



House OKs bill removing teacher test requirement

Governor and the chairman of the State Board of Education stand firm in their opposition

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Saying that it would help relieve the state's teacher shortage, the N.C. House voted unanimously yesterday to remove requirements for experienced teachers who move here from other states to take a standardized test.

But Gov. Mike Easley and the chairman of the State Board of Education continue to oppose the move, saying that it would reduce state standards for teachers.

To meet requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the bill would eliminate a requirement for middle- and high-school teachers who are considered "highly qualified" in another state to take a standardized test known as Praxis II before they can teach in North Carolina.

"The shortage of teachers in our state ... is not getting better - it's getting worse," said Rep. Doug Yongue, D-Scotland, the bill's lead sponsor. "Our No. 1 concern is to ensure that we have a duly qualified and licensed teacher in every classroom."

Although growth in the state's population is creating a need for 11,000 new teachers a year, said Rep. Linda Johnson, R-Cabarrus, the state hires just 2,200 of the 3,200 teachers that its universities produce each year.

"Our public schools rely heavily on out-of-state recruitment," Johnson said.

"We are," said Rep. Edith Warren, D-Pitt, "in a crisis situation in regard to meeting the needs of teachers. "I know principals are interviewing by telephone all across this country."

Rep. Becky Carney, D-Mecklenburg, said that the state desperately needs trained teachers.

"Some of those students ... have been sitting with a full-time substitute teacher who is only required to have a high-school diploma," Carney said.

Rep. Laura Wiley, R-Guilford, a teacher herself, said that the bill would remove an obstruction that keeps principals from hiring qualified teachers.

"This bill takes away a barrier to hiring teachers that are so needed in this state," Wiley said. "Let's offer teachers who want to move here a chance to work here.

"A teacher is not made with a test. A teacher performs her art and her craft in the classroom," she said. "We are talking about experienced teachers, quality teachers."

Rep. Robert Grady, R-Onslow, said that it is time to examine how much testing the state requires of teachers. He also warned that the bill doesn't do enough to solve the state's teacher shortage.

"This is going to help some school districts, but it's not going to solve the problem," Grady said.

The bill's backers say that under No Child Left Behind, a middle- or high-school teacher ranked as "highly qualified" must have a master's degree in the subject, have spent 24 semester hours on the subject in college or have a bachelor of science degree in the subject.

Even though the bill passed the House by a vote of 113-0, Easley and Howard Lee, the chairman of the State Board of Education, have criticized the legislation and continued to oppose it yesterday.

"This bill is particularly ill-timed, in that the State Board of Education is meeting this week to resolve this issue," said Sherri Johnson, a spokeswoman for Easley.

"In addition, this bill in its current form lowers standards for teachers and would put lesser-qualified teachers in our classrooms. North Carolina has no intention of doing this to our children," she said.

Lee said that the bill takes a narrow approach and that the state board is working on several approaches to confirm out-of-state teachers' qualifications.

If the state drops the Praxis II test, though, "we are accepting that the certification in other states is as strong as it is in our state. And that may or may not be true," Lee said. "I think we should set our own standards."

North Carolina generally requires higher scores on the exam than other states, he said.

"I don't think we should ever do anything to back away from our high standards for teachers," he said.

"You're letting people in and you have no idea what their content knowledge is," he said. "We have no problem with lawyers taking the bar ... and I've compared teachers to brain surgeons."

Lee said he has suggested a variety of measures to recruit teachers.

"We've got to be creative," he said. "You've got to do something to get people to give up other career paths and come into the classroom."

The bill now goes to the Senate for consideration.

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