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INDEPENDENT REGULATORY
RENEW COMMISSION

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As a professor of special education and an advocate for students with disabilities, I am very pleased that the proposed Chapter 49-2 changes, if approved, will require all teacher candidates in Pennsylvania to complete 3 courses or 270 hours that address students with special needs. I am equally as pleased that the proposal will require 90 hours or 3 courses to prepare teacher candidates to teach English Language Learners. As a teacher educator for 15 years, I embrace this initiative to prepare all teachers to be competent and confident in addressing the academic and social concerns of students with diverse needs in their public education classrooms.

Recently, teacher education faculty have discussed possible consequences of these proposed changes. Within these discussions, they appear to be most concerned with their ability to develop and offer 3 special education courses. Critics of the proposed course requirements believe that they will be able to integrate all required special education content/standards into existing courses. Furthermore, they believe that these hours can and would be taught or monitored by general education faculty with little or no expertise in special education.

Based on these beliefs, teacher education faculty encouraged members of the State Board to approve the hours versus specific required courses and to allow individual colleges to address the standards/content in the manner best suited for their programs by personnel who do not have a terminal degree in special education. I have concerns regarding issues.

Faculty with little or no training or experience in teaching students with disabilities do not have adequate knowledge nor expertise in disability culture, special education legislation and litigation, characteristics of students with special needs, the special education process, assessment tools including the Response to Instruction (RTI) mandates, nor instruction using research based strategies and accommodations which are required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Expecting general education faculty with no expertise to effectively cover this information in existing courses, research projects, or within lesson plans is highly improbable and likely to be inefficient. In fact, if critics of the proposed requirements had a true understanding of the breadth and depth of the field of special education, they would not consider nor suggest having the ability to cover this material without "highly qualified faculty" in an hour by hour basis.

One cannot aspire to teach special education content via an "hour approach" when one has not mastered the content and therefore is unsure of how to attach it to existing courses. I am certain that if permitted to do so, this would result in a futile and "lip service only" situation.

While No Child Left Behind mandates "highly qualified teachers", allowing general teacher educators to deliver special education content will unlikely result in "highly qualified teachers".

Furthermore, the likelihood that the majority of seasoned teacher educators to expand their knowledge and skills with current special education practices is highly unlikely.

I encourage you and the other members of the State Board to approve the proposed requirements, specifically, three courses rather than 270 hours and one ELL course rather than 90 hours. I also encourage you to require colleges and universities to hire special education and ELL experts to meet these requirements. Otherwise, we will not accomplish these welcomed changes.

Sincerely,

Sarah Jane DeHaas, PhD
Professor of Education