

Bethel University Will Challenge State Board of Education's Denial of Approval of Bethel's Professional Education and Licensure Program.

Bethel University is currently preparing to take steps to advocate for its students working toward professional teacher licensure after the Tennessee State Board of Education voted on Friday, July 22nd, to approve the Tennessee Department of Education's recommendation to deny approval of Bethel's Professional Education and Licensing Program – a decision that could potentially impact as many as 500 of Bethel's 5,600 students.

Bethel's School of Education has been approved as an educational preparation provider by the State of Tennessee for as long as the State Board of Education has required that teacher training programs be approved in order to recommend graduates for teacher licensure. Under the current policy, programs that have been approved must undergo a comprehensive review every seven years in order to maintain continuing approval.

According to Bethel University President Dr. Walter Butler, the Tennessee Department of Education's recommendation to deny approval came as a shock to Bethel administration after it learned in May of 2016 that its initial teacher preparation and advanced preparation programs received full accreditation by the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation ("CAEP"), a national accrediting agency approved by the United States Department of Education to accredit educator preparation providers.

The decision to grant Bethel national accreditation was made even though CAEP found that two of the six standards that were developed by CAEP's predecessor agency, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education ("NCATE"), were not fully met. "Even though there were issues with two of the six standards for accreditation, CAEP granted accreditation for our professional education program giving us time to address issues before a return site visit in the fall of 2017," Butler said. "With our getting this accreditation, we thought the state board approval would remain since the State Department of Education had said publicly they would rely on the CAEP recommendation."

The Department's recommendation for denial of approval was based on the fact that CAEP found that Bethel did not meet two of the six standards. However, despite the Department's reliance on the NCATE standards, the Department refused to adopt the national accrediting agency's decision to grant accreditation.

In addition, the Department itself conducted an on-site visit in April, 2015, and determined that Bethel met all six NCATE standards. As such, the Department recommended that the Board grant continuing approval to Bethel in July, 2015, but then unexpectedly asked the Board to defer action on Bethel's approval status in order to let the CAEP process play out.

The Board's action to adopt the Department's recommendation and deny approval of Bethel's program appears to be unprecedented as the Board has never denied approval to any other education preparation provider who has achieved national accreditation.

"We plan to do everything we can to challenge the denial of approval," Butler said. "We will work within the parameters of the judicial process, and we feel confident that we will ultimately prevail." Butler said that the University is hoping for a quick resolution that will minimize any detrimental impact on its students.

If the Board's decision to deny approval stands, Bethel would operate as usual for the next 12 months giving those close to graduation time to complete the courses they would need to graduate and gain licensure. After that period of time, Bethel would not be able to recommend candidates for licensure for at least a two-year period. Butler went on to say that the University will take reasonable steps to help all other students in Bethel's Professional Education and Licensing Program find ways to gain licensure.

"We really are scratching our heads on this one," Butler said. "We were told one thing by CAEP, and now without hardly any notice, we are being given this news. It just doesn't make sense that CAEP would grant accreditation and the State Board not follow suit."

Butler said the two standards not fully met dealt with candidate knowledge, skills and dispositions and with assessment systems and unit evaluations. "From the information provided to us, it appears not so much that our students don't meet a level of standard in these areas but that we have not adequately documented that they meet these standards," Butler said. "We have put into place a very committed and very competent leadership team and we are documenting that our education students are indeed meeting the standards they need to meet."

Butler pointed out that much evidence shows the quality of teachers prepared by the nearly 175 year old school.

"Our students have a 100 percent pass rate on the PRAXIS Principles of Learning and Teaching examination in three of the last five years with no pass rate below 93%."

"We have good relationships with schools in the region with many of them continually hiring our graduates year after year.

"We understand the purpose of standards," he said. "We set them for our University and its various programs every day. It seems to me that the actions taken by the Tennessee Department of Education and State Board of Education do not appear to be made in a manner that was consistent with Tennessee law. By challenging these actions, we are hoping we will gain the opportunity to continue to improve our program and continue to produce quality professional educators."