



Don't break promise of school aid

Rosemary Rivera • Guest essayist • March 26, 2008

Our children are our most valuable asset. They will grow to accept the responsibilities entrusted to us by previous generations. However, that trust has been historically violated by the constant underfunding of our public schools.

After years of court battles, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and the Alliance for Quality Education illuminated these inequities. Finally, in March of last year, education advocates cheered as then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer championed the children's right to a sound, basic education.

One year later, the proposed state budget is short of the promised aid by \$350 million statewide, and by \$7.4 million for the City School District. The attitude that the CSD with a 38 percent graduation rate has enough money makes me cringe. Almost every person in Rochester is bursting at the seams with ideas on how to raise student achievement. Ranging from smaller class sizes to more reading teachers; from uniforms to personal laptops, these initiatives would cost money.

We are most concerned with how much is spent in the classroom, or the basic foundation aid. This year, the city of Rochester will have an increase of \$24.37 million in foundation aid. However, that is still \$7.4 million short of what was agreed to by the Legislature last year as part of a four-year school funding agreement.

Throughout this fight, the alliance had to consistently call out GOP senators. They were committed to sending more money to wealthy Long Island districts even at the expense of their own schools. Why? Politics. They wanted to protect their majority in the Senate even if it meant shortchanging the children they represent.

Sen. Joseph Robach, R-Greece, has consistently voted for excess funding for Long Island. Now he is saying that the promise to Rochester and Monroe County must be kept. He is right. The test is now upon him. Will he once again vote for more money for Long Island or will he help students here at home by getting the Senate to restore the \$350 million in promised statewide foundation aid.

And let's stop blaming New York City for the problem — more than half the cuts in promised aid affect its schools.

If we prolong the allocation of the much needed funds to school districts, our children

will once again be caught in the wait-till-next-year philosophy. However, our children cannot get those years back; they should not be asked to sacrifice one more day!

To top it off, a report by the Fiscal Policy Institute clearly shows that students affected most by cuts in the promised funding are minority students, English language learners and the poor. For instance, districts outside New York City, with 60 percent of their students living in poverty, have 15 percent of all students in the state, but face 20 percent of the cuts in promised foundation aid. Districts outside New York City with only 4 percent of their students living in poverty have 17 percent of all students in the state, but face only 6 percent of the cuts. These disparities are also similar for minority students and English language learners.

After all the years of fighting for educational funding equity, it seems quite clear who represents the children. It is we the parents and the community. Without the pressure that parents put on our state legislators, the 20 percent down payment on education would not have happened. We want the full funding promised.

On the local level, we must ensure that the increased funding is allocated to areas that will maximize student achievement. The alliance went through a process that included knocking on doors, conducting surveys and talking to local educational experts and groups. At the end of this process, we concluded that we should ensure funding is allocated to three areas that are a cause for concern in the city: literacy, racial justice and parent involvement.

To make sure that funding is targeted toward these areas, people must speak up and speak out.