



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## Senator Martins: State Aid to Long Island Schools Doesn't Add Up

JACK M. MARTINS January 23, 2012

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I flipped through hundreds of pages until I found it. I was scanning the proposed budget released by Governor Cuomo last week, looking to see how our district fared with state aid, in particular the amounts for our school districts. I guess to say I was disappointed by what I saw is an understatement – the governor had proposed increasing state aid to education by 4%, yet time and again our districts were shortchanged.

It's no secret that I happen to agree with many of Governor Cuomo's efforts to get New York's fiscal train back on track. For too many years, the obvious truth that many in Albany were all too happy to ignore was that New York was well on its way to financial ruin. But in tandem with Governor Cuomo we were able to change that paralyzing mindset. In fact, the nine State Senators from Long Island were instrumental in helping to close last year's \$10 billion budget gap, capping taxes and reducing overall spending. This year, we face a \$2 billion budget shortfall but we remain as committed as ever to balancing the budget without increasing taxes or raising fees.

In that light, I like where this budget begins. At \$132 billion it's basically flat overall and calls for minimal increases in spending for Medicaid costs and education offset by cuts elsewhere. It also seeks to boost a sluggish economy by investing in infrastructure projects and tax

breaks while bringing our skyrocketing public pension costs into focus. Those are all good things.

But not even DiMaggio batted a thousand. The Governor then outlines increasing school aid by 4% overall, but not to our Long Island schools. Why? Because his new state aid formula declares we're wealthy enough that we don't need as much assistance.

Let's talk turkey. Long Island is a great place to live and, though we complain, our economy is the envy of other regions, and even some small states. Traditionally, we as Long Islanders have put much of that money into our children's educations. We're known for it and families move here from everywhere precisely to be a part of that successful system. Our students regularly excel and are widely accepted at the best universities around the country. But we do pay handsomely for those results.

No matter how you cut it Nassau and Suffolk remain two of the most heavily taxed counties in the nation. Along those lines, we send approximately \$7 billion dollars more in taxes to Albany than we get back in overall aid. Although this has been the norm for decades, when it comes to education we've been getting the short end of the stick for so long I think it's time to draw a line in the sand.

According to a 2010 report by the Long Island Education Coalition and the Long Island Association, Nassau schools received only 16.9 % of their budgets from state aid. Excluding Suffolk County and New York City, the rest of the state received an astonishing 40.5 %. It also emphasized that while 20.5 % of state aid is directed to our schools here on Long Island, our state income tax liability is well above the median with Nassau and Suffolk among the top three most highly taxed counties in the state. Furthermore, we're also tops among generating sales tax revenue for the State, outside of New York City. It all boils down to us sending much more than we get back.

Now the Governor proposes increasing overall education aid while shorting our Long Island schools? Once again, the proposed fix comes at our expense. It's clear that our school districts are struggling with budgetary issues and our overburdened taxpayers are having as much difficulty as anyone else. While we want what's best for New York's children, it makes no sense that it should come by diminishing opportunities for our kids here at home. This inequality has been common for years, but as resources are now so scarce, the disparity is even more glaring.

I can't even speculate as to what this means in the classroom, but it's not a done deal. At this point of the process we will go to the table and fight for fair distribution of state aid. To be clear, while I support a budget that doesn't increase taxes, the proposed allotment of funds is simply unfair to our taxpayers and to our schools.