

LONGWOOD REGIONAL LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST
FEBRUARY 6, 2010

Longwood Middle School
Middle Island, N.Y.

NASSAU-SUFFOLK SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
KEYNOTE ADDRESS

JAY L.T. BREAKSTONE, PRESIDENT
(delivered by Lorraine Deller, Executive Director)

On behalf of the Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association (and our President Jay Breakstone) I commend you, our partners in education advocacy, who, undeterred by threatening weather, are here this morning to prepare for the real storm bearing down upon us.

The ~~met~~ storm+ metaphor has been employed often in recent years, but never more accurately, given current predictions.

Let's look at some forecasts:

- > Governor Paterson proposing massive cuts in education aid
- > New York State experiencing record deficits with continuing revenue shortfalls
- > Federal Stimulus funding coming to an end
- > Pension contributions expected to hit double digits
- > Health care costs continuing to rise
- > Further decreases in Basic STAR and Enhanced STAR
- > Threatened expansion of charter schools
- > Exploding costs for special education services
- > Shifting costs for pre-school special education from the county to the local school budget
- > Shifting costs for special education summer programs from the state to the local school budget
- > Contingency budget cap of zero, reflecting a negative CPI increase
- > Diminishing local tax base and incomes

Well in advance of the gathering storm clouds, boards of education were exploring cost savings through greater sharing of services and purchasing, consolidating school district functions and containing employee compensation packages. Despite these efforts, it has become apparent that a disaster plan is going to be required, for even the most frugal school budgets are unlikely to withstand the mounting pressures from without.

How deep into the disaster plan will districts have to go to protect the fiscal and educational integrity of the communities schools? In a short while you will have the opportunity to ask that question of our State legislators.

Long Island has long counted on its State Senate and Assembly Delegation to unite in opposition to cuts in state aid to this region. More often than not, they have been successful in restoring executive budget cuts.

Unfortunately legislation advanced in Albany has not always reflected the professed support of Long Island's schools and taxpayers. Every costly mandate that has been given "protected status" within local school budgets and every pension enhancer or employee benefit that bypassed the local bargaining table, has served to contribute to the "perfect storm" we now confront. Every legislative restriction designed to curtail the community's right to determine its school budget and every limitation on local control, has left boards little with which to safeguard the community's investment in their public schools.

In your meeting packets you have the 2010 Legislative Priorities of Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association. The positions therein form the basis for our advocacy agenda. Our members will be calling upon our State Legislators to employ these recommendations to ease our local property tax burden and shield our schools from disastrous cuts:

- Eliminate costly mandates, beginning with the unconscionable waste imposed by the Wicks Law;
- Retain the moratorium on charter school expansion and relieve communities of the mandate to turn over local tax dollars to state-imposed, for-profit charters schools that are not locally accountable;
- Provide relief from volatile increases in pension contributions and health insurance costs;
- Oppose attempts to shift costs for pre-school and summer school special education to local school district budgets;
- Permit school districts to establish reserve funds for TRS and retiree health insurance, recognizing the significant long-term fiscal obligations these items impose;
- Provide timely aid payments in the current year and make no reductions in state aid to education once a state budget is adopted;
- Provide greater state funding of special education costs;
- Stop sweetening employee benefits through legislation;
- Revisit mandated contingency budget cap that denies school boards the ability to determine how best to allocate diminished resources to preserve the fiscal and educational stability of their schools
- Honor and make permanent the obligation to reimburse schools for payments to the MTA; and
- Address the deficiencies in the "Foundation Formula" that deny Long Island its fair share of state aid and contribute to the inequitable burden placed on local property taxpayers.

Nassau-Suffolk School Boards Association has long advocated for the reform of New York's education funding formula. Under the "Foundation Formula", New York's most recent school funding scheme, not only does Long Island continue to realize far less state aid than it is entitled to receive, it falls further behind every year. Our Association has joined in the effort to advance the "School Property Tax Relief Act . Framework for the Future" adopted by the Long Island Education Coalition. The Framework provides an alternative to the Foundation Formula that has ill-served Long island schools and taxpayers.

High performing public schools are an enduring priority for our communities. Long Island's economic vitality depends on retaining its reputation for top public schools. It is incumbent upon our elected representatives to understand that dynamic and join with their constituents to protect this most vital resource.

We in the educational community must continue to speak with ~~one~~ ~~voice~~ for Long Island. That ~~one~~ ~~voice~~, in unison, is what will be required to be heard above the roar of the storm.

Long Island will survive this crisis, as it has survived others, through the unity and commitment of the individuals and organizations represented here today.