 2006, led to a number of proposed changes to how special education preparation and certification should look. Not one of the proposed set of changes has been supported by teachers who know that, because special education is such a broad, complex field, no one person can do it all - not one regular education classroom teacher nor one special educator. Special educators see their colleagues burn out and leave the field in greater numbers every year. The only way to attract educators to special education is to make preparation and certification meaningful and manageable, which must, of necessity, be divided into two clear roles and certificates for special educators. I urge you to listen to what teachers say will happen if this proposal moves forward. I urge you to work with teachers, rather than against them, to create a certificate that is beneficial for them and the students they serve, and to maintain a bachelor's degree level in the field of special education.