

Beacon Hill Byline By Mary Rogeness

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Education Reform: Just stay tuned

Last week Speaker Charles Flaherty promised a full court press on the two-year effort to introduce education reform, and he carried out that promise in full, Legislators scurried throughout the week to cancel meetings all over the state as we worked from Monday through Friday, negotiating, voting, reconsidering and finally sending to the Senate a proposal for reform of public education in Massachusetts. This is what we accomplished.

The bill establishes a core curriculum including math, science, social science, history, English, foreign language and the arts, with standards and evaluation criteria for a certificate of initial mastery, a graduation requirement Those who do not qualify will then have two years to acquire the certificate. A certificate of advanced mastery will also be offered.

The role of the school principal is greatly expanded in the bill. That official can hire and fire classroom teachers, subject to arbitration. School committees lose much of their traditional role in hiring decisions, although they still act on recommendation of the superintendent in hiring principals. Principals lose the right to be represented by a union, a provision that emphasizes their new responsibilities as members of school management In a corollary to the changing position of principals, each school becomes responsible for more decision-making through a school council of the principal, staff, parents and members of the community.

The state commits to funding new school aid of \$175 million, distributed according to need through the foundation budget formula. Longmeadow receives the minimum amount of \$50 per student. The House deleted a provision in the bill that gave the local legislative body, in our case the town meeting, the right to approve salary increases higher than the statistical average in the state.

Much of the week's debates was dedicated to the concern of House members that the bill commits a community to maintain a specific level of funding for its school system regardless of other local needs. Considering the limits of Proposition 2 1/2 that requirement might have serious consequences. I feel an obligation to secure funding of local aid, and it was not very comforting to hear Mark Roosevelt, Education chairman, state that he was not responsible for municipal problems beyond education.

Last week was an exciting time at the State House. It was invigorating to participate in real debate about improving public education. I confess to having reservations about demands the bill places on town appropriations, many of which have not been clarified. I supported amendments to limit those mandates, but when those amendments failed, I still backed the bill. It has now been forwarded to the Senate for consideration. The Senate is expected to establish mandatory school choice, a proposition the House does not support. A conference committee will then provide a single package [amen]able to both houses. Stay tuned for future developments.