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Teachers fret over new tests

CONCORD — Teachers are used to giving tests, but soon they could be taking them to prove they are "highly qualified."

The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires all teachers to be deemed highly qualified by June 2006. The mandate has led to fear and confusion in the education community across the state. Right now, there is just one way for a teacher to become highly qualified and that's taking a test.

However, the state Department of Education is working on a second method. There is uncertainty as to how a teacher earns the moniker "highly qualified" or if a teacher can be fired for failing to make the grade. That's why the House Education Committee is looking at language to help clarify the confusion.

"Even though we know all of our teachers in this state are highly qualified, we do have a title we have to deal with," committee Chairman Stephen L'Heureux, R-Hooksett, said Thursday. "I felt this issue was urgent enough we should move forward."

L'Heureux introduced legislation Thursday which would prevent a teacher from being fired simply for failing to be deemed "highly qualified." "We're in a situation where we need teachers and we shouldn't be kicking them out," L'Heureux added. Teachers can take the Praxis II exam, which is a very comprehensive test, to meet the federal mandate.

Rick Trombly of NEA-NH, told the House Education Committee Thursday the test is not fair, especially for elementary school teachers. "The Praxis tests are dreaded. Not because teachers are afraid they're not highly qualified, but because the test covers areas that are not in their field," Trombly said. "This legislation is needed. There is a fear amongst our members they will be fired if they don't pass this test. And there may be some superintendents who feel they can't renew a teacher's contract if they fail."

Education Commissioner Lyonel Tracy said his department is working on a system to give teachers another option to attain highly qualified status. Tracy said teachers can create a portfolio which would contain things such as transcripts, workshops attended, certifications and education history.

That alternative is allowed under the federal law and is called Highly Objective Uniform State Standards of Evaluation, or a HOUSSE plan for short. "This high anxiety is not necessary," Tracy said of the fear surrounding the test.

However, the state's HOUSSE plan must first be approved by federal regulators. The federal Department of Education already told New Hampshire a teacher's certification is not enough to meet the new highly qualified standards. Teachers must be re-certified every three years in this state.

Dover school Superintendent John O'Connor, who was not at Thursday's hearing, said he applauds lawmakers' attempts to clarify the situation. However, he feels the highly qualified status is "overkill."

"I have 25- and 35-year veterans who are very concerned with this issue," O'Connor said. "That test is very comprehensive. Let's say you taught first grade for 35 years. What's the likelihood been using calculus and advanced level math? I think it is grossly unfair to subject a skilled, talented and dedicated teacher to sit for a multi-hour exam to show highly qualified to teach first grade."

The test also costs about \$100, which O'Connor said the Dover School District will cover for any teacher who wishes to take the Praxis exam. As for the HOUSSE plan option, O'Connor is not optimistic.

"It will take months to go through the feds' pipeline. And then what if it gets rejected," O'Connor said. "This whole thing is just overkill on the part of the federal government."

If legislation were to pass, a teacher couldn't be fired for failing to be highly qualified, but O'Connor questions what will happen to schools who continually employ teachers who fail. "If we employ teachers who are not highly qualified, will we jeopardize federal money we receive? That's a question that hasn't been answered," O'Connor said.

Like Rochester and Somersworth, Dover receives a substantial amount of federal Title I assistance. O'Connor fears districts who employ teachers who don't reach highly qualified status will lose those funds.

"At some point, the penalties from federal government will kick in. They'll say, 'If you don't follow the rules we won't give you the money,'" O'Connor said.
