

# ALBANY ALERT

## LEGISLATURE'S ONE HOUSE BILLS HELP SCHOOLS

By now we all know the context: The Executive Budget proposed a \$370 million increase in school aid (little more than enough to pay schools for the reimbursable expenses they'd already incurred.) If the legislature agreed to accept all of his education reforms, he would increase the amount to \$1.1 billion. He then threw in the caveat that they would also have to pass legislative ethics reforms as well. He then coupled the politically disparate issues of a private and parochial school tax credit with legislation to allow undocumented residents to receive state assistance toward college. If the legislature failed to agree, no one would receive state tuition assistance. In recent days, leaders from the legislative and executive branches have softened the rhetoric, saying that negotiations would be sincere and perhaps not as "all or nothing" as originally proposed.

Both houses of the legislature have now released their version of what a state budget should look like. Both are a far sight better for rural school districts. The Assembly version would add \$1.8 billion more in state aid. The approach would add \$1 billion in Foundation Aid, which largely helps rural districts that rely heavily on state aid. The Assembly one house bill would also reduce the GEA (Gap Elimination Adjustment) by nearly half, totaling \$456 million. This would leave a similar amount to be addressed in next year's state budget. It would split \$80 million for pre-school funding between New York City and the remainder of the state, unfortunately perpetuating the inequity begun with last year's \$300-\$40 million split.

The Senate weighed in with their own view, featuring a slightly higher total of \$1.9 billion. The most significant aspect of their approach is the total elimination of the GEA in this year's state budget. Assuming that the measure provides full reimbursement for Building, Transportation, Special Ed and BOCES aids, it would also provide more than a half billion dollars in additional Foundation Aid.

These bills stake out the position of each house and identify their funding priorities. Both versions would provide more than the \$1.3 billion needed in state aid to "roll over" the cost of existing programs and services for school districts. Local districts are legally allowed to increase revenue by about \$700 million under this year's tax cap. The amount needed to retain all programs and services at their existing level (adjusting for increases) would be roughly \$2 billion, leaving the state to provide \$1.3 billion in aid. Presuming that the additional amount is not earmarked for specific programs accessible only to certain districts, the amounts above \$1.3 billion would begin to provide real relief to districts that have struggled under years of austerity funding.

More specific analysis will be forthcoming, but the real value of the one house budget bills is as a political statement. We now know where each house stands on the issue of school funding. What remains to be seen is the willingness of the legislature to battle for their aid levels in the face of the governor's "winner take all" approach. Past legal attempts (to urge the courts to curb the governor's extraordinary power to place policy language into what has traditionally been a fiscal document) have not been kind to the legislature. While there has been informal discussion of a lawsuit by the legislature to prevent tying unwanted policies to needed state school aid, there is a general feeling among legislators that this would be a judicially risky maneuver. Politically polarizing as it would be, the thought of also delaying the state budget beyond the April 1<sup>st</sup> deadline is equally threatening to all parties. For now, legislative leaders appear poised to wait and see if the governor is at all flexible in negotiations; a process that can begin in earnest now that all sides have staked out their positions.

**Editorial Comment:** The aid totals proposed by the legislative houses would be of tremendous help to our school districts-for now. At this point, the problem with even a healthy aid increase is that it perpetuates a seemingly intractable distribution problem. To date, neither house nor the governor have attempted to tackle the real work of implementing a funding formula that adequately addresses the issue of how much any given community can afford to contribute to its local schools (and supplementing it with a state aid amount that results in every child being provided a sound, basic education as required by the state constitution.) In essence, because both the state and local school districts are forced to look at the problem only on an annual basis (and not in the long term) we focus only on what is provided right now, while ignoring the real issue of creating an equitable system.

Just this week a nationally recognized educational think tank ranked New York State 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation in the way it distributes its funding. Our state forces local property taxpayers to pay for the majority of public education's costs. Most states do the opposite, providing the lion's share of funding from the state, in a formula that bolsters the efforts of the less wealthy communities. The problem with New York's approach is that (if you don't happen to have significant local financial resources), you're done. The fact that we annually ignore the problem condemns students in those communities to an inferior educational experience, which in turn condemns them in many instances to a life of poverty. In the United States of America in 2015, in the Empire State, that is unacceptable. Papering over the problem with money in good times and withholding opportunity in the tough ones is a sad approach to a constitutional right. We would never stand for suspension of the right to freedom of the press, or freedom of religion or speech. Yet, we have allowed our leaders to suspend the constitutional educational rights of our children. Education is sequential. It builds on previously gained knowledge from one year to the next. Children literally can't afford to have gaps in their educational experience; not if we want them to compete in a national and international marketplace that will keep our state economically attractive.

The legislature is right to eliminate the GEA. It is right to provide additional Foundation Aid and reverse the unconstitutional and damaging course it set over the last decade. They must have our support and they must be successful. But when that battle's won, be ready for the real work of creating an equitable, workable and predictable school funding formula; because as beneficial as an aid increase would be, it will be an amount simply added to what you've received in prior years. It won't be based on enrollment, changes in your tax base or even remotely reflect what your community needs; and it will still force your local taxpayers to foot most of the bill. **Fund it, sure. Then fix it!**

## RURAL SCHOOLS TO LOSE CHAMPION

The fight over teacher evaluations has claimed another victim. Dr. James Dawson, who many refer to as the "Rural Regent" has lost his bid for reappointment to the Board of Regents. Incumbent Regents who oversaw the implementation of the Common Core reforms, including the APPR requirements, are being systematically replaced by those viewed as more responsive to the legislature. Under the state's constitution, the Board of Regents is an independent body, charged with setting the state's educational policy. Yet, given that they are appointed by the legislature (and seeing that the legislature was pressured to address a state testing policy seen as intrusive to existing educational practices and a threat to teacher security) the Regents that are up for reappointment are finding themselves being removed in favor of a new, presumably more pliable group.

Jim Dawson has been as informed and involved a representative as rural schools could hope for. An ever present fixture at rural school events, Dawson made the personal sacrifice of traveling hours (even during times of ill health) to ensure that he knew the most pertinent and important issues facing rural schools. He did it for a generation. He did it consistently. He did it for free. He truly cares about the education provided to all of our state's children and he took particular pains to ensure that rural interests were recognized in a world where they were often shuttled to the political sidelines. I have been involved in state policymaking for over three decades; the entirety of Jim Dawson's service as a Regent. When I began working in the legislature, I was told by a longtime legislative veteran that I'd be lucky if (when I ended my service) I could count on one hand those I truly respected. Jim Dawson heads that list. He personifies selfless service and embodies intellectual brilliance, combined with practical application of real world issues. His leadership comes in a form rarely seen and we will miss it dearly.

Dawson's replacement is Beverly Ouderdirk of Morristown. She has served as a school superintendent in several districts. She was quoted as saying "It's a wonderful opportunity at a very critical time. I have over 50 years in public education in New York State and hopefully that will give me some information that will help me in tough decisions ahead." Dawson was not informed of the decision ahead of time, but graciously said that he knew Ouderdirk, expected her to excel as a member of the Board of Regents and would support her.

The Rural Schools Association takes a similar view. We will work arduously with Regent Ouderkirk to support rural districts and all of public education in New York State. We will also pause to reflect and appreciate the career of dedicated service, the countless visits to our schools and the sound, reasoned approach to public policy provided by our own Jim Dawson. Regent Dawson, on behalf of your grateful rural school districts, thank you for your tireless and exemplary efforts.

## RSA ON THE AIR

One of the most important aspects of your RSA membership is supporting efforts to educate the public and state leaders on the needs and importance of our rural schools. As a result, your association makes every effort to work with media representatives to broadcast that message. This includes participating in media covered events like press conferences and rallies, serving as a resource for stories on public education and participating in interviews. In the past couple of months, RSA has appeared on Capital Tonight, the statewide political television show of Time Warner Cable. We have been interviewed by WCNY, both on the Capital Pressroom radio show with Susan Arbetter and on their television show, Insight. Yesterday, RSA was interviewed by former State Senator Cecilia Tkacyk for WGXC radio's Albany Report. **Click here to listen to the rural school perspective in state budget issues.**

**YOUR PART:** Many of you are currently participating in advocacy activities. Rallies, letter writing, school district board resolutions all help us press for much needed reforms and adequate funding. Maximize your efforts by focusing on engaging as many members of your community as possible. State leaders expect school officials to advocate. They do not expect unaffiliated community members to be concerned enough to contact them. Only when we become a political force that is larger than the school community will we effectively compete against the many worthy requests for the attention of the legislature and the financial resources of the state. Each one of your students represents four voting constituents. Use social media, school district newsletters, letters to the editor and offers to appear on local media to educate your community on the challenges you face and the responsibility of state leaders to help. Never forget the powerful words of Franklin Roosevelt "You've convinced me. Now go out and make me."