

Garden State Schools Coalition
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Not so fast on school-funding reform

By LYNNE STRICKLAND

GOVERNOR CORZINE has unveiled his PowerPoint presentation for a new, comprehensive school-funding formula, bringing New Jersey to a critical juncture in the debate over public support for public education.

The Legislature is preparing to enact the changes during the lame duck session, which closes Jan. 8 after the holiday break. To date, there is no proposed legislation nor district data impact listings available for review.

School funding and property tax relief are inextricably linked.

Creating an equitable funding formula is the single best way to relieve the heavy property tax burden in many communities and ensure that every New Jersey student receives a thorough and efficient public education.

To keep New Jersey at a high level of student performance that is nationally recognized, while relieving the high property tax burden, it is clear that the state needs to develop and implement a new public school funding formula, one that is unified and applies to all students, that is fair, flexible, stable, sustainable and responsive to student and community needs alike.

Today in New Jersey more than 45 percent of the regular operating districts are now considered too wealthy to receive basic state foundation aid. In California, only 6 percent of school districts fall into this "too wealthy" category.

Caught in the middle

Middle-income districts and poor districts alike have been caught in the middle, to the detriment of their student programs and resultant increases in property taxes. A good formula takes time, careful consideration and public debate.

We are concerned that by attempting to push such a complex and far-reaching proposal through the legislative process in the lame duck session, the governor and Legislature will end up shortchanging our students and taxpayers for years to come.

Ample time is needed to fully analyze statewide and long-term impacts that are intrinsic to any school-funding formula.

Our main concerns are:

- 1) Governor Corzine has recommended a radical departure from past practice regarding aid to special education. In calling for "wealth-equalized" funding for special education, he raises a volatile issue.

The practice of "categorical" aid for special education students has been a settled issue in New Jersey for approximately 40 years.

2) The Garden State Coalition of Schools has consistently opposed the "equalizing" of special education categorical aid. Under the categorical aid funding, aid is granted to each classified student according to disability, no matter where they reside. Virtually all major stakeholder groups in the state concur with keeping special education aid a categorical aid.

3) The administration has also recommended another change to special education aid, suggesting that it be reconfigured to a census-based approach. This means one flat amount would be granted for each classified student in a district, regardless of disability; the aid would be capped at 14.7 percent, the statewide average special education population, regardless of whether a district had a larger population or not.

A number of districts have promoted programs for autism and other disabilities, meeting the state's own goals of inclusion as well as efficiency. Families seek out such programs and thus such programs attract a greater number of students.

It would be wrong to punish this responsive program innovation by not providing state aid to meet the population beyond that first 14.7 percent.

3) While not part of a formula, a probable two-year "hold harmless" approach would be applied to state aid for all districts where aid would be reduced by the formula. Under the formula plan, it is estimated that approximately 200 districts would not anticipate any property tax relief, nor would there be any circuit breakers in place for lower income citizens in those districts.

Masking long-term effects

This short-term provision is an attempt to ease the negative property tax impacts on many districts. However, this provision will also mask the longer-term effects of the formula. For meaningful debate, district data impact listings must show how the formula would impact school communities without the hold-harmless provisions in the long term as well.

5) Since the actual legislation is not yet available for analysis, the formula and any new policy implications cannot yet be fully assessed. Open public scrutiny is limited until these important details are released in bill form and district impact data listings.

The new formula will impact the educational well-being of every public school student and every public school district, as well as every municipality and local taxpayer.

It is too important and too complex to take up halfway through the lame duck session -- with the holidays in between -- and try to pass such far-reaching legislation in a heated rush.

Read the coalition's report, "Funding New Jersey's Schools... Finding a Workable Solution," at www.gscschools.org.

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