



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Suzi Oppenheimer

Educators Hail Senator Oppenheimer's Efforts to Provide School Districts Mandate Relief and Increased Flexibility to Manage Costs

SUZI OPPENHEIMER February 26, 2010

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Acknowledging the difficult economic circumstances facing schools throughout the State, the Senate Education Committee, chaired by Senator Suzi Oppenheimer, today took decisive action to assist school districts in meeting their considerable fiscal challenges. The Committee acted favorably on several bills that are part of Senator Oppenheimer's reform agenda to provide mandate relief and afford greater flexibility to school districts to manage expenses and achieve cost savings.

The Committee's actions were praised by school officials and educators throughout the state. Said David A. Little, Director of Government Relations for the New York School Boards Association: "Senator Oppenheimer's Reform Agenda is a long awaited and important start to the process of allowing schools to become more efficient in their use of existing resources. As important as the subject matter itself, passage of these bills shows the possibilities for sweeping legislative relief for school districts and the local property taxpayers who support them."

Echoing these sentiments, the Council of School Superintendents thanked Senator

Oppenheimer “for being a strong voice in Albany on behalf of schools and our children.” Dr. Robert Bradley, Interim Executive Director of the NYS Council of School Superintendents, added “school superintendents are now facing enormous challenges in balancing budgets in light of state aid cuts to preserve educational opportunities for students and keeping taxes at levels that their communities can sustain. We are grateful for Senator Oppenheimer’s continued leadership in strongly advocating for measures to help schools control costs.”

The Committee approved the Education Mandate Relief Act of 2010 (S.5523A), sponsored by Senator Oppenheimer, which prohibits the implementation of new state mandates after the start of a school fiscal year. It further authorizes school districts to enter into piggyback contracts for the provision of shared transportation services and directs Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to convene committees of school and community leaders to examine options for cost-containment through consolidation and the shared provision of services. The bill would also authorize BOCES to provide internal and claims auditing services on a shared basis to member districts and permit school districts to create reserve funds for future employer contributions to the Teachers’ Retirement System.

The Committee also considered the impact on local school districts of regulations developed by the NYS Department of Education, approving legislation (S.5795), introduced by Senator David Valesky (D-Oneida), that would require greater transparency and input from local districts with regard to the costs imposed on localities by proposed SED regulations. This legislation is another step towards containing requirements that increase a school district’s costs and add to the local property tax burden.

In addition, the Committee acted favorably S. 5559B (Oppenheimer), which allows school districts to hire a single general contractor for school construction projects rather than the multiple contractors currently required under the provisions of the Wicks law. This

legislation is expected to save up to 30 percent of a school's overall construction costs and potentially save state taxpayers \$200 million a year.

The Committee also approved several bills that would authorize school districts to use state education funds more effectively by:

- Allowing schools to use funds allocated for textbooks to purchase manipulative models that demonstrate mathematic or scientific concepts (S.6776 – Oppenheimer);
- Providing school districts with flexibility in carrying out and accommodating the needs of their claims auditing responsibilities, as recommended by the Comptroller (S.5637 – Oppenheimer);
- Affording school districts the ability to use unexpended Universal Pre-kindergarten Program funds to create full day slots and support the cost of transporting pre-k students (S.6777 – Oppenheimer).

Regarding the use of pre-kindergarten funding, Georgia Ascianto, Executive Director of the Conference of Big 5 School Districts, commented: “New York State has a history of support for early childhood education in its urban centers. This legislation would build upon the State’s commitment to provide pre-kindergarten opportunities by allowing districts to maximize the use of available funds. Flexibility with resources is critical to continued increases in academic achievement in the State’s large cities.”

“Reducing the property tax on New Yorkers is critical to the state’s long-term economic health,” said Senator Valesky, who sponsored one of the bills approved by the Committee. “The legislation acted upon today by the Education Committee collectively acts to reduce that burden and aid school districts in maintaining high quality in a very difficult economic climate.”

“Challenging times call for creative approaches to stretch our education dollars further. I commend my colleagues on the Education Committee for recognizing the steps we can take to empower our school districts to contain spending and use existing resources more efficiently,” concluded Senator Oppenheimer. “I will continue to work for enactment of these measures by both houses of the Legislature and expeditious approval by the Governor.”