

Is new school-funding proposal a bad apple?

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By DAVID G. SCIARRA

AFTER a year-long delay, with a few tidbits trickling out over the last few days, Governor Corzine has promised to release his new school-funding proposal this week.

School funding is one of the most important issues in our state. Yet, here we are into December and, at this point, legislators, educators and the public know none of the complex details of the proposal. But the governor is still insisting he wants a new school-funding formula enacted in the remaining days of the lame duck session, with the holiday season in full swing.

Let's face it, the opportunity for anyone, at least outside the State Education Department, to review, analyze and provide input on the proposal, let alone propose alternatives, is now an impossibility.

Every student, parent and taxpayer will feel the impact of a new school-funding formula. We should proceed with great care and caution when changing an essential state function such as public education. This is particularly true now, when we need to address fundamental problems in our school finance system, and not just play around the margins.

The property tax question

Here are some of the key questions that need to be asked, studied and answered in considering the governor's formula:

Does the proposal reduce the state's structural over-reliance on local property taxes to support public education in so many communities?

Will the formula continue excellence in our most successful suburban districts, or will it "level down" educational quality in our lighthouse schools?

Will it strengthen the necessary funding and ground-breaking reforms underway in the Abbott districts, given mounting evidence these reforms are closing the achievement gap?

How will the formula ensure that other poor, under-funded districts receive the additional help they need from the state?

How can we ensure the formula is not a "reverse Robin Hood," simply redistributing aid taken from our poorest students and schools?

How will the state pick up its share of special education costs for children with disabilities, thereby reducing local tax burdens?

The governor has announced he wants to "hold harmless" all districts for the first year or two, so no district would immediately lose funding. Thus, districts may not experience the full impact of the formula until 2009 or 2010, when the Legislature actually implements it.

Thus, even more important than the initial "winners and losers" will be analyzing the longer term effects of the governor's proposal, which will take time and not be easy,

This also means that legislators now on their way out of office should not vote on the formula, since they will not be around when its full effect is felt. The incoming Legislature should do the job, because its members will have to fund the formula in the coming years, and they will be held accountable for their actions.

Ample opportunity for meaningful input and debate is also necessary to ensure the funding formula is educationally and legally sound.

Four times since 1970, the Legislature has rushed through formulas, only to be declared unconstitutional because they shortchanged our public schools.

Open approach

Tom Corcoran, an adviser on one of those failed attempts, correctly notes that the process of developing a formula "should be as open as possible because exclusionary, closed door approaches are going to build mistrust and opposition." Let's learn a lesson from recent history, not repeat it.

We need school-funding reform. But the governor's push to fast-track a new funding formula is unwise, and will likely yield yet another budget-driven formula that does little to lower property taxes and provide high quality education for all children and schools.

This time, let's take time.

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