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Teachers Union Chokes Off School Reform

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By Rep. Rich Cebra

With the Maine state government facing enormous budget cuts a year from now, the ruling Democrats used their power last week to endanger some \$235 million in potential federal funding for public schools.

I know this sounds hard to believe, but it's true. The Maine Education Association (MEA) demanded and got the watering down of a bill by Governor Baldacci that would have tied teacher evaluations to student achievement. That single change, engineered by State Sen. Justin Alford, a Portland Democrat, seriously jeopardizes \$160 million in school funds for next year.

For good measure, the Democrats also blew off a potential \$75 million in Race to the Top funding. This \$4 billion program, a stimulus package offshoot, pits states against each other to devise and implement serious education reforms. The governor submitted three bills to maneuver Maine into position to apply for a Race to the Top grant. But any chance we had probably was eliminated when the Democrats shot down a bid to allow charter schools in Maine. In the Race to the Top competition, charter schools are essentially a prerequisite.

If anyone doubted that the Democrats are owned and operated by the teachers' union, the MEA, last week's sad spectacle in the State House made it very clear that the MEA calls the shots. The union bosses are determined to block any meaningful change, even if it costs Maine taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. The important thing is to preserve the status quo, regardless of the fallout.

The MEA will return the favor by donating heavily to Democrats and campaigning hard in next fall's elections. This ironclad alliance has kept the Maine House under Democratic control for 36 straight years. If the educational excellence of our kids is a casualty of the Democrats' mad thirst for power, that's just tough luck.

Teachers and principals don't necessarily agree with the MEA's hardball approach. Nearly 5,000 charter schools are up and running across the nation. They are not a panacea, but they provide competition for failing public schools and they free up teachers to develop curricula and courses that connect with students. By and large, they are a success story, and the most imaginative and innovative teachers want to be part of a positive change. Thanks to the MEA and their Democratic puppets, Maine kids and teachers won't get that chance.

In the rest of the country, teachers don't always oppose systems that link their evaluations and merit pay to student performance. Teachers in districts that have adopted student achievement as a common measuring stick find that the district becomes locked like a laser on student outcomes.

As a result, teaching and teachers are elevated and empowered. Teaching once again becomes the focus of the entire enterprise. Why else would thousands of teachers in school districts across the nation voluntarily agree, through their own collective bargaining agreements, to use student achievement as part of their evaluation criteria? Such systems are growing in popularity each year. Here, the MEA has thrown up blockades.

To its credit, the Obama Administration is alarmed by the disastrous performance of American schools kids compared to their foreign counterparts. In response, it is tying federal education money to innovative reforms. Holding teachers more accountable for student achievement is a bedrock principle of this new attitude. That's a welcome development. The education of our kids is a national security concern. We've all seen the lists where American kids rank down with Third World students in math and science. There is no

way the United States can maintain its standard of living and its unmatched leadership in technology if the rising generation isn't competent.

Such concerns must be trivial to Augusta's ruling party, because their blind obedience to MEA demands is paralyzing reform efforts here in Maine, where our high school dropout rate is a shocking 24 percent. The most serious damage occurred on April 7, when Sen. Alford attached a "poison pill" amendment to one of the governor's bills, LD 1799 – An Act to Encourage the Use of Models in the Collection and Use of Student Achievement Data.

LD 1799 would have simply allowed the use of state assessment data in teacher evaluations if the local school district and the local teacher's association agreed to do so. Pretty mild stuff, really. The rights of Maine teachers would still be protected under the state's collective bargaining laws. But Sen. Alford and the MEA were not about to relinquish any such control to those (in their view) ignorant locals out in our school districts who might develop their own teacher-evaluation systems.

The Alford amendment, an unprecedented assault on local control, prohibits the use of any teacher evaluation system that uses student performance data as a metric unless the system has been approved by a committee of five unelected defenders of the status quo. The panel consists of the MEA, the Maine Principals' Association, the Maine School Superintendents' Association, the Maine School Boards Association, and the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities.

There is nobody on the panel to represent parents, students, business leaders, taxpayers or the higher education community. Basically, we're talking about total control by bureaucrats and lobbyists for the education special interests. The Alford amendment so concerned Maine Deputy Attorney General Linda Pistner that she weighed into the debate with a letter to legislative leaders. She warned that these kinds of "regulatory barriers" would knock Maine out of the Race to the Top competition. She was ignored.

Republicans have called on the governor to veto LD 1799 and send it back to the Legislature for corrective action. He says he'll sign it anyway. And once the Alford amendment is law, we can kiss goodbye tens of millions of dollars that our struggling state so badly needs.