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Don't succumb to status quo; turn failing schools around

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AFTER 16 YEARS of otherwise successful education reforms, there are still schools - largely in low-income areas - where students consistently fail to perform at grade level. In coming weeks, the Legislature will vote on a bill meant to give these schools new tools for improvement, but teachers unions and their allies are chipping away at the legislation. While the unions' desire to preserve their traditional protections is understandable, the greater good requires a more flexible approach.

State education officials, who strongly back the legislation, make a convincing case that superintendents need better tools to remove ineffective teachers and change work rules, such as a lack of time for teacher training, that inhibit student success. Urban mayors, notably Boston's Tom Menino, make a powerful case that the only way to stop the flow of students to non-union charter schools is to prove to families that district schools can offer similar flexibility in curriculum and staffing decisions.

Last month, it appeared that legislators were ready to support these initiatives in a single education reform bill. But unions leaned on the Senate to restore their job protections, and the Senate gave in. These concessions didn't just weaken a crucial bill; they also jeopardized the state's chance to win a competitive grant from the federal government's Race to the Top program, which offers money as an incentive to promote education reforms.

Starting in 1993, Massachusetts moved to increase funding for education, while using testing as a means to uphold high standards. That pairing of higher funding and greater accountability has served the state well, yet some schools still perform poorly.

In every underperforming school there are earnest professionals doing their best to educate children. Union contracts do indeed protect them from being held responsible for the failures of others and from being fired or reassigned for arbitrary reasons. Yet they also make it impossible to dislodge poor-performing teachers, whose lingering presence is deadly for morale at a school - and only makes the work of dedicated teachers even harder. No matter what, lawmakers should base education policy on what's best for students, whose options in life narrow with every year they spend in an ineffective school.

Opponents of reform can easily barrage legislators with thousands of letters and phone calls. Sadly, there is no such organized outrage on behalf of children who suffer when their schools fail to educate them. The governor, leading mayors, and the Obama Administration - all of whom have been friendly to labor in other contexts - have decided to put students first. The action has now moved to the House. Instead of smothering progress as their Senate colleagues have done, representatives should breathe new life into education reform. ■