

# The Buffalo News

## Rod Watson: There's a way to restore aid to education

By Rod Watson

Updated: 02/21/08 9:36 AM

Anybody who thinks education is the key to lifting Buffalo from its status as an official basket case should welcome a chance to put their money where their mouth is.

And if experience is any guide, it wouldn't hurt the state a bit.

The Fiscal Policy Institute has an easy remedy for Gov. Eliot L. Spitzer's decision to trim aid increases he promised schools as part of a four-year plan. The institute calculates that the slowdown would cost Buffalo \$5.6 million. That's a lot of teachers, books and other necessities in a district with lots of poor students — in both senses of the word.

The answer: temporarily increasing the top income tax rates on the state's highest earners, as the Legislature did in 2003 when it passed a three-year surcharge over the veto of then-Gov. George E. Pataki.

Granted, it's a radical notion, expecting those with the most to help those with the least.

But Frank Mauro, institute executive director, recalled Pataki singing the same "sky will fall" song the well-off always sing when we talk about helping poor kids. The threat was that raising taxes on those who benefit most would slow the economy and make people flee the state.

"Neither of those things happened," Mauro said at last weekend's New York State Association of Black & Puerto Rican Legislators conference in Albany.

Instead, he said, the number of tax returns filed by high-earners nearly doubled between 2002 — the year before the surcharge — and last year. And the amount of money collected jumped from \$9.2 billion to \$21 billion.

Beyond dealing with the current problem, Mauro said, a permanent surcharge on the highest earners also would reduce property tax pressures on low-and middle-income homeowners. That would be a permanent benefit.

Mauro and others at a forum on Spitzer's \$124 billion budget proposal acknowledged the problems the governor inherited, as well as his plan to boost school funding following the Campaign for Fiscal Equity lawsuit. State Budget Director Laura Anglin pointed to a \$1.4 billion increase in school aid even in the face of a \$4.4 billion budget gap.

But the \$350 million cut they cite in promised “foundation aid,” the basic money that goes into the classroom, will hit poor urban districts such as Buffalo hardest because they were in line for the most help.

“This is the aid category that was designed specifically to close the gap” between wealthy and poor districts, said Billy Easton, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education.

Why should education be singled out for protection in an economic downturn?

Because it’s the key to turning around every other problem we face, from crime to poverty to the region’s stagnant economy.

During the manufacturing age, this area touted its highly skilled work force as a competitive advantage.

What kind of competitive edge can we claim during the bioinformatics age when Regents tests show that only about a third of the students in the region’s anchor city can adequately read, write and do math?

A Siena College Research Institute poll released Wednesday asked respondents how they want the budget gap closed and gave them three choices: cutting health care more, reducing the school aid increase or raising taxes. Thirty- two percent — the highest of any answer — chose raising taxes.

Assemblywoman Crystal D. Peoples, co-chairwoman of the Albany session, said the problem would be convincing the Assembly’s “partners” over in the Senate. It would take public pressure to do that.

The Sienna poll indicates the public already gets it.

[rwatson@buffnews.com](mailto:rwatson@buffnews.com)