

Lack of Talk About Education in Malloy Speech Upsets Advocates

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By Kathy Megan

After eight years as the state's relentless champion for better education, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy failed to mention schools in his last state-of-the-state address Wednesday, which left education advocates troubled, searching for an explanation.

"While Governor Malloy's message in his address to the General Assembly emphasized Connecticut's tradition of fairness and concern for future generations," said Sheila Cohen, president of the Connecticut Education Association, "his budget proposal is anything but fair for Connecticut's students and public schools."

Don Williams, executive director of CEA, said that perhaps education didn't come up in Malloy's speech "because of the cuts to [Education Cost Sharing funds] that were in his previous proposals and have manifested themselves through the cuts that he's made in the biennial budget.

"We would hope that going forward that the governor could reconcile the theme of fairness with adequate funding for our schools and that the legislature could join and restore the money that has been cut in ECS and to our towns."

Martha Stone, executive director for the Center for Children's Advocacy, asked: "How can we have a laser focus on 'fairness' without addressing one of the most important issues facing our disenfranchised youth-- that of equal educational opportunity?"

"Recently rejected by the courts, failed in the past by the legislature, now ignored by the Governor," Stone said, "remedies to address our discriminatory system of education cry out for being at the top of the state's agenda."

Kelly Donnelly, spokeswoman for the Malloy said, "Education has been and remains a top priority for the Governor. Governor Malloy has consistently advocated for fairness in education funding and any assertion contrary to that is just not true."

Malloy's budget proposal, which was released Monday and did address education, cut about \$8.5 million from the biennial budget in the education cost sharing grant program, though it still provided a \$22.5 million increase in ECS funding for next year, over the current year.

However, Malloy's proposal eliminated education funding for 33 towns and significantly cut other towns which Williams said are not wealthy districts, including Plainfield, Stratford and Brooklyn.

"We're still seeing schools through-out the state that are facing cuts, that are facing lay-offs, higher class sizes, cuts in services and resources — that funding needs to be restored," Williams said.

Cohen said that districts are still suffering from the "destructive consequences of last year's cuts" including fewer resources for children, lay-offs of educators, and disruption in the middle of the school year.

Fran Rabinowitz, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents said she thought fairness was an excellent theme for the governor to address but "I just wish there had been a paragraph in there on education because I think that education is a great equalizer ... It felt like everything else was in there, health, women, wages housing, but education is huge."

She said she's also concerned that the governor's proposal once again this year to eliminate education funding for dozens of wealthy districts might lead to delays in the budget process experienced last year. Last year when the General Assembly didn't pass a budget until October, school district leaders started the school year not knowing whether they would have to lay-off teachers or cut programs.

"I thought last year was a blip," Rabinowitz said, "but I haven't gotten lots of assurances from legislators that we're going to have a budget by the end of the session."

She said she is particularly concerned that the money for the professional development of new teachers is not included in the budget.

Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel for the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, said she was surprised that education was not included in the speech, particularly when Malloy talked about the accomplishments of his administration.

She said the hardest challenge for districts is the instability of the budget. “We had hoped at this point we would have stability in funding. We are supposed to be in the second year of a biennial budget. The hardest thing for districts is the uncertainty ...It’s not good for students.”

She said the governor’s proposed cuts to education cost sharing are significant, as are, she said, his proposed cut to magnet schools — \$18 million.

“We are concerned that this is not a sustainable funding system,” she said. “The districts are left with really no place else to cut that is not going to significantly affect programs for students.”

Cohen also called on the state to repeal a requirement passed by the legislature last year that requires teachers to increase their contribution to their pensions from 6 percent to 7 percent.

Stephen McKeever, vice president of AFT-Connecticut, also called on the governor to urge legislators to roll-back the 1 percent increase, calling it a “targeted tax on teachers.”

<http://www.courant.com/politics/capitol-watch/hc-news-malloy-educators-left-out-20180207-story.html>