

OPINION: GOV. CHRIS CHRISTIE – THE LAME DUCK WHO ROARED

CARL GOLDEN | MARCH 2, 2017

The governor may be on his way out, but he managed to turn his budget address into a referendum on school funding, much to dismay of gubernatorial hopefuls



Carl Golden

Lest there be any mistake, Gov. Chris Christie forced the hands of those wishing to succeed him, while guaranteeing that the dominant issue in their campaigns would be their proposals to restructure the formula by which the state appropriates aid to local school districts.

While most of the attention was focused on the governor's seemingly abandoning his own "fairness formula," his challenge to the Legislature to develop a revised school-aid formula within the next 100 days – a challenge he knows will not be answered

– established the issue as one which gubernatorial candidates must address or risk being seen as unsure or too weak to grapple with it.

His "if you don't do it, I will" threat is largely hollow, issued more for effect than as a promise he can fulfill. He cannot act unilaterally to change the aid formula, other than to use his line-item veto authority to reduce or divert aid funds.

Such action on his part would back legislative Republicans into a politically untenable corner and, in all likelihood, lead to the first veto override of his tenure.

The Democratic legislative leadership has little interest in cooperating with Christie to rewrite the aid formula, preferring to wait until next year when they are confident a Democrat will occupy the governor's office and, with majorities in both houses, devise their own plan and claim victory for solving a problem that has vexed government for nearly 40 years.

Backing off his "fairness formula," under which each district would receive an identical \$6,599 per-pupil in state aid, from K to 12, was a relatively easy call for Christie. Aside from himself and a handful of Republican legislators, the proposal enjoyed little support.

By calling out the Legislature and by dismissing proposals for what he termed "stupid study commissions" or blue-ribbon panels – suggestions put forth by Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto (D-Hudson) – Christie delivered a "put up or shut up" message to gubernatorial candidates.

He assailed the current formula as an expensive failure foisted on taxpayers by an unwitting Legislature and an out-of-touch Supreme Court, stopping just short of characterizing them as eggheads who dwelt in a fantasy world.

Sweeney responded by agreeing to work with Christie, but reiterated the solution lay in fully funding the existing formula after first wringing the inequities out of the system and ensuring that districts do not benefit unfairly from overfunding while others are penalized by underfunding.

Whether his position will be embraced by Democratic gubernatorial candidates is unclear. Reactions from the acknowledged frontrunner, former Goldman Sachs executive Phil Murphy, and his closest challenger, Assemblyman John Wisniewski, (D-Middlesex), were largely vague assertions that the state must meet its obligations while easing the growing property-tax burden.

Neither Lt. Gov. Kim Guadagno nor Assemblyman Jack Ciattarelli (R-Somerset), were more forthcoming, although the Assemblyman complimented the governor for demanding quick action.

As the primary election campaigns unfold in both parties, the school-funding issue will dominate, but it's unlikely that any of the candidates will spell out in great detail — or any detail — what each would do to address it.

Once the general election contest is joined, however, the pressure on the chosen candidates to provide specifics will grow.

It will no longer be sufficient or acceptable to talk in generalities, pledging to provide a quality education for every youngster while controlling costs — particularly property taxes — and ensuring a formula that is fair and constitutional.

The four decades of history involved in the school-funding issue have entangled governors, legislatures, and the courts in a seemingly endless and expensive adventure.

As Christie pointed out in his speech, aid to education consumes nearly 40 percent of the entire state budget and the issue still is not settled.

The argument has been made repeatedly that 5 percent of the districts receive 60 percent of the aid and that the return on the billions that have been expended in many of those districts has been disappointing. Critics argue that little progress has been achieved in increasing graduation rates or test scores, despite per-pupil expenditures in excess of \$25,000 a year.

Christie, as well as some of his predecessors, has made the case that the state has done little more than to pour steadily increasing amounts of money into the system and it should be apparent to all that continuing to do so is foolish and fiscally unsustainable.

By focusing on the issue as he has and by his challenge to act in three months to address it, Christie has set the stage for a full-throated debate over the state's responsibility to public education and how to meet it.

It's more than likely that debate will be conducted in the heat of a gubernatorial election campaign, not always the most rational and reasonable venue for such discussions.

When he left the Assembly chamber after his speech, Christie may have been chuckling softly to himself, recognizing that while he'll be out of office in 10 months, he's established the campaign context for those who wish to succeed him.

He's proven himself a shrewd and crafty political figure — perhaps the most accomplished one in recent history — and casting his shadow over an election campaign in which he'll not participate personally serves to solidify that reputation.

The duck may be lame, but his quack won't be ignored.

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