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Another Voice: Governor should release details on proposed school aid

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By Rick Timbs

It is an accepted principle that a cornerstone of any focused, well-developed and on-time fiscal budget depends upon viable revenue and expense projections early in the budget process. Public school districts are no exception, and they depend for a large part of this information on someone else. Last year, that someone withheld revenue projections on purpose.

Most school districts in New York State rely on state funds to balance their budgets. The amount and distribution of state funds to public school districts has been erratic and unpredictable since 2008-09. This means that school districts cannot make significant budget decisions about where they will place their state resources unless state government releases those amounts for each school district. These are referred to as “state aid runs.”

Historically, the state has produced two state aid runs. The first is generated by the governor when he releases his executive budget proposal in January of each year. The second is released by state government shortly after the passage of the state budget, due by April 1 of each year. Then, school districts have to adopt their budgets, submit property tax levy calculations to the state and publicize their adopted budgets to voters for the annual May budget vote.

Last January, however, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo refused to release those executive budget state aid runs. Thus, public school districts had no clue as to the amount of state aid they might receive to determine programs for students, staff levels, local property tax implications and balance their budgets.

No enterprise – private or public – would deem this a best practice, but school districts around the state were forced into this situation for a purely political reason – to make state aid a negotiation ploy in the governor’s larger education agenda. If the governor and voters want districts to be as thoughtful as possible about budget decisions, districts must have all of the revenue information they can obtain as soon as possible. That includes state aid, because more often than not it is the largest revenue source many districts have.

School district budgets are serious business for children, taxpayers, employees and communities. The governor knows he has a responsibility to help and not hinder the development of school district budgets. The denial of prospective state aid revenue predictions is counterproductive to the thoughtful analysis and discussion needed at every level of government and public school districts.

The appropriate thing to do is for the governor to return to the long-established best practice and share his state aid runs with school districts immediately after the conclusion of his State of the State/executive budget proposal Wednesday.

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