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Editorial Observer; Machiavelli and New York's School-Aid Politics

By Steven R. Weisman

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All you have to do is walk through the State Capitol in Albany to feel the earthquake touched off last week by the landmark ruling on education aid from State Supreme Court Justice Leland DeGrasse. In sometimes angry conversations, lawmakers and staff talk about little else. They recognize that Justice DeGrasse, by ordering a drastic increase in state aid for New York City's failing schools, was challenging the fundamental way that Albany has always done business.

To win the fight for more school aid, New York City's strategists need to remember the precept of Niccolo Machiavelli that the hardest challenge in politics is to overthrow the fundamental order of things. For as long as anyone can remember, the city has gotten less than its fair share of state aid for schools. But that is primarily because education has long been a much higher priority for lawmakers from the suburbs and upstate than it has been for their city counterparts. This fundamental dynamic has to change before there can be progress on schools.

Education aid is distributed through at least 55 different formulas so technical that only a select few can pretend to understand them. What actually happens is that the aid goes disproportionately to those districts represented by the most powerful lawmakers. Their wishes are then carried out through seemingly neutral formulas devised behind closed doors by staff experts who talk to each other in lingo like RWADA (resident weighted average daily attendance) and TWPU (total weighted pupil units). The legislators themselves just look at the computer runs to see who won or who lost aid for their districts. One way that wealthy districts get a disproportionate reward is from formulas that require local districts to spend money in order to be partially reimbursed. New York City has lost out on some of these programs because it did not put up the money to get the aid.

''The school formulas are incomprehensible in order to disguise how the system really works,'' says an influential New York City Democrat. ''The other part of the problem is press coverage. School aid is front-page news everywhere except for New York City. Upstate and suburban legislators are defined by whether they deliver the aid. It's politically less important for legislators from the city.''

Many Democrats are also so concerned about keeping their majority in the Assembly that they are willing to compromise on certain issues important to the city if it helps Democrats from the suburbs and upstate. Other legislators, especially those from black and Hispanic districts where schools need help desperately, admit privately that in pressing for state aid they are more influenced by the unions representing hospitals and social services than by the teachers' union.

Another force of logic is at work in Albany, the logic of tradeoffs. Two-thirds of the entire budget goes for local assistance, of which school aid is the biggest piece. In the minds of upstate legislators, however, it is only fair for New York City to receive

less per pupil than the rest of the state, since the city receives two-thirds of the spending on welfare and Medicaid, which are the other big pieces of local assistance.

New York City has 41 percent of the state's population, but only 32 percent of the voters, another factor working against the city. In addition, according to the Center for Governmental Research, an independent organization in Rochester, New York City residents and businesses pay roughly 40 percent of state tax revenues, about the same portion the city gets from state expenditures. New York City residents can argue that the city deserves more because of its needy population, but the political dynamics make that a tough sell in Albany, where many upstate and suburban lawmakers envy the city's wealth and feel that its high costs result from patronage and crass political factors like wages paid to powerful unions.

There are ways around these problems. First, city lawmakers may have to face some difficult tradeoffs as they set new priorities, possibly by accepting spending restraints elsewhere. Much more important, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the legislators from New York City need to do a better job of making alliances with other parts of the state that are also not receiving school aid commensurate with their needs. One good thing about Gov. George Pataki's latest budget proposal, for example, is that he spoke of meeting the needs of districts in rural areas upstate and even less-well-off parts of Long Island. Mayor Giuliani should make common cause with Buffalo, Syracuse and other places instead of bashing them for getting a higher percentage of school aid than New York City.

Even though Mr. Pataki is appealing Justice DeGrasse's decision, many Republicans in Albany think that at least some of the increased aid he called for will be upheld. A top Republican who supported the appeal told me this week that the decision could be useful in changing the longstanding legislative mentality of making school aid a matter of naked power politics. But to make the change, New York City and its legislators need to make schools a higher priority and be smarter about making deals to get the money the schools need.

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