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TO: Jess Stairs, Chairman
House Education Committee

FROM: Lawrence H. Curry 

DATE: June 15, 2000

FROM: Chapter 354

I share in the Committee's consensus that the current Chapter 354 is a much-improved document over the one we saw a year ago. Having said that, I want to point out seven examples of weaknesses in a document intended to be a guide for teacher education programs.

1. Antiquated conceptually. In both philosophical approach and specific tasks, the chapter utilizes antiquated ideas and does not reflect the current understanding of learning and learning techniques.

For example, the credit unit is a bad measure for college level learning. It is, indeed, what we use to measure steps towards a degree, and it is universal. However, credits reflect courses, which have their own integrity, which integrity does not necessarily represent the practical result we want or find necessary for our purpose.

Likewise, grade point average (GPA) does not reflect learning or performance – and GPA is especially inappropriate as side criteria in judging pedagogical skills. Content knowledge is critical, but how that knowledge is organized and communicated is equally critical. Such heavy emphasis on GPA, as indicated in Chapter 354 as it currently reads, is a simplistic and antiquated notion.

Finally, where transfers from one institution to another occurs, many receiving institutions accept the credits (above C), but do not average in the grade point.

2. Vagueness in language and purpose. Language in critical places is frustratingly vague. For example, paragraph 354.24 speaks to academic preparation, which consists of six semester credits (or the equivalent) in college level mathematics. Since this preparation applies to elementary education majors, who may teach up to 8th grade, it is a weak, watered down and inadequate requirement. The math preparation should speak to knowing algebra and calculus, for example, rather than than "6" semester hour credits in mathematics, which might be achieved without taking either algebra or calculus.

Similarly, six semester hours in college level English composition and literature is poor preparation for a school curriculum that should be increasingly emphasizing writing.

3. Deflated standards. Certainly the intent of Chapter 354 is to design a program that prepares teachers to engage in meeting higher standards. Ironically, the document, because of its antiquated conceptual approach, does not expose prospective teachers to the rigorous educational experience they must have. Worse, in the name of content improvement, so much is jammed into a proposed four-year program, that the experience to become a teacher is a gulp rather than a feast.

Moreover, nowhere does the document show a measurement of performance or assessment by observation in the classroom. We need tasks to measure performance.

We have long recognized that grading, at best, is arbitrary and perhaps not indicative of what the student understands, but what he or she has perhaps memorized or mastered for the purpose of regurgitation. We need to find a more meaningful measurement of performance. To fail to recognize this responsibility in this document is to laud the GPA as a goal in itself, at the expense of the goal of teaching.

4. Thus, I believe the chapter suffers from a too heavy reliance on scores, on tests, on GPAs. The inadvertent lowering of standards has ironically been caused by a desire to set GPAs higher. Such an approach is soothing and easy to grasp, but bypasses too many real and unpredictable situations. Grading is both arbitrary and variable by instructor and institution to be the basis for an academic program, especially teaching.
5. Too simplistic in approach. The language in Chapter 354, to define a course of study preparing teachers, needs to be precise and is admittedly difficult to select so as to give an exact meaning to the chapter. For example, paragraph 354.25 (Academic performance) sub paragraph (b) is poorly written. It says academic preparation courses under paragraph 354.24 shall be the same as for a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree.

What direction does that give anyone? A candidate in the teaching program is going to receive a Bachelor of Science or maybe a Bachelor of Arts. So our guidelines say potential teachers will have the same academic preparation as potential teachers. Hello? Redundant? Hidden meaning? The paragraph simply does not express clearly its intentions, or worse, it says nothing!

6. Inappropriate jargon. The field of education, like every other discipline, has developed its own unique jargon. Sometimes, we may attempt to utilize that jargon, but in trying to capture an idea, we create a meaningless or contradictory phrase. Paragraph 354.24 sub paragraph (c) refers to required elective courses. The defense for this term is that 'required elective' is used as a category. The document giving direction to schools and departments that will train teachers should either include a definition of 'required elective' or consider a further distinction like 'required supplemental credits' as opposed to electives. Electives should be electives.

7. Use of terms 'pedagogical' and 'professional'. The document refers to academic coursework and pedagogical coursework, which is clear – one is the material to be taught the other is the way in which the material is to be taught. When the document introduces 'professional coursework in paragraph 354.26 (b), what is the distinction?

Moreover, the apparent definitions in sub paragraphs (1) and (2) are not only helpful, because the distinction is obtuse, but they are too limited. The definitions limit professional and pedagogical to informing about technology and developing and understanding of technology and its impact on teaching. Thus, all professional and pedagogical is limited only to technology.

Since both education committees (House and Senate) have overwhelmingly rejected this document, I hope we will revisit this important issue in the near future. Perhaps, we can get some expert help in current educational concepts, and chart a meaningful course for schools and departments of education. I am willing to assist in whatever way I can in this endeavor.