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BILL ANALYSIS



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Senate Bill 443 (Substitute S-4 as passed by the Senate)
Sponsor: Senator Dennis Olshove
Committee: Education

Date Completed: 6-15-06

RATIONALE

In Michigan, teachers with a general elementary teaching certificate are permitted to teach all subjects in grades from kindergarten up to 5th grade, and may teach subjects in their major or minor areas of preparation in 6th grade to 8th grade. A teacher with a secondary certificate is permitted to teach 9th grade to 12th grade in the teacher's major and minor areas of preparation. For 6th grade teachers, however, the certification requirements no longer match the actual structure of Michigan schools.

Typically, in elementary schools, students remain in the same classroom throughout the day, and one teacher instructs them in all subjects. In secondary schools, students change classrooms during the day and receive instruction from teachers who specialize in one or more subjects. Although for certification purposes 6th grade is considered an elementary grade, more often than not it is offered in middle schools, and generally is taught on the secondary school model, with separate classes for each subject. Reportedly, some teachers who have been teaching 6th grade for many years have found that they do not meet the highly qualified teacher requirements under the Federal No Child Left Behind Act. According to the Department of Education, a highly qualified teacher in Michigan must have full State certification, among other qualifications. Middle school teachers frequently have endorsements authorizing them to teach 7th grade to 12th grade, but they must earn an additional elementary certification or endorsement to be certified to teach 6th grade.

Some have questioned the relevance of requiring an elementary teaching certificate

for teachers in middle schools. To reconcile the State's certification requirements with the actual structure of many Michigan school systems, it has been suggested that both elementary and secondary teachers be authorized to teach 6th grade.

CONTENT

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to authorize an individual who held an elementary level or a secondary level teaching certificate to teach in 6th grade.

Specifically, the bill provides that notwithstanding any rule to the contrary, if an individual held a valid Michigan teaching certificate, the individual would be certified to teach in 6th grade regardless of whether he or she held an elementary level teaching certificate or a secondary level teaching certificate. If an individual held a valid secondary level teaching certificate, he or she would be certified to teach the endorsements on the certificate in grades 6 through 12.

(The Administrative Code defines a general elementary certificate endorsement as an authorization to teach all subjects in grades kindergarten to 5, and all subjects in grades 6 to 8 in a self-contained classroom where the majority of instruction is provided by one teacher. A secondary certificate endorsement is an authorization to teach in grades 9 to 12 in certain areas for which the individual has received a certificate endorsement.)

MCL 380.1531g

ARGUMENTS

(Please note: The arguments contained in this analysis originate from sources outside the Senate Fiscal Agency. The Senate Fiscal Agency neither supports nor opposes legislation.)

Supporting Argument

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers must demonstrate that they are highly qualified to teach their assigned subjects. In Michigan, some middle school teachers who do not meet the highly qualified teacher requirements may have to take university courses to earn an elementary teaching certificate or endorsement to gain highly qualified status. Although teachers may earn a secondary certificate endorsement to teach a specific subject in grades 7-12, in order to teach 6th grade, teachers must earn an elementary certificate, a K-12 endorsement, or a middle school endorsement. It makes little sense to have to earn an elementary certification to teach 6th grade considering that it is rarely taught in elementary schools, and that the students and the structure of the courses have more in common with secondary grade levels.

In addition, some teachers are concerned that if they received an elementary certification, they could be subject to an involuntary transfer to an elementary school. For teachers who want to remain in middle school, working with students of that age group, currently there are few good options for certification. The bill would correct the problem, allowing teachers with either an elementary or a secondary certificate to teach 6th grade.

Response: As with any new policy, the Legislature should have the opportunity to review the change after it was implemented to ensure that it was having its desired effect. The bill should include a requirement that the Department of Education report to the Legislature on the implementation of the bill after a certain period of time.

Supporting Argument

The bill would give school districts added flexibility to place teachers where they are needed. With the requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act, and the recently enacted high school graduation requirements (which will take effect for 9th graders in the 2007-08 school year), teachers likely will be moved around as school priorities and schedules change.

Under the bill, high school teachers could be used to fill positions in 6th grade.

Opposing Argument

Sixth graders are at a difficult age emotionally, and their needs are different than those of either elementary school children or high school students. High school teachers are well prepared in terms of content knowledge, but in dealing with the personal, emotional requirements of the students, secondary school teachers could find that the strategies for working with high school students may not translate to preadolescents. Teachers should not be put into these classrooms without some training on the developmental needs of the children.

Response: Although 6th grade students certainly have unique emotional needs and cognitive abilities, experienced secondary teachers have the skills to deal with those issues. In many cases, 6th graders are in the same schools with higher grades, and teachers already interact with these students. Furthermore, teacher education includes training in working with all grade levels, regardless of a teacher's specialization.

Legislative Analyst: Curtis Walker

FISCAL IMPACT

State: The State could see minimally reduced restricted teacher testing revenue if this bill were enacted. Currently, a person holding an elementary certificate may teach 6th grade (if in a nonself-contained classroom) only if the person passed the test(s) in the subject area(s) he or she wishes to teach. The legislation would allow someone with an elementary certificate to teach 6th grade without having taken the subject area test(s).

Local: Local districts could see some cost savings due to increased flexibility allowed by this legislation. For example, a district needing a 6th grade teacher and having excess teacher capacity in a different grade could use the extra teacher, regardless of his or her certificate grade designation, if the bill were enacted.

Fiscal Analyst: Kathryn Summers-Coty

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This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan Senate staff for use by the Senate in its deliberations and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.