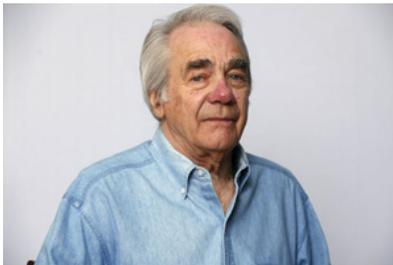


OPINION: SWEENEY'S JERSEY CITY GAMBIT FOR EDUCATION AID

CARL GOLDEN | APRIL 26, 2018

The Senate president's strategy to redistribute aid from overfunded districts is far more palatable than Murphy's plan to raise taxes



Carl Golden

State Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) is on his way to becoming one of the most consequential presiding officers in recent history, his hands firmly on the levers of power – political and policy. He has demonstrated that he is both adroit and willing to push and pull those levers in relentless pursuit of his goal.

When, for instance, he singled out the Jersey City school district as the prime example of the unfair application of the state's formula for aid to local education, he accomplished two things:

- He assumed full command of the legislative mission to revise the formula and wring out the inequities that for years have denied growing districts their fair share of aid.
- He dramatically altered the political dynamic that he and other critics maintain produced the aid imbalance in the first place and has thwarted efforts to correct it ever since.

Sweeney has been on a crusade to reduce or eliminate the transition-aid component of the formula that has ensured that districts with declining enrollments would continue to receive their level of funding. This “hold harmless” provision has, in its practical application, punished districts that have experienced enrollment increases but have not received the amount of aid to keep pace.

Sweeney, the go-to guy

He has established himself as the go-to guy in the Legislature on the school-funding issue. And he has left no doubt about his commitment to revamping the formula this year with his public threat to delay Senate confirmation of Lamont Repollet as commissioner of education after the commissioner-designate indicated any action to do so wouldn't occur until 2019.

Within 24 hours of Sweeney's drawing a line in the sand, both Repollet and Gov. Phil Murphy experienced an epiphany and allowed as how action in this legislative session was just dandy with them.

The frame of reference for the debate on school funding will be established by Sweeney, and he will head into negotiations with the administration on the issue with an exceptionally strong hand.

Jersey City in the crosshairs

It was, though, his pointed criticism of Jersey City – overfunded, he said, by an astonishing \$174 million – that was more politically intriguing.

He could have issued a more general statement, reiterating the unfairness and the burden it imposes on local property taxpayers in the underfunded districts, but he chose to concentrate on Jersey City. Accident? Not likely.

A report issued by the Office of Legislative Services (OLS), for instance, said 70 percent of the state's districts were underfunded and estimated full funding – a goal insisted on by the governor – would cost an additional \$2.2 billion and could be partially offset by redirecting the \$660 million in transition aid.

It wasn't too many years ago that a prominent Democrat – someone of Sweeney's stature – publicly scolding Hudson County was unthinkable.

Hudson was the epitome of Democratic party influence and power, delivering massive and decisive victory margins on election day. Gubernatorial candidates or anyone with statewide ambitions trekked to the county on regular pilgrimages to seek the imprimatur of the county leaders – the gold standard of endorsements.

Murphy, for instance, rolled up a plurality of nearly 70,000 last November in Hudson, suggesting that the capability of the county to turn out in significant number remains. Democratic margins in previous gubernatorial elections ranged from as low as 11,000 to a more common 50,000 to 60,000. (Republican Gov. Tom Kean carried the county in his 1985 landslide by 42,000 votes, aberrant voter behavior not likely to be repeated).

Sweeney must have weighed the political cost/benefit analysis before singling out Jersey City as the most egregious example of school-funding distortion and concluded the risk was minimal or neutral.

He is convinced he's on the high ground of fair play and that his willingness to take up arms on behalf of school districts and taxpayers who've been cheated of their just due by crass political actions will be rewarded.

While Murphy has repeatedly pledged to restore full formula funding, he has not included the elimination of transition aid in his calculations, a reflection of the position taken by the New Jersey Education Association – perhaps his strongest supporter – that no district lose aid in any reconfiguring of the formula.

More appealing than Murphy scheme

With 70 percent of districts underfunded, as reported by the OLS study, legislators are more likely drawn to Sweeney's view than that of the governor.

The frosty reaction of the legislative leadership to Murphy's \$1.7 billion tax increase recommendation is not helpful to the governor's cause, to be sure, and the Sweeney proposal to divert the transition aid into help for the underfunded districts offers a reasonable and far less risky alternative.

Sweeney has seized the initiative on an issue that has bedeviled governors and legislators for decades and, in doing so, has created a dilemma for the governor – choose to perpetuate an unfair system and support it with increased taxes or apply a commonsense attitude and treat all school districts equitably.

A side effect that likely gives Sweeney some inner satisfaction and a private smile or two is the unflattering light cast on the NJEA, which spent some \$5 million last November shredding the Senator personally and politically only to fail badly in its effort to oust him.

Moreover, his criticism of the Jersey City district reflects the dissatisfaction ingrained in South Jersey that for too long government has tilted the state toward the more populous and politically powerful north.

Sweeney won't pay a price for poking North Jersey in the eye while straightening the tilt, pushing to restore a balance and raising the decibel level of South Jersey's voice.

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