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## Teacher licensing bill vetoed

### Governor fears erosion of quality



The bill vetoed by Gov. Mike Easley would ease rules for out-of-state teachers. He said it would 'cheat our children.'

Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu

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By TODD SILBERMAN, Staff Writer

Gov. Mike Easley drew a hard line Thursday on teaching standards for North Carolina classrooms. He vetoed a bill the legislature passed last month that would make it easier for school districts to hire teachers from other states.

The state's teacher shortage has forced dozens of districts to hire more teachers from elsewhere. Local school leaders have pressed the legislature to ease licensing requirements for those out-of-state teachers.

But Easley said Thursday that the measure threatens to erode hard-won progress in the state's public schools.

"This bill reduces the North Carolina teaching standards to the lowest in the nation," he said before wielding his veto stamp in public for the first time. "It cheats our children out of a quality education and dishonestly classifies unqualified teachers as highly qualified."

He said the bill also would limit the authority of the State Board of Education to certify teachers.

Easley's move sets up further conflict with the legislature, which could override the veto by Oct. 12, further negotiate with the governor or let the veto stand.

The measure, which passed by a wide margin, would grant North Carolina certification to any teacher qualified to teach in any other state, regardless of those states' standards, which vary widely. For now, teachers licensed in other states but new to North Carolina must meet one of several requirements, including testing or national certification.

"It's a race to the bottom," Easley said. If another state lowered its standards, he said, it could hurt North Carolina schools.

Easley cited as an example Georgia, which recently made it easier for teachers to meet classroom qualifications.

Local school leaders disputed Easley's argument.

"I think we're very discerning when we hire," said Bill Harrison, superintendent of Cumberland County schools, one of the state's largest systems. "In the age of accountability, principals apply greater scrutiny, and they're much less tolerant of mediocre teachers."

**An urgent need**

The need for teachers has never been greater, school officials said, and the state must remove barriers to attracting and hiring them.

"The issue for us is the ability to bring teachers to North Carolina without having to jump through bureaucratic hoops and red tape," said Jim Causby, executive director of the N.C. Association of School Administrators. The group backs the bill.

"It's not a problem that's going to disappear," he said.

About half of the 10,000 teachers hired by North Carolina districts every year come from elsewhere, and that proportion is edging higher in Triangle districts. Wake and Durham filled more than half their hundreds of vacancies this summer from out of state.

"The potential of the bill is to help streamline and facilitate hiring people from out of state," said Fred Williams, Durham schools' director for recruitment and retention. "Some of the folks who might be attracted to North Carolina take themselves out of consideration because of these rules."

Robin Little, director of human relations for Johnston County schools, stopped short of saying that passing the law would fill the district's 15 vacant positions.

"Every strategy we have to recruit helps," Little said.

But at least one teaching-quality expert shares Easley's worry that the bill may put supply needs ahead of high standards.

"North Carolina shouldn't carte blanche accept any other state's definition of 'highly qualified' when we know that other states are all over the map," said Barnett Berry, president of the Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, a Chapel Hill policy group. "Superintendents have every right to be clamoring, but when are we getting off this merry-go-round of lowering standards to get more people in the classroom?"

### **No compromise**

Easley said he had hoped to avoid a veto with a compromise, but he said legislators were unwilling to budge. The bill was approved unanimously by the House. The Senate approved it 45-4. To override Easley's veto, each chamber would need a three-fifths majority of members present.

"I hope the legislature will make the decision not to override this veto," Easley said. The legislature would have to reconvene and vote on the measure by Oct. 12.

Senate leader Marc Basnight, a Manteo Democrat, said that an override is possible, but House Speaker Jim Black, a Democrat from Charlotte, said he was still hoping for a last-minute deal.

"I believe the Senate would override," Basnight said. "We have a huge shortage of teachers."

Black suggested that time remains for a compromise.

"We have about 10 days to discuss the various options regarding this issue and the governor's veto," Black said in a statement. "The previous votes on this bill by legislators and a vote to override a veto are two very different things, and I will continue to talk with members of the House about their feelings and suggestions on the issue."

Jerry Smith, principal of Clayton High School, said he hopes the state will ease the rules. Twenty of the 107 teachers at his school are from out of state.

And while he worries about diluting teacher standards, he worries more about filling classrooms; a first-year teacher can make \$1,600 more a year working next door in Wake County.

"If you can find an experienced teacher who is qualified and willing to relocate," he said, "you ought to be able to put that person to work."

(Staff writers Marti Maguire and Rob Christensen contributed to this report.)

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