

SNG-Nowlan-Steans the reformer-6-11-11 (700 words)

Smart young lady key to major school reforms

By Jim Nowlan

This spring teacher unions, schools, business, reformers—groups normally at dagger points in Springfield—came together in an unprecedented collaboration to shape far-reaching school law changes in Illinois.

“And it wouldn’t have happened without Robin Steans and Advance Illinois,” booms Jeff Mays, president of the conservative Illinois Business Roundtable. Probably just in her 30s, Steans is the self-assured, in-a-hurry, persistent leader of a school reform group named Advance Illinois, which she helped found.

The legislation that she helped spur to passage will fundamentally change public schools by basing teacher tenure, layoffs, recalls, hiring and firing on performance evaluations, rather than simply on seniority. This may not sound earth-shaking, but the objective is to reward excellent teaching and make it possible to dismiss ineffective teachers, which has been almost impossible until now.

The legislation also breaks the stranglehold the Chicago Teachers’ Union (CTU) had over their classroom day, which is about the shortest in the nation. The law also makes it very difficult for Chicago teachers to strike, something they used to do with regularity.

Further, the law provides transparency to the collective bargaining process for all school districts. In cases of impasse between unions and school bargainers, the parties’

“last and best offers” must be made public, for parents and taxpayers to see. “This will help encourage good faith discussions,” says Steans.

When I was education adviser to Gov. Jim Thompson for a spell in the late 1970s, the unions basically ran things. The kind of difficult issues agreed to this spring would have been impossible; teacher union power would have stopped any such ideas dead in their tracks.

With degrees from Stanford in education and law from the University of Chicago and service on her family’s own education foundation, the attractive Steans exudes self-confidence. She has also paid her dues in school matters. A former Chicago Public Schools (CPS) teacher, Steans enrolls her three children in CPS schools, something most whites are leery of doing, and she has served on a CPS local school council.

Robin and her collaborators in reform made Advance Illinois a major player from the get-go in 2008. Bill Daley, now President Obama’s chief of staff, and former Republican governor Jim Edgar were the first co-chairs.

So how did this brash newcomer play such a big role in the legislation? First, she lobbied legislative leaders to support efforts by the state school board and reformers to apply for big dollars from the federal government’s Race to the Top competition. The Illinois application had to show how it would support innovation, address needs of struggling schools and improve school standards. Much of the application dealt with how to improve the teaching corps.

The state school board had no money for the application process, so Steans convinced the foundation community to kick in financial support.

Illinois was not successful with its application, yet the work provided the blueprint for Illinois school reforms, which began in 2010 with the Performance Evaluation Reform Act.

“But what good are better performance evaluations if they don’t matter,” says Steans. In recent years, for example, Illinois schools have been going through waves of layoffs caused by budget shortfalls. Yet the school boards have had no authority to protect the best teachers, and instead have been forced to abide by strict seniority rules.

So Steans pushed in late 2010 to convince the legislature to create a special school reform committee to address such things as the link between performance and teaching career rewards and sanctions. Steans and other group leaders stuck with their efforts through lengthy legislative negotiations.

Success has many parents, so Robin was but part of a cast of key people, including legislators and state board of education officials. Space limitations preclude me from recognizing all who stayed the long course. But Steans got the ball rolling and helped keep it moving.

Steans, who has a fast-paced speaking style, is clearly in a hurry.

“There is huge implementation work to do (with the new law), for example, the development of model teacher evaluations.” She also wants to fundamentally reshape the Illinois School Report Card to make it user friendly and useful to parents.

Illinois has a savvy new player in education politics. Get in her way at your own risk.