

Capitol Comment

Race for the Money

By State Rep. Mike May

It is typical during the first two weeks of the session for events to unfold slowly, allowing legislators to get bills filed before funnel (deadlines) dates close off new bills. This year leadership has decided to drop the first 20 days of the session, forcing legislators to hit the ground running.

Last week as the ranking member on the House Education Committee I dealt with several bills leadership wanted to move quickly. The most prominent of these is a bill that will conform Iowa Code to the criteria mandated in the federal application for a bill called "Race to the Top".

This Obama Administration initiative directs grants to states totaling \$4.3 billion. Iowa could win from \$60 million to \$175 million of that.

The federal money has noble intent -- to help redeem some 5,000 failing schools across the nation. We all know a poor education most likely means a life of misery and want. As a society we simply must insist that all schools constantly look for ways to do a better job and, most importantly, we must have zero tolerance for bad schools.

The federal funds would provide grants to states with creative plans to turn around their failing schools, improve student achievement, lower dropout rates, and radically change the academic culture of the school.

The feds have identified close to forty failing schools in Iowa. We can argue the fairness of the designation, but the fact is that Iowa, like all the other states, needs to get serious about poorly performing schools, and the RTTT money perhaps gives us the push we need to do get that done.

Unfortunately the changes we are making to Iowa code to qualify and the Iowa application are likely to fall far short of the kind of innovative changes necessary for improving failing schools and/or being awarded one of the federal grants.

Charter Schools

Iowa has the worst charter school law in America according to almost everyone in education circles. The Center for Education Reform says. "Iowa's law is abysmal

and should be completely reformed and overhauled".

Charter schools operate under rules different from public schools. That gives them latitude to experiment and create innovative practices to increase student achievement.

Most importantly it gives parents a choice beyond sending their children to schools that are simply not producing.

Iowa law now limits the number of charter schools to 20, and our bill removes that cap. It also ends a sunset provision.

However, it does not allow nonprofits, privates, or institutions of higher education to hold charters.

In charter schools in most states teachers are hired "at will," and if they don't produce substantial improvement in the education of their students they are dismissed. Their job is tied to student achievement, not to a tenure system.

This is one of the greatest failings of the bill, but there is another serious problem. To repair schools, the feds demand a MOU (memorandum of understanding) or plan to fix what is wrong.

Unfortunately, the Iowa legislation demands that the teachers' union be a part of determining the repair plan. Frankly, those responsible for the educational failure should not be part of the plan to fix it.

Additionally, the federal initiative is directed to tying teacher pay to student achievement. Simply put, effective teachers will be paid more. Unfortunately, our legislation requires the federal money be bargained for which makes this "a race for the money" not a race to the top.

What a shame and what a lost opportunity to break the chains of the past and try new innovative ways to improve education in this state.

To support my conclusions you will note that the school districts with the most failing schools (urban schools like Des Moines) asked not to be included in the grant process. They do not want to be encumbered by new regulations, which hinder their ability to address the needs of children in failing schools in their districts.

The sad part is that considering how the new laws are written these urban schools most definitely will not get the money but will be forced to follow the new union driven guidelines.

Des Moines Politics

The majority party tried this past week to force through three additional pieces of education legislation, which did not need immediate action. They did so by breaking house committee rules that outline the legislative process. As ranking member I refused to give them unanimous consent to do so.

The Education Committee majority broke the house rules anyway by not holding normal subcommittee hearings on these bills.

They asked for the same privilege on the House floor. Republicans refused and the majority decided against breaking house rules a second time.

I still believe there is no place for Washington-style politics in Des Moines, Iowa. We should never follow recent congressional policy of refusing to allow openness and discussion, of passing laws in the middle of the night when no one is watching, and breaking rules that have significant purpose.

Those in political power don't seem to get it -- in Washington or Des Moines.

Federal Deductibility

Many of you have written about the possibility of losing the right to deduct your federal taxes on your Iowa income tax return. I don't believe that issue will come up this year, but it is impossible to say that with certainty. I will do everything in my power to prevent that from occurring. Our GOP caucus is solidly opposed to any change in federal deductibility.

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