

*Opinion*

*Teachers union up to old tricks*

*CTA pushing for new law that would gut school accountability measures*

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Last year, the California Teachers Association sponsored a bill that would have made curriculum, testing and other education policies part of the collective bargaining process. That bill died a well-deserved death. But now the CTA is back with a proposal that would knock the teeth out of the state's school accountability system.

Under the state's system, schools that perform much better than expected are eligible for rewards such as teacher bonuses. At the other end of the spectrum, low performing schools that fail to meet their student test-score improvement targets are eligible for the accountability program.

Participating schools are given grant money to devise and implement plans to improve student performance. If a school continues to fail to meet its test-score targets, then eventually it is subject to a variety of sanctions. The teachers union could probably care less about some of the sanctions, such as reassigning principals of failing schools. Other sanctions, however, encroach on union power and turf.

For example, the accountability law allows for renegotiating new labor contracts, which, in theory, could mean addressing issues such as linking teacher pay to student performance. Another sanction would allow failing schools to be transformed into charter schools, which are independent, deregulated public schools that are not necessarily bound to the local teachers union contract.

Further, the accountability law gives the option of reassigning teachers at the failing school. Currently, in many school districts, teacher assignment is strictly dictated by union contract rules. As a result, it is difficult to place the right teacher in the right job at the right time.

In reaction to such provisions, the CTA is sponsoring legislation, AB 356 by Assemblywoman (and former Berkeley mayor) Loni Hancock, that would amend the accountability law to remove the rewards and sanctions components. This amounts to a total gutting of the law since it offers no alternative set of rewards or sanctions. The result would be the effective repeal of the accountability system; without consequences for poor performance, there would be no incentive for schools to improve.

The state testing system would simply be informational, with no guarantee that schools would use that information to raise student achievement. The victims would be students at failing schools who would continue to receive an inferior education.

It is no coincidence that the CTA proposal comes at a time when hundreds of failing schools could be sanctioned in the near future. The state Legislative Analyst's Office estimates that the total number of sanctioned schools could hit 230 in 2003-04 and 330 in 2005-06. The potential imposition of tough consequences, however, is critical if the accountability system is to work.

The prospect of sanctions has been a significant factor in spurring poorly performing schools to change to better curricula and teaching methods and to focus on meeting the state's tough academic content standards. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District, which has many under performing schools, has adopted a systematic structured phonics reading program that is raising test scores of students in the early grades, especially Hispanics and African-Americans.

The state accountability program is not perfect. Parts of the system are voluntary, which allows some low-performing schools to avoid the accountability measures. Also, the test-score growth targets are small, which allows poor-quality schools to escape meaningful accountability. However, the solution to such problems is to tighten up the system, not weaken it, as the CTA wants.

Accountability may be threatening to union power, but it is essential if we really care about the achievement and success of children. True compassion means tough love, not surrender.

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