

Sacramento Bee. August 21, 2009

By Torey Van Oot

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Thursday called a special legislative session for lawmakers to repeal a controversial law that prohibits linking teacher evaluations to student performance.

The Obama administration is demanding the repeal to make California eligible for part of \$4.3 billion in federal stimulus funds for schools. But the move could face tough going in the Democratic-controlled Legislature because of opposition from the California Teachers Association.

Specifically, the proposal would repeal a law that prohibits using student test scores in combination with a statewide system for storing information about teachers that will go online next year. The Obama administration has said states that prohibit linking teacher evaluations to student performance will not be eligible for the "Race to the Top" stimulus funds.

"Right now, we can't tell over the course of time how an individual teacher or principal or school is doing," Schwarzenegger said Thursday. "They call it a firewall, and I say tear down that wall."

The Republican governor also called on lawmakers to make other changes he said will make the state more competitive for federal funds: lifting a cap on the number of charter schools allowing "alternative pay schedules" for teachers in some jobs and opening enrollment to allow students to attend any school in the state.

He called on the Legislature to take up the package and finish by Oct. 5 so the state has time to apply for what he said could be hundreds of millions of dollars for California schools. Billions of dollars in future funding opportunities are also expected to be linked to the standards set for the grants, he said.

California Teachers Association Vice President Dean Vogel criticized the governor for rushing through a serious policy decision.

"We certainly recognize the need for more school funding but calling lawmakers into a special session to rewrite state education law just so the state can apply for (this) grant funding... really seems like a knee-jerk reaction," he said.

Vogel said the changes outlined by the governor, such as merit-based pay and charter school expansions, "just don't work" and echoed past statements by Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell that teachers can already be evaluated on the basis of student performance if local administrators and teachers agree.

O'Connell spokeswoman Hilary McLean said the superintendent "shares the governor's goal of qualifying for Race to the Top funds," and that his office was reviewing the proposal's details.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who is scheduled to visit Sacramento on Sept. 1, called the governor's plan a "step in the right direction."