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Opportunity for Bold Education Reform At Hand

House draft is preferable but still requires modification to meet challenge

The Legislature has the ability to approve by mid-January the most significant education reform law since 1993. The opportunity to secure up to \$250M in federal Race to the Top (RTTT) competitive grants and the urgency to turn around chronically underperforming schools have joined to create a moment when fundamental reform is possible to bring more resources and greater administrative flexibility together to improve the academic achievement of students in Boston and other school districts.

The Senate education reform bill (S.2116) was approved on November 23 and the House will start debate on its bill (H.4410) this week. A final reform bill must be enacted prior to January 19, the deadline when the Commonwealth must submit its RTTT application.

Both bills provide important reform measures including turning around underperforming schools and expanding charter schools. However, significant differences in key areas below make the draft endorsed by the House Ways and Means Committee a stronger bill.

Underperforming Schools

- The House draft provides more authority to the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, working with a district superintendent, in creating a turnaround plan and modifying union contract provisions. The draft does not require unresolved union contract issues to be settled through expedited

binding arbitration as in Senate bill. Both bills affect a limited number of underperforming schools, with the House limit being 55 schools statewide.

- In the House draft, a tenured teacher in an underperforming school may only be dismissed for “good cause” with normal collective bargaining appeal rights. This limits administrative flexibility but is preferable to the Senate bill that allows a dismissed teacher to appeal through binding arbitration.

Charter Schools

- The House draft does not allow creation of in-district Horace Mann charter schools without approval of the local teachers’ union. The Senate bill is similar for charter conversion schools but not for new Horace Mann schools. If Commonwealth charter schools are to be increased, in-district Horace Mann charter schools should be authorized without teacher union approval to enable local districts to be more competitive.
- The increase in charter schools should be accompanied by a change in the tuition reimbursement formula. Neither the House draft nor Senate bill is satisfactory on this matter. More time is needed to resolve this issue so the status quo should prevail for now.