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Evers works to add licensing flexibility to support innovation

MADISON — In classrooms across Wisconsin, students learn mathematics, reading, social studies, art, science, and other subjects through integrated projects that show great promise for increased academic achievement. The catch: the collaboration between students and teachers often involves multiple academic subjects, which can present licensing issues for school districts.

“There is no question that parents and students want innovative programs,” said State Superintendent Tony Evers. “The reality of some of today’s educational approaches requires that we look at our licensing regulations to increase flexibility and expand routes to certification to ensure that these programs are taught by highly qualified teachers.”

Federal and state laws require that teachers meet certain qualifications. Generally, teachers have a college major or minor in the subject they teach and have a license for the subjects and grade-levels they teach. To get that license, a teacher in Wisconsin has passed a content test; completed a preparation program through an accredited college, university, or alternative program; demonstrated minimum required competencies through 18-weeks of observation and practice teaching; and met other requirements. Wisconsin teachers continue their education and professional development to maintain their professional or master educator license.

Licensing issues sometimes arise in charter or rural schools that want to offer specialized subjects like physics or accounting, but have small enrollments and no teacher with that specific certification. In project- and inquiry-based learning, along with special courses such as Project Lead the Way and cross-disciplinary science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) coursework, the integrated nature of the classes means teachers may provide instruction in subjects they are not fully licensed to teach.

“We need more flexibility in our state’s licensing system so teachers and school districts can expand curriculum offerings to students,” Evers said. “Our goal in examining state licensing regulations is to increase the talent in our classrooms, meet the demand for innovative programs and hard-to-staff subjects, and encourage mid-career professionals to share their real-world experiences as teachers in Wisconsin schools.”

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The Department of Public Instruction is reviewing licensing regulations under PI-34 to determine ways to add flexibility for those wishing to enter the teaching profession or expand their credentials. Options may include granting credit for lifetime experiences, using a portfolio process to demonstrate knowledge or expertise, adding a license or credential that facilitates cross-disciplinary teaching assignments, and working with colleges, universities, and alternative programs to offer staff development to meet specific needs.

“We have a strong licensing law that ensures quality in our classrooms. Our new teachers have mentors and every educator continues to learn to maintain a license. We need a few other pieces in place to support flexibility,” Evers said. “Through mentoring, professional development, and collaboration, Wisconsin can expand innovative programs and continue to attract talented people to serve in our classrooms to meet education’s changing needs,” he said.

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NOTE: This news release is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2010_02.pdf.