

Sen. Meeks' opportunity

August 22, 2008

Illinoisans who fear that state Sen. James Meeks is a dangerous threat may not know the half of it. The Chicago Democrat is a threat, all right—to timid lawmakers who really don't want to overhaul this state's school funding formula and to a public education industry that is terrified of being held accountable for its failures.

The first of Meeks' two warfronts—his plan for Chicago students to boycott their first day of class and try to enroll in North Shore schools—has received the most publicity. But his companion demand that educators be held accountable for student performance could most disrupt the comfy status quo in classrooms across this state.

Meeks acknowledges what many other advocates of a new school funding formula do not: Before Illinois taxpayers think about changing any formula, they want lawmakers to demand better outcomes in return for the \$20 billion a year that this state already spends on its 2 million public school students.

That means refocusing the public education industry away from inputs (We want more money) toward its outputs (How well do our students actually *perform*?).

Or as Meeks bluntly told us in a conversation Thursday: "Nobody's going to put a dime into this system without demanding some reforms."

Amen to that, Reverend.

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James Meeks is the summer storm front that has descended on Illinois and will not go away. He refuses to accept what many legislators long have: year upon year of dismal schooling that dooms too many students to dead-end careers and dead-end lives.

We're on record opposing Meeks' first-day-of-school stunt, which would disconnect Chicago students from their own classrooms on what's arguably the most important day of the school year.

But we concur with his belief that, for too long, Illinois politicians haven't cared enough to insist on better educations for Illinois kids.

That's in large part because many of those politicians are hostages to the politically active

teachers unions. Most Springfield Democrats would rather have Dick Cheney as their party's candidate for president than risk alienating those teachers unions.

Meeks, though, evidently is in this fight on behalf of the students who right now are being cheated—not on behalf of the public employees paid to educate them. "If we're not going to evaluate educators on student performance, we're missing the boat," he said Thursday. "If we evaluate students based on their performance every week when they take a test, why shouldn't we regularly evaluate teachers on the job *they're* doing?"

This sort of imaginative thinking drives the public education industry berserk. Follow Meeks' line of thinking and you might get to other frightening heresies, such as paying big bonuses to the best teachers—and promptly firing the worst.

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We hope Meeks expands his reform agenda to include the most exciting, most popular innovation in Chicago public schooling today: the rise of successful charter schools.

Arbitrary caps on the number of charter schools currently keep many thousands of Illinois students from transferring to charters from the lousy schools that have failed them. Ghettoizing those kids—forbidding them access to more charter schools—is a crime.

An op-ed on today's facing Commentary page makes a crucial point: In order to take students to the North Shore from his South Side district, Meeks has to drive them past many charter schools that are outperforming neighborhood public schools.

Meeks says he'd rather force all public schools to meet the higher standards that charter schools aspire to achieve.

Who could argue with that?

But there are three reasons why Meeks should reconsider and enable more charters to open:

- Uplifting all public schools takes time.
- More competition will force neighborhood schools to improve or lose more of their students to charters. Remember, charters are public schools, open to anyone. And their results—the education outcomes they actually deliver—are impressive.
- Just between us, Rev. Meeks: Your vocal support for giving more kids access to the charter schools they and their parents crave would bring more Illinois citizens into your fold. As a legislator, you know how much people like charter schools. Demonstrating that you're not just another pol demanding "More money for education!" would distinguish your call for funding reform.

Because, to borrow a phrase:

Nobody's going to put a dime into this system without demanding some reforms.

The first, probably least expensive, most liberating of those reforms should be an elimination of state government caps on charter schools. Embracing that cause, Sen. Meeks, is your opportunity to build real credibility among Illinoisans just now awakening to how great a threat—how great a force for education reform—you can be.