

Remarks of Doreen Merrill
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Before the Program Review and Investigations Committee
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Good afternoon Senator Fonfara and Representative Rowe, and members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee.

My name is Doreen Merrill, I'm a special education teacher in the Woodbridge Public Schools. I'm here today to comment on the need for an independent educator professional standards board in Connecticut.

With the advent of NCLB, local school districts were required to assure that all currently employed teachers met the highly qualified requirement established by that law by the end of the 2005-06 school year. The law laid out the primary ways a teacher could 'show HQ,' as we said. It also established an alternate process that could be used by all veteran teachers until the end of the 2006-07 school year, and by certain groups of teachers beyond that, notably special educators and teachers holding an elementary certificate who were being assigned to teach a single subject, such as math or science, to students covered by their certificate grade range. The alternate process is known as HOUSSE, standing for **H**igh, **O**bjective, **U**niform **S**tate **S**tandard of **E**valuation. Connecticut's HOUSSE process had been approved by the federal Department of Education (DoE); since federal law requires a HOUSSE plan, such a plan can only be eliminated if the provision is eliminated from law.

Over the 2006-07 and 2007-08 years, however, things began to unravel in a sequence of events.

- ◆ May 12, 2006 – US Education Secretary Margaret Spellings issued a letter encouraging states to eliminate the use of the HOUSSE process for veteran teachers, beginning in the 2006-07 school year.
- ◆ May 25, 2006 – NEA wrote a letter to Spellings, opposing this position, citing NCLB law that requires states to have a HOUSSE plan, and urging withdrawal of her letter.

- ◆ September 5, 2006 – Spellings issued a letter to chief state school officers that essentially acknowledged the DoE couldn't eliminate HOUSSE.
- ◆ Fall 2006 – The CT State Department of Education submitted a revised NCLB plan to the US Department of Education, outlining a plan to eliminate the use of HOUSSE by the end of the 2006-07 year. The federal review stated *"it appears that the SEA is exceeding federal expectations by eliminating its use for permitted, excepted teachers. We therefore recommend that the SEA review how far they will take implementation of this federal policy."*
- ◆ September 2006 – A letter sent from CEA to Acting Commissioner Coleman explained events to date regarding the possible elimination of HOUSSE, and urging him to adhere to original CT plan, since that was originally approved by the federal DoE and couldn't be changed without federal approval.
- ◆ October 2007 – SDE issued a circular letter C-7 explaining the letter from US Secretary Spellings that encouraged elimination of HOUSSE plans in states, with 3 instances of exceptions. The SDE said CT had to meet this 'requirement,' so would comply.
- ◆ Circular letter C-7 was brought to CEA's attention in early November 2007 – CEA sought NEA advice on this policy, and received information regarding the legal status of eliminating HOUSSE.
- ◆ January 7, 2008 – CEA sent a letter to Commissioner McQuillan urging him to rescind circular letter C-7, as it violated federal statute.
- ◆ March 3, 2008 – Commissioner McQuillan issued circular letter C-13, informing superintendents that he had received information that the federal DoE agreed that NEA's interpretation of Spellings' September 5, 2006 letter was correct, and that HOUSSE would remain a viable method for teachers to show HQ.

What does this issue have to do with the need for an independent educator standards board in Connecticut? The connection is this: The elimination of HOUSSE would have negatively impacted thousands of educators and the students they serve in districts across the state. The SDE should have been aware that Margaret Spellings had reissued a letter maintaining the use

of the HOUSSE process, as it is their role to monitor NCLB news regarding implementation. The SDE's interpretation of the first letter from Spellings, which 'encouraged' the elimination of HOUSSE, saying that it was 'required' by states is obviously erroneous. Professional educators understand what it means to be an 'effective' educator, and have a vested interest in making sure educators meet that standard, while affording multiple, flexible ways of doing so that comply with law. Educators who would comprise an independent standards board would not have interpreted the Spellings letter of September 2006 without first consulting with their expert resources and coming to consensus on the meaning of the letter. The time and effort that was spent sorting out this issue would have been used to move other, more important education issues forward. The lesson we should learn from this incident is this: an independent educator standards board in Connecticut would use their professional resources to more effectively and efficiently make decisions that affect Connecticut educators.