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Samuel R. Tyler
President

January 11, 2010

The Honorable Ronald Mariano
House Assistant Majority Leader
State House, Room 343
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Education Reform Bill

Dear Assistant Majority Leader Mariano:

On behalf of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, I write to congratulate the leadership and members of the House of Representatives and Senate for the passage of their respective comprehensive education reform bills. These bills balance the need for an effective strategy to turn around underperforming and chronically underperforming schools in Massachusetts with the opportunity to provide more charter school options for students and parents. By achieving this balance, we believe that the final bill approved by your conference committee will greatly strengthen the Commonwealth's application in the federal Race to the Top competitive grant process. We do recognize that the House and Senate bills differ in a few key areas and I would like to state the Research Bureau's views on a few of these issues.

In general, as an organization that closely monitors the operations of the Boston Public School System, the Research Bureau is concerned about a district's ability to implement a turnaround plan in a timely fashion and that the district has the tools to make its public schools more competitive with Commonwealth charter schools. With that in mind, we offer the following recommendations.

Underperforming and Chronically Underperforming Schools

- We support the House bill's provision of stronger authority vested with the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, with assistance of the district superintendent, in the effort to turnaround underperforming and chronically underperforming schools. State involvement in the past has had limited success and more fundamental change is required.
- In situations where the turnaround plan requires the reopening of the collective bargaining process, we support the House dispute resolution process with specific timelines and the ability of the Commissioner to resolve any outstanding issues. The requirement that the member of the joint resolution committee appointed by the American Arbitration Association have an educational background is important in our view.
- We support the House language authorizing the superintendent to dismiss or not rehire for good cause a teacher in a school declared underperforming or chronically underperforming. We endorse utilization of the House dispute resolution process to review the superintendent's action rather than through expedited arbitration.

- We support the Senate language that limits the number of underperforming or chronically underperforming schools to 5% of all public schools in the state.
- We are concerned about the length of the timeline in the steps from the Commissioner's preliminary designation of an underperforming school to final designation and suggest revisiting that matter if possible.

Charter Schools

- The Research Bureau believes charter schools should be an accessible education option for students and parents in urban school districts. We support the increase in the spending cap for Commonwealth charter schools from 9% of net school spending to 18% in underperforming districts.
- We recommend that the current charter school tuition reimbursement formula be modified in light of the expansion of Commonwealth charter schools. We understand that this is a policy that will require further discussion and support the House's decision to maintain the current formula while studying the issue. The Senate's proposal to cut the tuition reimbursement rate should not be included in the final legislation. Discussion on a new formula should not be delayed and a time limit of 30 or 45 days should be set to complete the study.
- Expansion of Commonwealth charter schools should also be accompanied by tools for local districts to be more competitive and better positioned to retain students. For that reason, we had supported the creation and expansion of in-district Horace Mann charter schools as a means for traditional public schools to remain competitive. In this case, we support the Senate language that would streamline the creation of new Horace Mann charter schools.
- Student retention in charter schools is an important issue that needs to be addressed, and we are supportive of the House language to require vacancies to be filled in a charter school's entry grades. We also support the new charter school application provisions presented in the House version that require charter school operators to demonstrate how they will recruit and serve a student population that mirrors the academic and demographic profile of the charter school's sending districts.

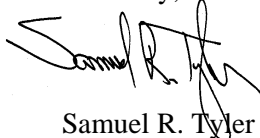
Innovation Schools

- We strongly support the House language that allows a municipality with more than 500,000 residents to establish four new Innovation Schools solely with the approval of the superintendent and the school committee. Boston Superintendent Carol Johnson has released her Acceleration Agenda to improve student academic achievement over five years. She has identified 14 chronically underperforming schools and seeks support in this education bill for administrative flexibility to turn around these schools. Four schools are not enough but it does allow a start which if successful will strengthen the case to revisit the limit at a later time.

Conclusion

The opportunity to secure millions in federal Race to the Top grants and the urgency to solve the challenge of chronically underperforming schools and to expand charter school options have intersected to demand bold educational reform in Massachusetts. This goal is achievable with the right mix of sections from both bills. Thank you for your consideration of the recommendations made in this letter.

Sincerely,



Samuel R. Tyler
President