

Don't rush school aid plan

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Asset monetization isn't the only complex, multibillion-dollar issue confronting Gov. Jon Corzine and the Legislature. The governor has promised a new education funding formula in time for school boards to draft budgets this winter. To meet that timetable, Trenton's leaders are in tent on fast-tracking a \$7.3 billion aid plan through the Senate and Assembly in the next five weeks.

They ought to reconsider.

After all, school spending is the lion's share of everyone's property tax bill. Moreover, the result will mean a revamping of so-called Abbott funding for poor districts, which the state has wrestled with for decades.

This is not something that ought to get done on the quick. Corzine has promised a public forum on asset monetization in each of the state's 21 counties. Is financing our public schools any less important?

What is known so far about Corzine's plan is little beyond the catchphrase that state aid should follow the child. Fine, but how will that work?

Tidbits have trickled out, but the details -- specifically how much each district will get and why -- remain stashed in an Education Department computer. Despite that dearth of information, Corzine, Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts and Senate President Richard Codey want to get the massive spending plan wrapped up by Jan. 7, probably voting on that final day of the lame-duck session.

That doesn't leave much time for a reasonable discussion of a proposal that will affect every school district and every property tax payer in New Jersey for years to come.

Last year, during the special session on property tax reform, lawmakers spent months studying the matter, holding myriad hearings and eliciting comments from all sides.

It is not good enough, however, to say that this passes for public debate. People outside of Trenton weren't fully engaged then, and they won't be this time either. Under the Legislature's schedule, any full-blown debate will have to come amid holiday preparations and festivities. (No, dear, we can't decorate the tree this year. We've got to go to Trenton to discuss per pupil spending.)

More important, the Legislature is about to undergo a remarkable makeover. The 40-member Senate will have 16 new faces and the 80-member Assembly will have 27. Those newcomers should have a say. Allowing lame-duck lawmakers who aren't answerable to voters anymore to make decisions that will affect property taxes for years is illogical as well as a snub of voters.

Besides, rushing can amount to a waste of time. It's happened before. In 1990, a newly elected Gov. Jim Florio came up with a new school financing formula. Democrats strong-armed the proposal through the Legislature by late spring. A month or so later, the state Supreme Court forced Florio to rewrite the plan.

The call for caution isn't meant to suggest that longer debates inherently produce better results. But a policy move as momentous as school funding shouldn't be made in a matter of weeks.

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