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Teacher licensing change prompts quick opposition by Easley

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RALEIGH, N.C. -- With North Carolina facing an annual shortage of thousands of teachers, lawmakers and local educators are asking for greater leeway in hiring applicants from out of state.

But they're encountering opposition from Gov. Mike Easley, who warned Wednesday that proposed legislation making it easier to bring in new teachers threatens the state's educational progress.

"We are raising standards in North Carolina. We are not lowering them," Easley said in a statement. "The school administrators need to accept our commitment to high standards and get busy finding the teachers who meet those qualification with the new tools that we are giving them."

The state's top two educators - Easley appointees - also announced their opposition to the bill, which was crafted by two Democrats and two Republicans from the House and filed Wednesday.

The lawmakers and others say local school districts are desperate for ways to hire the "highly qualified" teachers mandated under the federal "No Child Left Behind" law.

"By removing some of the barriers out there, we have something to help solve the problem," said Rep. Doug Yongue, D-Scotland, a bill sponsor.

Under "No Child Left Behind," every teacher of core academic subjects must meet state standards for highly qualified status by June 30, 2006, or schools could be penalized or see federal funds dry up.

That puts the pressure on the public schools, which each year must fill some 11,000 teaching vacancies. Though many of those jobs are filled by North Carolina teachers transferring from other schools, the state's teaching universities are producing only about 2,200 new teachers each year, according to the Department of Public Instruction.

That forces local districts to recruit teachers from elsewhere, and Yongue and others who spoke Wednesday at a news conference said that under the state's current rules, that's becoming more and more of a challenge.

The fact that all elementary and many middle school and high school teachers who come from out of state must pass a standardized test to be licensed to teach here is a hindrance in hiring, they said.

The bill would eliminate that requirement for middle school and high school teachers who already have been labeled highly qualified in another state. Elementary and special education teachers would still have to be tested.

Local educators complain that many out-of-state applicants don't want to go to the trouble of taking the Praxis II test when they've already proven their teaching skills.

Principal Sylvia Mizzelle of Hearne Elementary School in Wilson County said she's had vacancies of up to six months trying to hire someone who meets the current "highly qualified" qualifications. In the meantime, students are taught by long-term substitute teachers.

"We're not asking North Carolina to lower their standards, but to accept the standards of teachers from other states," Mizzelle said.

But that's the problem, according to State Board of Education Chairman Howard Lee. He argues that several states have lowered their standards to make it easier for their teachers to meet the federal requirements.

The board and the Easley administration are already working to recruit and retain teachers, Lee said, by improving teacher pay and working conditions. The state is also offering college scholarships and a partnership with community colleges.

But "granting a license to unqualified teachers just to have a warm body is not" a desired option, Lee said Wednesday at a hastily called news conference with Tricia Willoughby, the state school superintendent.

The Department of Public Instruction already allows veteran out-of-state secondary school teachers to be considered "highly qualified" if they performed graduate work in their course subject or hold national certification.

Despite Lee's assurances, legislators and school administrators believe the state isn't acting fast enough ahead of the No Child Left Behind deadline.

The State Board of Education received a committee's recommendations on accepting out-of-state licenses last year, but has largely failed to act on them, said Katherine Joyce with the North Carolina Association of School Administrators.

Easley's sharp response to the bill may be because it proposes to reduce the education board authority to certify teachers. Easley vetoed a bill two years ago because he said that measure would erode the board's authority by imposing teacher licensure rules.