

News Clips

Headlines

Rocky Mountain News

Thursday, December 13, 2007

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Some of the state's highest- and lowest-performing schools would get to control their budgets, hire their own faculty and staff and design their own curriculum under a bill proposed by a top Democratic lawmaker.

Colorado Senate President-elect Peter Groff unveiled a plan Wednesday that would allow school districts to create what he calls "innovation zones."

Under a bill Groff plans to introduce next month, districts could identify a zone of schools that could seek waivers from district and state policies and some provisions in union contracts.

Such policies and rules are viewed as barriers to innovation in the classroom, Groff said.

"Some of our public schools are struggling and they need the freedom to figure out how to prepare kids for the global market place," he said. "This bill would allow school districts the flexibility to create a charter school concept within the framework of the district."

Groff's bill would give school principals flexibility in hiring staff and faculty,

allocating their budgets and resources, developing innovative curriculum and designing incentives to reward teachers.

Schools still would be required to continue to meet federal requirements and administer standardized tests.

Groff's proposal mirrors that of Bruce Randolph School in northeast Denver, which is seeking waivers from most union rules and policies set by Denver Public Schools.

Officials with the Colorado Education Association, which represents 38,000 educators, said the proposal has widespread implications.

CEA spokeswoman Deborah Fallin said such a law could interfere with about 50 collective bargaining agreements that govern working conditions and provide job protections for teachers statewide.

"Everybody wants reform. Everybody wants kids to succeed," Fallin said. "But we have to look at the big picture and not take a leap that could be more detrimental than helpful."

Education reformers call Groff's proposal cutting-edge but said strict accountability must be built into the measure.

"The proposal can't be designed in a way where school districts and the state leave schools on their own and say we'll see what happens in four or five years," said Van Schoales of the Piton Foundation, which serves low-income communities.