

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Looking Back

It really does not seem like it was eighteen years ago that I first ran for the office of State Representative. I did not dream that the campaign would lead to my becoming, over time, the longest serving Republican, the dean of our delegation. I just wanted to take part in the Weld revolution.

Since that time, I have participated in debates and contributed to many initiatives as the years rolled along. Last week's news stories wrote about the big changes of education reform, tax cuts, health insurance changes. Massachusetts is now a better place to live, to work, and to raise a family because of our actions.

As a new representative, I met Governor Weld, whose election excited my interest in public service. His mastery of the job is demonstrated by the fact that the massive budget problems facing the state when he took office were under control by the time of my election, nine months later. His leadership in budgeting, workers compensation and unemployment insurance had lasting effects on the fiscal health of Massachusetts.

Later I saw how he worked with (or around) the Democratically controlled legislature on the issue of welfare reform. Changing the multi-generational pattern of welfare dependency was a huge task, even with the federal government's looming requirements. We added work and education requirements to eligibility standards and achieved sharp reductions in caseloads. My hope for welfare reform is that children will grow up having the model of a parent who goes to work each day.

Education reform is a legislative achievement that has progressed for many years now. MCAS, first viewed as a radical requirement, is now accepted as a routine graduation requirement. When the federal government required testing, we already had ours in place. Massachusetts students now lead the nation in math and English performance.

School choice opened up new opportunities for children to attend schools outside of their home districts. And charter schools offer educational alternatives for specialized curriculum or, like Springfield's Sabis International Charter School, provide an educational alternative for urban students.

Governor Romney had a role in another of my favorite initiatives. I worked unsuccessfully to convince the legislature to remove the state mandate of separate classrooms for non-English speaking children. When that failed, I joined the governor in working to promote the successful ballot initiative that gives children a year of sheltered immersion before they move to a regular classroom. Springfield's Hispanic students now show improved test scores, with higher growth in MCAS results than any other group.

The most recent governmental change is the state's new health insurance law, another Romney initiative. Again leading the nation, we have undertaken the mission to insure all residents. The plan is still rolling out, but many more people are now enrolled for insurance. A positive indicator came in the recent report that applications for free hospital care have dropped by 12%.

In addition to working at the State House, a state representative often serves as a first point of contact when people have a problem with government. Helping individuals work their way through a medical, insurance or unemployment issue is more important to them than anything else I can do as a legislator.

Although I am not running for re-election, I will be busy all year, in Longmeadow as well as Boston, working for the benefit of the state and the people of the Second Hampden District.