

Statement by the Massachusetts Teachers Association on the Education Reform Act of 2009

The Joint Committee on Education has approved a bill called the Education Reform Act of 2009 that amends state law in several areas, most notably in the rules governing schools labeled as underperforming, the establishment of new alternative schools within districts, and lifting the caps on charter schools.

The MTA is strongly opposed to several provisions in this bill that would adversely affect educators' bargaining rights and would diminish collaboration in the school improvement process. MTA members are urged to contact their legislators to urge them to protect fairness in the school improvement process.

This complex 66-page bill was released to the committee Monday night and voted on Tuesday afternoon. It is expected to be voted on in both branches of the Legislature by early next week. It includes some of the concepts contained in the governor's Readiness Schools and Smart Cap bills, but also differs from his proposals in key ways.

While the bill does include the teacher and union voice at several junctures, the MTA is very concerned about several areas in which it does not, most notably in the way teachers are treated in up to 92 schools that are labeled "underperforming," as well as in additional schools and up to six districts labeled "chronically underperforming."

In these schools and districts, the superintendent or commissioner of education would have extraordinary authority to make unilateral changes in collective bargaining agreements and could require all teachers in the affected schools to reapply for their jobs, regardless of their past performance. If they are not rehired for their former positions or hired to fill a vacancy within the district after one year, they would be terminated.

"There is no justification for allowing superintendents to fire experienced professional teachers for no cause," said MTA President Anne Wass. "That would open the door to favoritism and nepotism, two problems that unions were created to address."

The MTA is drafting and supporting amendments that seek to restore balance, equity and collaboration in the school improvement process.

When the MTA has had a chance to review the bill more carefully, the association will make additional comments on its two other major sections: "innovation schools" and the charter school cap provisions.

"The MTA strongly supports excellent schools for all children, and we are proud of the accomplishments of our members, which have resulted in Massachusetts continuing to be first in the country on national exams," said Wass. "We recognize that a small number of schools need significant attention, support and possible restructuring. We believe that those efforts are most likely to succeed when there is collaboration, openness, transparency and cooperation among all the stakeholders."

