



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Toby Ann Stavisky

Albany Times Union: Legislature keeps college affordable

TOBY ANN STAVISKY May 6, 2009

| COMMITTEE: **HIGHER EDUCATION**

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First published: Wednesday, April 29, 2009

Deciding where to spend and which cuts can be made are the most difficult decisions any legislator faces. But voters expect their elected officials to make choices, and to stand up and show leadership in bad times as well as good.

A national economic downturn that hit New York particularly hard left the state with a \$17 billion budget deficit. However, education was prioritized in the budget we recently passed for the first time in many years.

Any smart economic development policy invests in education. As we work to turn around a terrible economy, an educated work force is one of New York's greatest attributes in attracting businesses and jobs.

After serving nearly 10 years in Albany, I am appalled at the degree to which proponents of the status quo put political self-interest above that of their constituents.

Amid historically difficult choices, the budget protected students at the State University of New York and the City University of New York. Previous administrations' tuition increases went directly into the state's general fund, and none was reinvested in our colleges and universities. We raised tuition by \$600 for CUNY and \$620 for SUNY. That was only the third tuition increase since 1992. Now, for the first time ever, CUNY and SUNY will receive annually increasing percentages of that tuition.

This reinvestment totals \$55 million this year and more than \$110 million by 2012.

Is it enough? No, but it begins to reverse years of poor public policy.

It's no surprise to anyone paying for college that it is a struggle to cover tuition. We should be proud that even with this year's tuition increases, SUNY and CUNY still cost less than almost any other comparably sized public university system in the country.

Public colleges in Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey cost \$2,000 more per year on average. We must keep our colleges and universities affordable and continue to build upon their stellar academic records.

Affordable education was not previously a priority in New York. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education released data indicating that New Yorkers have the nation's highest burden of student loans. In response, this year we established NYHELPS, an affordable loan program that will allocate \$350 million per year in low-interest aid — something all my Republican colleagues voted against.

They also opposed our restoration of cuts to the Tuition Assistance Program, the community colleges and universitywide programs.

While some may oppose aspects of the state budget, those who vote down every bill — even good ones like education — believe that "no" is a policy. It's not. "Just Say No" may work for drug prevention, but not our children's educational future.

Toby Ann Stavisky of Queens is the chairwoman of the state Senate Committee on Higher Education.

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