Indiana school districts likely no longer face as sharp of a drop in the number of teachers credentialed to instruct dual credit courses as once feared.

State education leaders learned this month that the Higher Learning Commission, a national organization that accredits colleges in the state, is allowing colleges and universities to apply for an extension of up to five years on new requirements it has set for those instructors.

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education announced plans Monday to seek an extension. The request means instructors of the classes, in which students simultaneously earn high school and college credit, could have until 2022 to meet the new coursework standards.

"We are encouraged by this opportunity to apply for an extension to meet these new requirements for dual credit teachers," Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education Teresa Lubbers said in a statement. "That said, this in no way means our work is done. As a state, we remain focused on expanding quality dual credit options for all students."

What’s clear, education leaders say, is that although the Higher Learning Commission appears willing to budge on the implementation timeline, it is steadfast on eventually requiring dual credit teachers to complete more graduate-level coursework.

The challenge: Approximately 70 percent of the state’s dual credit teachers don’t comply. The percentage reflects teachers who instruct in subject areas affected by the new requirements.

The state has to follow the new requirements, or colleges risk losing their accreditations, which are required for them to seek federal financial aid. A Republican lawmaker plans to file a resolution during the upcoming legislative session “condemning” the Higher Learning Commission for enacting the new requirements. Under the changes, dual credit teachers would need to have a master’s degree as well as 18 credit hours in master’s-level courses in the subject matter they plan to teach.

“Our teachers don’t have any problems with accountability. Our teachers don’t have any problems with being asked to do above and beyond,” state Rep. Wendy McNamara said. “What I think our biggest problem is basically having an
entity that is inflexible and not understanding of what’s best for a sovereign state.”

McNamara, R-Mount Vernon, announced her plans to offer the resolution Monday as a group of state education leaders and K-12 school officials met to begin exploring potential solutions to get more of the state’s dual credit teachers meeting the new requirements.

Lubbers said the state wants the Higher Learning Commission to explore establishing an exception to its new criteria based on measurements of teacher quality. Potential considerations could be the performance of students in classes or whether a teacher has earned professional awards. Other ideas being weighed involve financial incentives, such as paying teachers a stipend for dual credit courses or offering assistance to cover the cost of graduate-level courses. Some districts offer as high as $2,000 for each dual credit course a teacher instructs.

Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Glenda Ritz said she thinks “push back” on the Higher Learning Commission is appropriate. As policy discussions continue, Ritz said, she’s worried about equity.

“Do all teachers have an opportunity to teach dual credit? Can all teachers that want to get the master’s degree and utilize some monies, will they have opportunity to do that?” Ritz said.

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