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ISTA bill would kill charter schools, preserve educational status quo

By Kyle Olson

The Indiana State Teachers Association spends a great deal of money every election year supporting candidates who are willing to do its bidding in Indianapolis.

Now the union wants to cash in on its investment with a self-serving bill in the Statehouse that would all but kill the state's charter school movement and curtail other necessary educational reforms.

It's appropriately called "ISTA's bill" and is sponsored by two lawmakers who accept a lot of campaign donations from the teachers union.

The chief sponsor is State Rep. Greg Porter (D-Indianapolis), who has pocketed at least \$33,055 from teachers union political action committees since 2000. The co-sponsor is State Rep. Dave Cheatham (D-North Vernon), who has collected \$65,000 from the same sources since 2005.

Their proposed legislation (HB 1367) would severely limit the creation of new charter schools, delay the school scholarship tax credit and virtual charter school pilot program, forbid for-profit charter schools, allow school capital project funds to be used for other expenses and repeal this year's scholarship tax credits for parents.

The goal is to kill charter schools, which provide healthy competition for public schools, destroy any program that would give families more school choices and divert school improvement funds so teachers don't lose their annual "step" raises and lucrative benefits.

ISTA Interim Executive Director Ann Clarke told union members in an internal memo last week that "ISTA's bill" must be enacted.

While the bill would be advantageous to the teachers union, it would grossly shortchange the parents and students of Indiana.

Republican lawmakers condemn ISTA's bill, partly because it could negate the state's application for up to \$250 million in federal "Race to the Top" competitive grants.

Destroying Indiana's shot at RTTT money would be the cherry on top for the ISTA. The union has spent months diligently working behind the scenes to obstruct the state's RTTT efforts, because school reforms tied to the money go against ISTA interests.

Lawmakers also contend that ISTA's bill discourages important K-2 diagnostic testing and grade 3-8 acuity tests, designed to ensure students don't fall behind. It also allows schools to discontinue tests that prepare students for the SAT and qualify them for National Merit scholarships.

Those tests are critical to producing educated Hoosiers.

We at the Education Action Group Foundation (ISTAexposed.com) believe ISTA's bill is clear evidence the union has no real interest in improving education in Indiana.

ISTA's only goal is to preserve the educational status quo, so union teachers in sub-par schools can maintain their guaranteed student clientele and continue to collect generous salaries and benefits.

We also believe taxpayers are being poorly served by lawmakers like Porter and Cheatham, who are acting to please their campaign sponsors instead of doing what's best for the children of the state.

Kyle Olson is vice president of the Education Action Group Foundation in Muskegon, Mich., a nonprofit organization that monitors teachers union activity throughout the nation.