

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The long, winding road to education reform

"What is happening with the education reform bill?" This is a question asked by parents, teachers and others concerned about the condition of education in Massachusetts. I have waited to address the issue of education reform, waited for the Legislature to reach a decision about the future of our schools. That has not happened yet, so this is an interim report to explain and predict.

House members expected to take up a bill last spring. When the governor and Legislature could not agree on a comprehensive package by the July 1 budget deadline, we increased local education dollars without incorporating reform. The next deadline was the end of the last session, which also passed without action. Members of the House refused to debate the bill without adequate opportunity to study the 98-page document. The bill was not ready, so it officially died at the end of the session. Speaker Flaherty then used the authority of his office to direct that the bill be presented to the new legislature. That brings us to this week. The House Education Reform bill, H-500, was presented on Monday, Jan. 25.

Here are some provisions of that bill.

Professional development: Each district must spend at least \$20 per student on teacher development programs. Teacher certification must be renewed every three years.

Tenure and early retirement: Teachers may be dismissed by their principals for just cause, subject to arbitration. School districts may offer early retirement to teachers, and the state will share the costs of that program equally with the district.

Funding: Every town receives new state aid of at least \$50 per student, the exact amount calculated by a complex formula that considers the community's effort, wealth and expenses. The "foundation level" attempts to quantify the cost in each town of delivering adequate education. Because Longmeadow spends more than its foundation amount, the town stands to receive the minimum \$50 per student. East Longmeadow receives \$165, and Springfield, \$348. Comparable new funding is projected for seven years, and each school district is required to maintain its level of effort in order to receive new funding.

What does the bill accomplish? It enhances teacher certification requirements and strengthens the role of the school principal. Mark Roosevelt, House Education Chairman, claims that it will correct deficiencies in test performance of a generation of students, a claim that does not appear to be borne out by language. It does provide funding for needy districts, although it may inflict more budget-cutting on other municipal services.

Considering that the administration, the Legislature and the Mass. Business Alliance for Education have cooperated on this effort for more than a year, I feel that the product should be more comprehensive. The House and Senate will work to strengthen the bill in the coming weeks. Keep abreast of events with the daily media and future Bylines. Be assured that I am working to provide a reform law that takes Massachusetts proudly to the year 2000.