

Posted on Thu, Mar. 17, 2005

Bill would change rules for teachers

N.C. should ease requirements for those 'highly qualified' in other states, it says

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RALEIGH - Several lawmakers, led by Rep. Becky Carney, D-Mecklenburg, are picking a fight with Gov. Mike Easley over the way to resolve North Carolina's teacher shortage.

Carney, Rep. Linda Johnson, R-Cabarrus, and two other legislators filed a bill Wednesday to make it easier for teachers considered "highly qualified" in other states to move into N.C. classrooms. Those educators would no longer have to take the state's Praxis exams before getting a full teaching license.

According to the backers, some veteran teachers consider it an insult and a hassle to have to take Praxis -- a series of SAT-like exams that show a teacher's competence in different subjects.

The issue could turn into a showdown with Easley. The governor vetoed an education bill two years ago, saying part of it took away the State Board of Education's authority over licensing teachers. Easley staffers have made the same criticism of Carney's proposal.

But school board leaders statewide have backed the bill, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent James Pughsley.

"Give me a teacher with a master's degree and eight years experience -- I want to get them into a classroom," Pughsley said.

Lawmakers from smaller counties bordering South Carolina and Virginia also back the bill, saying this makes it tough to hire teachers living just across the border.

"Their hands are tied," Carney said of those local school leaders. "This would absolutely keep and add highly qualified teachers to every classroom."

Easley, however, immediately criticized the bill. A staffer was handing out a statement within an hour of the bill's filing. The Democratic governor then sent the state's school board chairman and superintendent of public instruction before reporters to denounce it.

The governor argues the bill lowers the state's standards, since teachers might be deemed highly qualified in other states, even if they make lower scores on Praxis than North Carolina would have required.

"The school administrators need to accept our commitment to high standards and get busy finding the teachers who meet those qualifications with the new tools that we are giving them," Easley's statement said.

The N.C. Association of Educators, the teacher's union, also condemned the bill.

Supporters of the measure say they're not lowering standards. They argue it's better to have a teacher lead a class who was qualified in another state than to have some classrooms led by substitute teachers.

Backers also say their bill might help North Carolina deal with the statewide schools case known as Leandro, which mandates every N.C. student has the right to a highly qualified teacher. Carney said she's courted Superior Court Judge Howard Manning of Raleigh, who's overseeing the Leandro case, asking him to publicly back them. Manning has not, so far.

Both the lawmakers and the governor are trying to find ways to tackle a teacher shortage in North Carolina that they expect will get worse.

The federal "No Child Left Behind" Act requires each classroom to have a "highly qualified" teacher by next summer. A story in Sunday's Observer noted that about 80 percent of the 110,000 teachers in both Carolinas meet that standard. Teachers who have spent years in classrooms might have to leave the profession by next summer if they haven't proven themselves under the new federal standards.

And because of North Carolina's growth, the state's school districts need to add 10,000 to 11,000 teachers each year. The state's universities graduate about 3,200 annually. About 2,200 of those graduates end up teaching in N.C. schools.

Easley and lawmakers have proposed offering more Teaching Fellows college scholarships and opening teacher education at community colleges as ways to draw more candidates into the profession.

Patricia Willoughby, Easley's appointed superintendent of public instruction, said the state will have to change its standards in some way to draw more teachers.

Right now, for instance, teachers with four or more years of experience in other states and good standing can get a one-year N.C. teaching license. After that, they can get a regular license.

The requirements of "No Child Left Behind" will force the state to at least tweak that policy.

But the Praxis requirements won't change, said state schools chairman Howard Lee, who called it "non-negotiable." He added, "at least right now."

staff writer Peter Smolowitz contributed