

## OPINION: SENATE PRESIDENT SWEENEY — POISED ON THE CUSP OF POWER

CARL GOLDEN | JULY 26, 2017

The Democratic leader has gone toe to toe with the NJEA on school funding — and bested it. A likely Murphy victory would put him in a position of undeniable strength



*Carl Golden*

Having locked down another term as state Senate president, Sen. Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) has turned his focus to an issue that has bedeviled governors and legislators for nearly 40 years — devising a fair, equitable, affordable, and constitutionally bulletproof formula for distributing state aid to local school districts and, in the longer term, providing a degree of property tax relief.

Sweeney has thrown himself into the effort by concentrating on the unfair application of the formula that rewards some districts that arguably don't qualify for the amounts of aid they've been receiving and shortchanging those who've been denied aid increases they deserve.

Not surprisingly, he again drew the wrath of the New Jersey Education Association, which views any step toward reducing aid to any district for any reason as a sin for which there can be no redemption.

### **A bitter dispute**

Sweeney has been at odds with the NJEA for more than a year, marked by heated and bitter exchanges.

Sweeney, at one point, accused the organization of extortion after it threatened to withhold campaign contributions from Democrats who opposed an NJEA position.

Aside from sounding like a Trump tweet, Sweeney's rhetoric was dismissed as an overheated reaction to a hollow warning.

### **A bad move**

The NJEA, though, in a remarkably ill-advised strategy announced publicly it would throw its resources into defeating Sweeney, either by mounting a primary challenge or supporting his Republican opponent in the 2017 legislative election. It compounded its blunder by pledging to defeat him should he seek another term as Senate president.

The result? The primary challenge never developed; Sweeney is the odds-on favorite to win re-election, and the effort to block him from another leadership term was demolished in less than 48 hours when Senate Democrats released a letter unanimously pledging their support to him.

Sweeney went three for three. Or, put another way, the NJEA went zero for three.

The NJEA, long accustomed to winning such confrontations, miscalculated badly in directing threats of political retribution at Sweeney. It was an ill-considered overreach and cost the organization a sizeable chunk of political capital.

It will be necessary for the union to deal with Sweeney in advancing its agenda, while acknowledging the Senator comes to the negotiating table holding the stronger hand.

### **Beyond the funding issue**

While rewriting the funding formula continues to be the public education issue overshadowing all else, there are other initiatives of considerable impact on the union membership.

Strengthening the public pension system and ensuring it can fulfill its promise to current and prospective retirees remains a matter of deep concern, for instance. The expansion of charter schools and its effect on the public school system is troubling to the NJEA as well.

There will most certainly be other issues that arise during the course of the legislative session that affect the organization as well, and Sweeney will play the central role in addressing them all.

### **Making peace?**

The contentious relationship between the senator and the NJEA will remain in the minds of both, but it is in their best interests equally to put past differences aside, avoid overwrought rhetoric, and prevent a damaging stalemate on issues of critical and costly importance.

In taking on the issue of education aid, Sweeney has waded into a political thicket that has frustrated and harmed many others who've ventured into it before.

Its four-decade history of litigation and arguments over constitutionality, of pitting suburbs against urban, of judicial imperatives overriding legislative prerogatives, has made school funding the longest unresolved issue in state history. It was providing adequate financial resources to local districts, after all, that led directly to the enactment of the state's first income tax in 1975.

### **Choosing winners and losers**

It is an issue fraught with the prospect of deciding who wins and who loses as those districts that have experienced declining enrollments or where renewal and redevelopment have greatly expanded local property values will fight to preserve their level of aid.

Sweeney has decided, it seems, that developing a new approach to the problem, as politically perilous as it may be, can only benefit him and his party in the long run.

If Democrats, he believes, can deliver a message to New Jersey voters and taxpayers that it is their party and its leaders who went all in to put an end to the interminable wrangling and offer the prospect of property tax relief in the bargain, the political rewards will be enormous and long lasting.

With Gov. Chris Christie leaving office in six months and if, as widely believed, he is succeeded by Democrat Phil Murphy, Sweeney will emerge in a position of great strength.

He'll have Murphy's ear and a unified Democratic caucus behind him. He'll be able to remind Murphy if need be that he went toe to toe with the NJEA, heretofore the major player in education matters, and bested it. His ability to influence the agenda and advance the administration's goals will be enormous.

Sweeney stands on the cusp of becoming the most dominant Senate president since Somerset County Republican Ray Bateman in the 1970s.

His earlier aspiration to become his party's gubernatorial nominee may have been stymied, but his second place finish – the Senate presidency – ain't bad.

Carl Golden served as press secretary for Republican Gov. Thomas Kean for eight years and as communications director for Republican Gov. Christie Whitman for three years. He is currently a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED ©2017 NJSPOTLIGHT