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Commentary: Union should lead the way to reform teacher-tenure laws

Edna Johnson graduated from Springfield Teacher's College in 1918 and went to work as a grade school teacher in rural South Dakota. A dedicated professional, her job forced her to see her family only on weekends, and the school district imposed strict guidelines on her personal behavior and dress. She was paid a meager wage for the arduous task of teaching several grades of unruly students in a one-room schoolhouse. Unfortunately for Miss Johnson, her teaching career came to an abrupt halt in 1920 when she was forced to give up a job she loved. She didn't have a contract or tenure to protect her. Her crime? She married her hometown sweetheart who returned home from the war.

Teacher tenure came about in the 20th century as a reaction to teachers being treated like school-district chattel. Faced with antiquated and often arbitrary rules, teachers finally demanded and received assurances of due process, collective bargaining, and better pay. Yet what started off as common-sense protections for teachers has evolved into something quite different and destructive. The reality of teacher tenure in Minnesota is that it's become a guarantee of permanent employment for life, regardless of effectiveness.

Minnesota's public-school teachers are granted tenure following completion of a three-year probationary period in a single school district. Only 10 states have a shorter probationary period for teachers. A three-year probationary period means thousands of Minnesota teachers are awarded a job for life, often when they are only 25 years of age. Indeed, Minnesota teachers are automatically granted tenure upon successful completion of that three-year probationary period. No application, no hearings, no process — just an automatic job for life. I can think of no successful industry in this country that offers an ironclad job guarantee for life regardless of an employee's effectiveness.

Today, teacher tenure is often looked upon with a great deal of skepticism and as an impediment to providing children with a quality public education. As recently as 2005, a Gallup poll found that most Americans were unsure or outright opposed to current teacher tenure laws. Taxpayers recognize that Minnesota's teachers union is one of the most powerful special-interest groups in the state; the union carries an enormous amount of clout at the Capitol.

It's that same union that now steadfastly refuses to accept even the most modest reforms to teacher tenure.

Recently, we learned that Minnesota, once a pioneer in K-12 innovation and achievement, received a D- by the non-partisan National Council on Teacher Quality's 2009 State Teacher Policy Yearbook. According to the report, we failed miserably in "exiting those [teachers] deemed ineffective." This report, along with Education Minnesota's steadfast opposition to linking teacher pay to student achievement, is what many believe doomed Minnesota's

initial application for a new federal education initiative called “Race to the Top.”

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the “Race to the Top Fund provides competitive grants to encourage and reward states that are creating the conditions for education innovation and reform.” Our rejected application would have been worth \$250 million for Minnesota’s schools.

Last week, Gov. Pawlenty unveiled a comprehensive education reform bill designed to ensure that if Minnesota submits a second “Race to the Top” application, our plan won’t be summarily dismissed.

Nationwide, Democrats and Republicans have come together, worked with the teachers unions and made significant compromises in reforming teacher tenure laws. Delaware, one of the two states that received money from the initial “Race to the Top” competition, went so far as to pass legislation that “includes the ability to have teachers rated as ‘ineffective’ for three years removed from the classroom, even if they have tenure.”

Edna Johnson Schmidt was my grandmother. She would be shocked to see what those common-sense teacher-tenure reforms sought years ago have wrought today. Her love of teaching spawned four generations of teachers in my family, all of whom entered the profession seeking student, not personal, enrichment. We should expect no less of a commitment from Education Minnesota. The union should lead the way on reforming teacher tenure laws — or get out of the way.

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