



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Upsetting the Apple Cart

There are weeks I feel like I should wear a football helmet to the office. That's because whenever powerful, special interest groups feel I've somehow threatened their status quo, they launch attacks. This past week a number of local teachers' unions targeted me as the "deciding vote" in favor of the tax cap and, in that vote, as having participated in an attack on our children's education.

I'd like to set the record straight. The tax cap passed the Senate with a near-unanimous 57-5 bi-partisan vote and was enthusiastically signed into law by Governor Andrew Cuomo. It limits increases in school and local property taxes to two percent a year, or the rate of inflation, whichever is less. A greater tax increase can still be passed, if necessary, but only if 60 percent of the voters approve. That

means taxing districts have to present informed, factual arguments to voters and then let them decide. It puts the power of responsible budgeting where it belongs, in the hands of the people paying the bills who have every right to vote as they see fit.

Why do we need it now? Consider these sobering facts. The 15 highest taxed counties in the country are all in New York, and, in absolute dollars, Nassau County pays the highest property taxes of them all. Our state's property taxes have grown more than six percent a year for 10 years, double the rate of inflation. But our personal income has not developed anywhere near that. We're still dealing with a punishing economy and everyone is making do with less so it's only fair that we expect our government to do the same.

The backdrop for the tax cap was a system that allowed a voter rejected budget to be re-voted and if the budget votes failed, the fallback was an "austerity" budget that absolutely no one got to vote on and oftentimes resulted in a significant tax increase irrespective of the vote. I can't imagine anywhere else that this would pass for democracy, but we accepted it here because, frankly, we were convinced that anything less would hurt our children.

The truth is bureaucracy is what's hurting our students. As Governor Cuomo recently noted, in just the last 15 years, the number of school supervisory staff has increased 34 percent and the number of teachers has increased 9 percent while student enrollment has actually dropped 4 percent. As a result, New York spends 51 percent more on school administration than the national average. He also pointed out that there are currently more than 2,000 administrators or managers making at least \$150,000 per year while 40 percent of school superintendents receive salaries and benefits of \$200,000 a year or more. I invite you to look at local school district spending increases over the past 10 years. We taxpayers have clearly spent the money and committed the resources.

If there was a correlation between this type of spending and better results, everyone would support it, but unfortunately that's simply not the case. The reality is New York ranks first in per student spending but only 40th in graduation rate.

I've worked hard to restore money to our local school districts because I know first-hand what an outstanding job they do. But we aren't talking about the merit of a particular district or the competence of teachers. We're talking about powerful interests that hold such leverage that we can't meet their demands and pay for the

needs of our children simultaneously.

Frankly, the tax cap sheds a critical light on this situation and threatens to upset the proverbial apple cart. To be fair, these interests do what they are meant to do, which is fight for the interests of their members, but that should in no way be automatically lumped in with advocating for our children.

We must surely continue pressing for reforms that will remove the state bureaucracy as an obstacle to the flexibility and efficiency of our local districts. Those efforts in tandem with the tax cap give me every confidence that with discussion and patience, we will arrive at an equitable balance for students, teachers and taxpayers. The tax cap is a step in the right direction.