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Legislature Approves Education Reform Bill

*Lifts cap on charter schools; provides innovative tools for in-district schools;
and aims to narrow achievement gap*

BOSTON – The Senate and House on Thursday passed an innovative education reform bill that establishes a new category of public schools, provides options to improve existing school districts that are underperforming, and puts the Commonwealth in better position to secure federal grant money to help all public schools in Massachusetts.

“The changes provided in this bill strengthen the Commonwealth’s ability to compete for federal ‘Race to the Top’ funding worth \$150 million to \$250 million,” **Senate President Therese Murray** (D-Plymouth) said. “This money represents a one-time-only opportunity to improve our education system, which is especially important in tough fiscal times when budgets are being slashed and programs are being cut.”

“I am extraordinarily proud of this bill, which places our Commonwealth in a position to capitalize on the significant federal dollars of ‘Race to the Top’ funding,” **House Speaker Robert DeLeo** (D-Winthrop) said. “With this bill, we are taking strong action to address our unacceptable achievement gap, ensure that every child in Massachusetts receives a world class education and promote accountability and innovation in our schools.”

“This bill is a major milestone for improving the quality of education we offer the children of Massachusetts,” said **Senator Steven A. Baddour** (D-Methuen). “The bill will facilitate parents, teachers and community stakeholders in starting charter schools, confront the issues that result in poor performance on assessment tests, and dramatically change the status quo placing Massachusetts in a stronger position to receive ‘Race to the Top’ federal grants. This bill represents a tremendous win for the children of the Commonwealth and especially those in schools and districts with below average performance.”

“Massachusetts has always been a leader in education but for too long we have allowed our achievement gap to widen, leaving behind students and schools that were not performing,” said **Senator Robert O’Leary** (D-Barnstable), lead sponsor of the bill and Senate chairman of the Joint Committee on Education. “The final

bill that we have put forward is a comprehensive, well-balanced bill that represents a collaborative effort by educational stakeholders from around the state and which I believe puts our education system on the right path to better serving all of our students. This bill encourages innovation in school districts and will equip underperforming schools with the tools they need to turn around. By passing this bill today, we have put Massachusetts in a competitive position to secure federal Race to the Top funds that will benefit the whole state. I am proud of the work we have done and commend my colleagues on taking this very important step toward improving public education for all students here in the Commonwealth.”

The consensus bill, An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, creates Innovation Schools, which are district public schools with increased autonomy and flexibility to operate. Any school, in any district, may take advantage of this new model, and the funding of these schools is the same as for any other school in the district.

Any groups or individuals can submit proposals for innovation schools and approval depends on collaborative evaluation by the school committees, teachers union and superintendent.

The bill also addresses “underperforming” and “chronically underperforming” schools by authorizing the commissioner of elementary and secondary education to intervene and work with school superintendents to develop turnaround plans for those schools.

Plans can be approved for up to three years. Upon expiration of the plan, the commissioner will conduct a review and decide whether the school has improved sufficiently, requires further improvement or has failed to improve at all. If no improvement has occurred, the commissioner can take steps to institute changes.

Schools that score in the lowest 20 percent in student achievement measures may be designated as either underperforming or chronically underperforming. No more than 4 percent of the state’s schools (72 schools) can have either designation at any given time.

A final piece of the bill removes the cap that currently limits the state’s total charter school population to 4 percent. It also raises the state’s spending cap for charter schools from 9 to 18 percent of net school spending in the lowest 10 percent performing districts.

The legislation requires charter schools to develop recruitment and retention plans which include annual goals and specific strategies to attract, enroll and retain low-income, special-education, limited-English and sub-proficient students.

Other highlights of the legislation include:

- Requires the Executive Office of Education, within six months of receiving “Race to the Top” funding, to report a detailed plan for use of the funding;
- Requires schools to include a program relating to the American flag in history and civics classes;
- Protects regional school transportation payments from unfair reductions;
- Gives expanded power to dismiss poorly performing teachers as part of a turn-around plan for failing schools while also protecting teachers’ rights including an arbitrated appeals process.

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