



Unions provide ‘anchor’ leg in ‘Race to the Top’

By Jim Waters

Kentucky’s teachers unions played “political chicken” and lost.

When Senate Education Committee member Sen. Jack Westwood, R-Erlanger, offered an amendment to include charter schools in the commonwealth’s application for a piece of the \$4.35 billion **Race to the Top** education stimulus pie, the Kentucky Education Association — this from its Web site — “immediately sprang into action, asking members to flood all senators in opposition to charter schools.”

In its newsletter, the KEA crowed: “Our action worked as the committee failed to adopt charter schools in a tie vote with Senator Alice Forgy Kerr (R-Lexington) breaking with other Republicans to vote ‘no.’”

It’s true. But it also backfired — big time.

Had Kerr not allowed Kentucky’s education-union bullies to intimidate her, we likely would have been expecting a check for at least \$200 million right now.

Instead, Tennessee got \$500 million — twice what the Volunteer State originally qualified for — and Delaware, which expected \$75 million, received \$100 million.

Even if charters are finally included in the second-round application due June 1, Kentucky apparently already has lost \$25 million because it caved to the KEA. Perhaps the additional \$25 million Delaware received came from Kentucky’s pot of education gold, since the amount Kentucky now is eligible for is \$25 million less than the \$200 million it requested in Round One.

The biggest villain here is the Jefferson County teachers union, which threatened to withdraw its support for the commonwealth’s application if charters were included. Union leaders are willing to give up millions of dollars for the schools in which their constituents work just to deny parents the opportunity to send students to a better school.

Hmmmm. How will lawmakers go home and explain this loss of money — especially when cuts to education loom?

Will we see some nervous politician wiping his perspiring brow at Fancy Farm this August, saying: “Well, folks, it’s like this: Our top priority is to keep getting re-elected. Since teachers unions offer really fat campaign contributions, we must place their self-centered agendas over what’s best for our students, even if more than 10,000 of them are in failing, **Tier 5 schools**?”

I doubt it.

Here's what you should hear: "Folks, as your state representative, for too long I have kow-towed to the teachers unions afraid that without their support, I couldn't get re-elected. However, I have come across an analysis of education data indicating that since the Kentucky Education Reform Act began in 1990, more than **786,000** Kentucky children left eighth grade with inadequate math skills. It's obvious: the status quo is not working."

"We need charter schools because they are smart, flexible and high-performing — all characteristics a recent Fordham Foundation report said Jefferson County's teachers union hinders. So, I'm willing to give up the support of the unions to do what's best for our children, the future of our commonwealth and the betterment of our country."

Teachers unions nationwide squawk about how the winning states had "buy-in" from the stakeholders, particularly teachers unions. If that is all it took for Race to the Top success, Kentucky would have finished at the top of the heap

Kerr told reporters she voted against the charter-school amendment because she didn't want to endanger the application's chances when the deadline was looming and the state's educrats had all agreed with the approach.

Of course, Kentucky's process had buy-in from the unions because it didn't contain two elements they despise: charter schools, because they can't control policy, curriculum or staffing decisions; and policies connecting teachers' evaluations to students' academic success because then our state would have a mechanism for firing failing teachers and paying great ones more.

Delaware and Tennessee had both. Game over.

— *Jim Waters is director of policy and communications for the Bluegrass Institute, Kentucky's free-market think tank. Reach him at jwaters@freedomkentucky.com. Read previously published columns at www.bipps.org.*