

For Immediate Release

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From the Office of Sen. Joyce Waddell, NC Senate
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Greetings:

We started session on Wednesday with a prayer, as we do every session. Committees have been assigned, bills are being filed and the business of the General Assembly is on its way.

Joyce Waddell

Medical Marijuana

Medical marijuana is up for discussion in North Carolina. When the new legislative session began Wednesday morning the very first bill filed in the N.C. Senate was the "Compassionate Care Act". It would allow medical – but not recreational – marijuana use statewide. The proposal passed the Senate last week with bipartisan support, but was never allowed a vote in the House. The main sponsor's cancer experience led him to advocate for allowing doctors to prescribe marijuana for cancer, ALS, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, Crohn's disease, sickle cell anemia and PTSD, among a handful of other ailments.

North Carolina is one of an increasingly small number of states that still fully outlaw marijuana. Most states have legalized medical marijuana, and a growing number have made the plant fully legal, even for purely recreational use.

Wednesday's bill, Senate Bill 3, is long and filled with highly technical details on medical and financial regulations. But the list of approved medical ailments is identical to last year's bill, and on first glance other parts of the bill also appear similar if not identical to the final version of last year's bill, which went through a number of revisions before ultimately passing the Senate.

Last year, some proposed other marijuana bills that would have gone even further – including by fully legalizing it, or at least decriminalizing the possession of small amounts of marijuana, so it would be treated more like a traffic ticket than a crime. But those bills went nowhere, even as the medical legalization proposal did move forward.

Public polling shows the vast majority of North Carolina residents support legalizing medical marijuana, including a majority of Republicans. A majority of the state also supports fully legal pot, even for recreational use, although support for that is smaller and does not include a majority of Republican voters, The N&O has reported.

If done correctly, allowing marijuana for medicinal purposes could be very helpful based on medical reports. As legislators it is our job to mitigate any possibly issues that could come before our communities. As a cosponsor, I am optimistic that this bill will pass.

Special Ed Teachers

Special education teachers are required by law to have "content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities," said the director of the Education Law Program at the Council for Children's Rights in Charlotte. Additionally, they must have obtained full certification as a special education teacher – which could include certification obtained through an alternative route if the alternative route meets the federal requirements as well – or they have passed the state special education teacher licensing exam and hold a license to teach in the state. This information was taken from a memo published in October from the federal Department of Education.

Schools can hire teachers who are in the process of pursuing their certification, but they have to get mentorship and professional development, and they can not serve in that role for more than three years without their certification.

The Department of Public Instruction has a guidance document advising schools on how they can meet these federal requirements when dealing with the labor shortage. The agency suggests that a school rotate a certified special education teacher back and forth between their classroom and the vacant classroom, the vacant classroom being overseen the rest of the time by a substitute.

North Carolina, like the rest of the country, is facing a massive teacher shortage. Part of the reason is the pipeline. But low wages are also a problem. The average starting salary for a teacher in the state is \$37,127, putting it in 45th place nationwide, according to data from the National Education Association. The state education department only collects data on job vacancies on the first and 40th school day of the year, not in real time. The job dashboard of the state uses to post vacancies, TeachNC.org, shows thousands of openings across the state – hundreds of which are for special education teachers and instructional assistants.

As reported by Education NC in 2021, DPI data shows the state has lost about 9,400 teacher assistants since the 2008-09 school year.

Special education cannot be ignored. Our children deserve better. I have always had a special place in my heart for all things involving education and I want you to know - as long as I am at the General Assembly, I will fight vigorously for our education system as well as, the other staff members that support it.

The COVID numbers are finally going down, but that does not give us the green light to discontinue being vigilant about slowing down the spread. We must continue paying attention and continue doing those things that helped us reduce the spread.

We can reduce the spread of COVID and Influenza by staying aware and putting special emphasis on the steps that keep us safe.

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