Senator Kennedy Holds Roundtable Discussion on the Budget's Effects on Western New York's Students

TIMOTHY M. KENNEDY   March 25, 2011

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Parents and students from Cheektowaga-Sloan meet with Senator Kennedy to discuss their concerns

CHEEKTOWAGA, N.Y. – Senator Timothy M. Kennedy, D-58th District, visited the Theodore Roosevelt Elementary School to hold a roundtable discussion with parents, students and educators. The talk focused on the state budget's effects on schoolchildren in Western New York.

Senator Kennedy chose Theodore Roosevelt as the location for the discussion because the Cheektowaga-Sloan School District is slated to be hit with a double-digit percentage cut in state aid. In real dollars, that's almost $1.5 million. Because the district's undesignated fund balance is down to about $5,000, Cheektowaga-Sloan falls far short of having enough reserve funds to cover the massive aid cut.

"As it currently stands, it appears the state budget will take money from the hands of Western New York's school children and send it directly to the pockets of Wall Street millionaires," Senator Kennedy said. "Albany needs to get its priorities straight, and that means re-prioritizing this budget. As we try to close this $10 billion budget deficit, it seems there are better uses for our state's depleted funds than a millionaire's bailout. To restore greatness to the Empire State, we need to reinvest and reinvent our schools to help our students achieve their fullest potential – the future of Western New York depends on it."

"I'm glad that Senator Kennedy is taking the time to meet with us and hear our concerns," said James Mazgajeski, superintendent of schools for Cheektowaga-Sloan. "For the first time in my career, I'm using the word devastating to describe these cuts. We're facing a $1.5 million cut in state aid. That's a significant revenue loss. The spending increase in our budget is very minimal, but the revenue loss is driving up our district's costs and in turn, our residents' taxes. These cuts will have detrimental effects on our ability to provide a well-rounded program to our students."

In an effort to get the state's priorities in check, Senator Kennedy is fighting to stop the millionaires' bailout. The budget, in its current form, proposes drastic cuts to Western New York's schools while giving tax breaks to millionaires. According to the Center for Working Families, in the 58th Senate District, there are only 46 taxpayers that earn more than $1 million annually. Those 46 are the only taxpayers who would be affected by the Assembly's proposal to stop the millionaires' bailout – which Senator Kennedy supports.

With the support of Parent Teacher Organizations and the Superintendent's Office, Senator Kennedy organized the discussion to give parents and students in Cheektowaga-Sloan and throughout Western New York an opportunity to voice their concerns about this budget.

At the end of the roundtable discussion, Senator Kennedy asked the parents, students and educators in attendance to sign on to a letter to Governor Cuomo, Senate Majority Leader Skelos and Assembly Speaker Silver to stop the bailout on millionaires and support Western New York's students.

"It is my belief that we need to change the priorities that the current budget lays out. The budget, in its current form, provides a sizable tax break to the wealthiest New Yorkers and at the same time hurts our students," the letter reads.

After the event, Abigail Chavis, a student in the Cheektowaga-Sloan School District, presented Senator Kennedy with a petition that she circulated through her school. Well over 100 of Abigail's classmates and teachers signed the petition, which asks Albany to invest in New York's schools.

Abigail's petition reads, "School funds are too low, our school is suffering, and teachers are getting laid off. Clubs and sports are not going to be here next year. I am asking on behalf of the John F. Kennedy Middle School/High School to stop cutting school funds."