

Cuomo and the schools

Fred LeBrun, Commentary

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Governor Cuomo has donned his armor, picked up his lance and says he's ready to leap into the next "Battle of Albany." Windmills statewide be warned.

"You may not hear the cannon and musket fire," he told the New York State Association of Counties last week, but the battle over teacher evaluations is joined. He says if those darned powerful teachers unions continue to block progress, he will impose his own statewide "tougher" teacher evaluation plan through amended budget language on Feb. 16. Andrew Cuomo claims a lot of things over this teacher evaluation nonsense. How much of it is true is something else.

However, since he does have center stage with high public approval, and the bully pulpit, he defines the argument and the enemy. Even when there isn't one.

It could just as persuasively be argued that he, Andrew Cuomo, is the one primarily responsible for "blocking progress" toward a statewide teacher evaluation format that would pass muster with the feds for \$700 million in Race to the Top funds, the State Education Department and the unions. All those stakeholders were on the verge of signing just such an agreement last year, an agreement that did include a rigorous new teacher evaluation standard. But the governor intruded with a letter May 13, 2011, specifying he wanted a higher reliance on state standardized tests as a measure of teacher effectiveness than even the law allowed.

Bear in mind, the Education Department, Board of Regents and education commissioner are all supposed to be independent of the executive branch, and what the governor wishes or doesn't. Historically, there have been colossal battles between the education establishment and prior governors over attempted intrusion. Not this time. Negotiations buckled after a crude, last minute attempt by the Regents to placate the governor. That failed, winding up in a lawsuit. Since then, I'm told the governor has destabilized negotiations a couple of times when an agreement was only a few words away.

Clearly, Cuomo has an agenda here. What that is, who knows, but it is not the betterment of public education in New York. His continual bashing of those who are the front-line troops of education is having an enormously corrosive effect. It is richly ironic when he called himself the lobbyist for students during his budget message, because he is anything but. Or for their parents, either. A one-size-fits-all teacher evaluation plan, a la Cuomo, will be one more unfunded state mandate for taxpayers, and the destruction of a key foundation brick for successful education: local control.



Last month, when the governor was all glowy about his accomplishments last year, I asked you to do a reality check about the tax cap he was crowing about. It was about the time tax bills were arriving in the mail. I asked you to check his rhetoric against the bill. Talk about a disconnect. Incidentally, I heard from a surprising number, and not a single one saw much of a slowdown in the annual increase.

Well, I'm going to ask you again to do a reality check on the Cuomo rhetoric. Because he single-handedly is the one responsible, through his reductions in school aid, for the loss of music and art teachers, remedial programs, enrichment programs, advanced placement courses, even kindergarten and prekindergarten in many schools across the state. While he was distracting the public by pinning the tail on the teacher, the administrator, and the so-called "bureaucracy," he was eviscerating public schools from Montauk to Williamsville. It was not the Legislature, it wasn't the teachers, and it surely wasn't the local school boards. It was the governor, one heck of a lobbyist, who made those choices.

The most absurd aspect of this year's plan to "reform" New York public education is to introduce competition among school districts for much of the state aid available. "Competition works," he said more than once. Sure, when the playing field is level and the contestants evenly matched. Pitting high-needs districts against the affluent is ridiculous; pitting them against each other is right out of Spartacus. One irate school superintendent for the Genesee Valley called poor districts going at each other for school aid a "Dickensian competition."

That conjures an image of a two shabby public orphanages brawling out on the street to see which one will be fed dinner.

Obviously, the entire competition thing should be tossed. Where this governor has failed since Day One is in not taking politically unpopular positions, even when it's the right thing to do, for those who cannot do for themselves. Properly funding high-needs districts, rural and urban, shouldn't be an afterthought or some game of "blame the victim," as Cuomo is making it. It should be a budget imperative for a state as wealthy as ours, even if it means irritating high-resource school districts which won't do as well, and the Republicans who love them.

Last May 15, Cuomo met a surprising defeat. He publicly called for a voting down of local school budgets. They were approved instead at a near-record level. Don't mess with our schools, the majority were saying.

It's a message still in the air as the governor heads for the teacher evaluation showdown. If he appears to broker a deal between education professionals that would have happened anyway, he can escape. If he tries to become the new education czar, watch out.

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