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Murphy shows fairness in accepting Sweeney's school aid reform, says Carl Golden

Carl Golden For The Press Jul 10, 2018

He may have felt boxed in or perhaps he recognized the risk of being on the wrong side of a solid legislative consensus, but Gov. Phil Murphy's decision to accept legislation to dramatically revise the formula for state aid to local school districts may turn out to be the most significant act of his first term.

When fully implemented, the abolition of adjustment aid to instill greater fairness in the allocation of state funds will be the most far-reaching and impactful change since the enactment of the formula in 2008.

The unbalanced distribution of aid has been a bone in the throat of many local school boards for years. They argued that districts with growing enrollments were denied their rightful funding while in those with declining enrollments, the aid was granted as if the drop-off in students had never occurred.

The net effect was that some districts benefited from vast over-funding while others suffered extreme financial hardship from equally vast underfunding.

Senate President Steve Sweeney, D-Gloucester, took up the cause, seizing every opportunity to point out the fundamental injustice in granting millions of dollars to undeserving districts while denying the legitimate claim of districts coping with increases in student numbers.

The formula, he insisted, was designed to meet the very issue posed by the adjustment aid — namely, that as enrollments grew, funding would increase proportionately while, conversely, as enrollments fell, the amount of aid would reflect the decline.

The political pressure exerted on legislators by local officials whose districts stood to lose money if the formula was more equitably applied had always been powerful enough to prevent corrective action by the Legislature.

Understandably, legislators in the impacted districts were not eager to spend their time explaining to their constituents why they were unable to prevent the loss of significant funds from Trenton.

Sweeney's frustration reached a boiling point this year when he threatened to shut down government by refusing to act on a new budget unless the changes he proposed were accepted.

His legislation establishes a seven year phase-in of the readjustment to allow time for the 200 districts that will lose money to absorb the loss gradually and plan effectively to make up the difference.

Some 300 historically underfunded districts will experience aid increases during that period. And, while the beneficial impact on property taxes may be somewhat modest in those districts, the fact that there will be one at all sends a message that, while it may take time, voices will be heard and responses will be forthcoming.

While the governor's acceptance of Sweeney's legislation was a victory for the Senate president, Murphy, too, emerges as a chief executive willing to deal with the political blowback from groups and individuals happy with the status quo.

The New Jersey Education Association, for instance, an early and strong supporter of Murphy and a critic of Sweeney, has steadfastly opposed any funding mechanism that results in any district losing money, arguing that the proper response is a full funding of the formula rather than shifting resources from some districts to others.

He has taken a step away from the NJEA, establishing an independence of thought and — from an important perception point of view — responded to critics who claim he is a captive of the association and its policy agenda.

Having just come off a bruising confrontation with Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, D-Middlesex, over the fiscal 2019 budget that brought government to the brink of a shutdown, the agreement on revising the aid formula may take some of the edge off the often pointedly harsh rhetoric between the governor and the two leaders.

Moreover, it signals that differences can be put aside in a higher interest when causes coincide, a welcome development for the governor who remains committed to the remainder of his ambitious legislative agenda and who needs the support of Sweeney and Coughlin to see it through.

Murphy's campaign slogan and his mantra since his election has been a commitment to a "stronger and fairer New Jersey."

By embracing the revised aid formula legislation, he has taken a major step toward the "fairer" part of that commitment and he deserves great credit for it, no matter the underlying motive.

He has three and a half more years to fulfill the rest it. Six months in, he's made a promising start.

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