



Lawmakers look at alternate route to teaching

BY Mark Sommerhauser

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ST. PAUL — Legislators heard a proposal Thursday that supporters say would broaden Minnesota’s pool of teacher candidates, especially in struggling districts or in areas with teacher shortages.

The proposal would create alternative pathways for teachers to obtain licenses. It could give St. Cloud schools a more diverse pool of teaching candidates, and more candidates for hard-to-fill positions, the district’s superintendent said.

A similar proposal faltered last year amid opposition from some DFLers and the state’s leading teacher union, Education Minnesota. They say an alternative-licensure process with too-lax standards could put unprepared teachers in the state’s toughest classrooms.

The newly Republican makeup of the Legislature — and Education Minnesota’s emerging support for alternative licensure — suggests it could make headway this year.

But the issue bubbled over again this week, when a leading proponent, Rep. Sondra Erickson, described part of an alternative-licensure proposal offered by Education Minnesota as the “teacher Gestapo.” Erickson, R-Princeton, later apologized.

Erickson is a longtime supporter of alternative licensure. She’s in a position to advance the issue this year, chairing a House committee that oversees K-12 education policy.

“We’re almost in a panic for ways to close the achievement gap,” she said. “If (alternative licensure) is one of the answers, we have to try it.”

The alternative pathways could serve teacher candidates who didn’t follow the traditional route of getting an education degree. That includes midcareer professionals seeking to enter the teaching profession, or graduates of programs such as Teach For America, which recruits college graduates to teach in struggling schools.

A bill sponsored by Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, and Erickson would allow school districts to partner with colleges or nonprofit groups to establish alternative-certification programs.

Education Minnesota offered its own alternative licensure proposal earlier this week. President Tom Dooher said he's optimistic the union can agree with legislators on a proposal that includes supervised classroom instruction for teachers-in-training.

"It's not just content knowledge that you have to have," Dooher said. "It's the ability to reach kids where they're at, and bring them forward academically."

Superintendent Bruce Watkins said the St. Cloud school district sometimes struggles to find special-education, technology and foreign-language teachers.

"If there became legislatively approved alternative pathways for teacher licensing — and the district were out looking for hard-to-find positions — we would certainly entertain those candidates," Watkins said.