

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Education Reform Package becomes law

Today I can write the last chapter of the story about enacting education reform for the public schools of Massachusetts. That final chapter is at the same time the first chapter of implementing new ideas, a process that is likely to consume even more time than the legislative endeavors that have lasted well over a year. But today we can focus on Gov. Weld signing the education bill into law, the Education Reform Act of 1993.

My involvement with attempts to restructure our educational system began in 1992 when the legislature waited throughout most of the year for the Joint Committee on Education to produce a bill. You may recall that we budgeted \$186 million to fund the reform, money that we then distributed to school districts without requiring any changes. The bill finally was offered at the House in December, but it died with the session's end because the body refused to rubber-stamp an unstudied bill. Speaker Flaherty then scheduled Education reform as an early item in 1993.

The House passed the bill in January; the Senate acted several weeks later. Then a conference committee worked to combine the two pieces of legislation. The major stumbling block was incompatible approaches to school choice. The House called for a moratorium, while the Senate mandated that all systems participate. The bill might have expired at that point had not Gov. Weld offered a winning compromise. The conferees agreed to gradual expansion of school choice, limiting participation to 1 percent, 1.5 percent and finally 2 percent of statewide enrollment over several years.

The conference committee bill was approved in the House by a 2-1 majority. Many of those who voted against the bill were concerned about the mandates for local support of schools at the expense of other town services. I shared these concerns, which were heightened both by an extraordinarily complex formula to determine the level of spending for each district and a cavalier "don't worry about it" attitude of the bill's proponents. Nevertheless, I voted to take a chance as the best hope for improving a struggling statewide system.

That was the bottom line for me. Employers in Massachusetts had expressed alarm about the quality education they see in job applicants. The state has a long tradition of highly skilled workers in our labor force and today's schools are not maintaining that tradition. The new law establishes curriculum and learning standards, minimum foundation expenditure and new lines of authority as a means to changing that decline.

Gov. Weld signed the bill into law last Friday in a Malden schoolroom surrounded by smiling schoolchildren. May their high hopes for their education be sustained in the months and years to come.