

Wrong direction on teacher competency

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Virginia would be foolish to try to fix a teacher shortage by dumbing-down requirements for the job.

That's the danger in a shortsighted bill approved late in the 2005 General Assembly session.

Sponsored by Winchester Sen. Russ Potts, who acted at the request of local school superintendents, the bill exempts teachers trained out-of-state from meeting the Praxis 1 licensing scores required of teachers trained in Virginia.

In effect, the bill looks like a back door way to undermine Virginia's highest-in-the-nation requirements on the reading-writing-and-math exam.

When the bill takes effect in July, a student at East Carolina University can graduate, take Praxis 1, meet the North Carolina cutoff score of 522 points, and begin teaching immediately in Virginia, fully licensed.

Meanwhile, a student trained at James Madison or Old Dominion will have to meet Virginia's 532-point cutoff score for full licensing. If the Virginia-educated student misses the mark, he'll receive a provisional license for up to three years. After that, if he still can't pass, his teaching days are over. This is nuts.

One way to fix the disparity, of course, is to lower the Virginia scores or to eliminate the Praxis 1 requirement altogether. Suspicious minds expect that may be the ultimate goal of those pushing the bill. Some educators prefer a focus on Praxis 2, which measures a teaching candidate's ability in the subject matter he'll teach.

Dropping the general knowledge portion of Praxis would be a mistake, however. Even art and physical education teachers need to know how to write a coherent sentence. Math may be more negotiable, but Praxis 1 is generally viewed as a 10th-grade test. That's not a high hurdle for someone who wants a career in our classrooms.

In an era when Virginia demands more of students, it's indefensible to expect less of teachers. The answer to teacher shortages is to encourage talented career-switchers to apply and to offer pay differentials in hard-to-fill areas such as science, math, and special education.

Simply lowering the bar is the easy and short-sighted way out.

Board of Education President Tom Jackson has wisely appointed a bipartisan group to evaluate the concerns about Praxis 1. In the meantime, Potts' bill imposes a blatantly unfair dual standard.

Gov. Mark Warner should veto the bill or, at least, recommend a re-enactment clause. That would require lawmakers to take up the matter again next year when they'd have time to think before they act.