

# Editorial: Assembly drags down Race to the Top

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A recent story in The Bee revealed how legislators strategically use abstention and absences to avoid controversial "yes" or "no" votes, often killing bills in the process.

A prime example is the Assembly's response to President Barack Obama's invitation to challenge the education status quo. It's a status quo, says the president, that "has held back our children, it's held back our economy, and it's held back our country for too long."

Obama is referring to those in the education establishment who have fought steps to better track student progress, reward effective teachers, close persistently low-performing schools and encourage public charter schools as an option for parents and students.

Obama announced in July that states could compete for \$4 billion in new Race to the Top funds to move the bar in those reform areas. Applications are due Jan. 19.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger jumped on the opportunity, delivering a package to legislators by mid-August. The Senate passed a bipartisan package (Senate Bill X5 1) on Nov. 4.

In the Assembly, however, the guiding principle has been delay, detain, derail. And priming this has been the California Teachers Association, which has opposed the Obama initiative from Day One.

That's where strategic non-voting comes into play. In the Assembly Education Committee on Wednesday, six members avoiding controversy took a pass on voting. That killed the Senate bill. Key Assembly leaders, if you can call them that, played a part.

John Perez, D-Los Angeles, who was elected Assembly speaker the next day, was one of the abstainers – not a good start.

Felipe Fuentes, D-Sylmar (Los Angeles County), who had been vying for the Speaker's position, didn't show up for the vote.

Jeff Miller, R-Corona; Isadore Hall, D-Compton; and Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park (Los Angeles County) also were no-shows. Joan Buchanan, D-Alamo, abstained.

The Assembly Education Committee then passed its own, weaker package (Assembly Bill X5 8) – knowing that the Senate does not support it and that the governor will veto it.

Kevin De León, D-Los Angeles, who also had been a candidate for speaker, then jammed this weaker bill through the Appropriations Committee, not allowing amendments that might win support from the Senate and the governor. That bill then went to the floor and passed.

For her part, outgoing Speaker Karen Bass, D-Los Angeles, has been trying to make this legislation a personal battle with Schwarzenegger rather than an opportunity to reach common ground.

Most appalling is that these leaders have large constituencies of poor and minority children stuck in chronically low-performing schools. These kids and their parents deserve better.

The Assembly bill now goes to the Senate. This is where heavy lifting begins. The governor and leadership in the Senate will have to get together with key players in the Assembly to negotiate amendments.

In the coming days, Californians will see if the Assembly really is acting in good faith or is simply trying to prevent the state from taking advantage of new flexible funding to adopt reforms that Californians have discussed for years and years.

The stark reality is that only six to a dozen states will get Race to the Top funding.

Will the Assembly prove to the nation that our state government is utterly dysfunctional?

Or can it show that California can improve the education it provides to millions of young Californians?