

MTA Opposes Plan to Create State Takeover Zones

Proposal would disempower educators and school committees

Senator Eric Lesser of Longmeadow and Representative Alice Peisch of Wellesley have filed bills for the 2017-18 legislative session proposing to create so-called “Innovation Partnership Zones.” The legislation, supported by Governor Charlie Baker, is a clear attempt to subvert the will of the voters who defeated Question 2 last year by allowing the commissioner of education to create charter-like “zones” of two or more schools, stripping democratically elected school committees of all authority over these schools, and gutting local collective bargaining agreements. We are calling them State Takeover Zones.

Under both bills, the commissioner could create an IPZ of an unlimited number of schools as long as there is at least one Level 4 or Level 5 school in the district. The state could also pressure a district to create a zone as long as there is at least one school in the bottom 20 percent. While euphemisms about “partnership,” “empowerment” and “innovation” are used, this is a state takeover bill, pure and simple.

- **NO “PARTNERSHIP”** Although school committees, parents, educators and unions have to be “engaged” in the process, they have absolutely no power. Instead of a partnership, there are top-down mandates. Specifically, there is no requirement that a single educator, municipal employee or local elected or appointed official serve on a zone’s board of directors. In fact, those most involved in the local public schools may *not* constitute a majority on these boards, paving the way for charter-like entities dominated by business interests.
- **NO “EMPOWERMENT.”** Some call these “empowerment” zones — a cynical turn of phrase since the only person empowered is the commissioner. For example, the commissioner would be empowered to impose unilateral changes to the local contract, to appoint the zone’s governing board, and to approve or reject any plans developed by that board. Despite claims that this proposal calls for zones similar to the Springfield Empowerment Zone, they would bear little resemblance to that model.
- **NO “INNOVATION.”** The proposal calls these zones “innovative,” but requires no “innovations” that can’t be approved under existing law. In fact, the mandates in this bill stifle true innovation. The zone’s plan must be judged based on “measurable student outcomes” — mainly standardized test scores. There is no reference to the kinds of innovations sought by many parents and educators, such as those addressing the social and emotional needs of students, fostering creativity and the arts, and replacing teaching to the test with authentic measures of teaching and learning.

The MTA is urging legislators to reject the bills filed by Lesser and Peisch and to support an MTA-backed bill filed by Senator Michael Rush of West Roxbury, with Representative Marjorie Decker of Cambridge the lead House co-sponsor, to invest in public education, support a community school model for struggling schools and institute a three-year moratorium on the high-stakes use of standardized tests.