

State has a setback on plan to reform prisons

But it's an important effort that legislators should stick with.

Teachers aren't the only special-interest group that wants to challenge the state's bold plans for reform. In addition to sweeping education changes, Gov. Mitch Daniels is proposing a serious change in the way Indiana handles its prisons and those who are sentenced to them. And it is the state's prosecuting attorneys who are fiercely fighting the change.

There is a difference, though. The Republicans in the administration and both houses of the General Assembly are plowing ahead with education reform, despite the objections of teachers. But for whatever reason, they are actually listening to the prosecutors, and that means prison reform in Indiana might not end up doing what the reformers intended it to. If the state isn't careful, the whole reform effort could fall apart.

Prosecutors wanted to strengthen the bill's "tough on crime" message, so they persuaded lawmakers to add a provision ensuring violent criminals would serve at least 85 percent of their sentences; currently, most offenders serve only half because they get a day of credit for each day of good behavior. They also successfully lobbied against a provision that would reduce "drug-free zones" around schools from 1,000 to 200 feet.

Many of the bill's original provisions remain to divert low-level offenders into treatment and community corrections. But because of the changes sought by prosecutors, a key component is in doubt: the ability to reduce prison costs by more than \$1 billion. This is an important effort, so legislators shouldn't give up. They should work with prosecutors until they come up with something that will both protect Hoosiers and save money and prison space.

Education and prison efforts have another thing in common: What Indiana is trying is part of a nationwide movement toward reform.

On education, global competition has forced politicians and some educators to see that we can't keep accepting excuses for the failure of our public education system. Indiana's may be one of the boldest reform plans, but it certainly isn't the only one.

Prison reform is being pushed by burgeoning inmate populations and soaring costs – more than \$50 billion a year is spent on prisons in this nation. Florida is moving 2,000 prisoners to private jails. Arkansas is paroling terminally ill prisoners. Louisiana is trying to rein in its system – the nation's fastest growing. The Pew Center on the States, which spearheaded the reform proposals here, is currently working with 20 other states.

Reform momentum is building, and there is hope it will succeed despite the setbacks. Everybody hang in there.