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Failing public schools need local control

Gov. Owens should sign a bill that would give poor-performing schools earlier attention and greater flexibility in achieving a turnaround.

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Schools ranked as unsatisfactory in Colorado get lots of attention, but schools classified as low-performing are too often ignored.

But test scores at schools considered low often dangle dangerously close to unsatisfactory levels, and the state's accountability law does nothing to help them. A school has to be ranked unsatisfactory for three consecutive years before the state intervenes.

It's one of the key flaws in an otherwise solid accountability system. It would be eliminated under a bill passed by the legislature and awaiting Gov. Bill Owens' signature.

Under the current law, if a school is unsatisfactory for three years in a row, it must be converted to a charter - even if that may not be the best tool to rescue the school. But under House Bill 1216, low-performing schools also would get help, and the remedy wouldn't always be conversion to a charter school.

The local district, not the state, could decide what's best for the school after consulting with the community. The answer could be a charter. Or it could just be longer school days, or a longer school year. Or maybe some teachers need to be fired.

Local control of education has a long and successful history in Colorado, and this bill would restore that control on an important matter. If schools continually fail, even after local intervention, the school board and the state then would agree to change the school's governing system. That could mean converting to a charter, allowing an outside educational program to take over, or closing the school.

Another measure on Owens' desk, Senate Bill 214, was originally written to align Colorado's various accountability systems - School Accountability Reports, CSAPs and district accreditation - with the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The idea was to create one sensible system. (As it stands now, Colorado actually has to lower some of its standards to conform with federal rules.)

But SB 214 was greatly watered down during the legislative process. Even so, proponents still fear it will be vetoed by Owens. So be it.

Owens, in his State of the State address in January, drew a line in the sand over school accountability, pledging to veto any bill that he thinks would lessen accountability or roll back progress.

Aligning Colorado's accountability systems is important, and we'd urge lawmakers to let this one go and come back with a bill next year that Owens can support.

And we would urge Owens to either sign HB 1216 or let it become law without his signature. It's not a step back; it would strengthen Colorado's accountability efforts by helping more students who are struggling in low-performing schools.