



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

## From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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### **Dreaming of Tuition Assistance**

A college education today is expensive ... ridiculously expensive.

Most families with dreams of sending a child to college need any and all the help they can get. From scholarships to tuition assistance, every dollar can be the difference between one school or another, between open doors and closed ones, between opportunity and, well ...you get the idea.

That's why I am concerned. After four years of compromise, working together to produce on-time, reasonable budgets that rewarded New York State with progress unmatched in years – this year, things are different. In the very first week of budget negotiations the Governor has reworded the budget to essentially force both houses of the legislature to fund college educations for illegal immigrants, an effort called

the Dream Act. While there's certainly room for differences of opinion on this controversial issue, this attempt to force it on people is not only undemocratic, it is downright dangerous, no matter where you stand.

Governor Cuomo's plan would actually deny nearly \$1 billion in tuition assistance (TAP) to 372,000 New York college students unless we in the legislature agree to also provide precisely the same type of tuition assistance to any and all illegal immigrants living in our state. And lest there be any confusion, I want to clarify how few restrictions this plan actually carries. It is not only for undocumented immigrants that came as children and who have already received educations here. This plan would include every illegal alien the moment they set foot in our state and get a high school equivalency diploma.

I am a child of immigrants and while I wholeheartedly believe that a society benefits when anyone is educated, I must take the same position I took when the Governor proposed a similar plan for inmates. No. Not at the expense of opportunities that should, and must, first be available to New York taxpayers. The fact is that right now, two thirds of New York college students do not qualify for tuition assistance.

Let's be candid. As it stands, illegal immigrants can and do receive both elementary school and high school educations in the state of New York, no questions asked. Further, about ten years ago, they were also afforded in-state tuition rates, a significant savings, when attending state universities and colleges. But how can we justify providing additional college benefits to illegal, non taxpaying persons when a full 70% of legal New York college students do not qualify for it themselves?

Let's keep in mind that we have a real education crisis on our hands. Tuition at private universities jumped 474% percent from 1970 to 1990. Families are refinancing homes, borrowing against pensions, working countless hours of overtime, taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loans and still they don't qualify for TAP. Tens of thousands are foregoing college because they simply can't afford it - that's our reality. Yet we suddenly - magically - have money for those who have never paid into the system? Precisely who is looking out for New York's taxpaying, middle class?

Unfortunately, the financial realities of our country do not make college education an unalienable right for anyone as of yet. We do a good job with state universities

and community colleges but we're still a long way off. Until we can provide equal assistance to those who need it, like the strapped taxpayers who are actually footing the bill, it's unacceptable to pay for others who have never paid into it, no matter how well intentioned the effort may be. But for the Governor to threaten withholding tuition assistance to 372,000 current New York college students unless the legislature approves including illegal aliens is adding insult to injury.

A college education for everyone is indeed a noble ideal. But it simply isn't possible yet. Our job - our duty - as elected officials is to marshal the limited resources you entrust to us in the fairest and most efficient way possible. The Governor's plan is out of step with the priorities of a state that is still making its way out of a recession and is entirely unfair to the thousands of hardworking, taxpaying New Yorkers who are themselves struggling to pay for college.