

Beacon Hill Byline

July 3, 2008

### **Education Reform, Version 2008**

Last week Governor Patrick announced his plan to improve public education in Massachusetts. I was stunned by its reach. It promises universal pre-school and full-day kindergarten along with education through the community college level for all children.

Those are admirable goals. So are its extended school year and school day. But each item has a price tag.

Was there anyone in the state who did not wonder how he plans to pay for the expansive plan?

When asked about its cost, the governor's explanation was glib but puzzling. He commented to reporters, "We're building a house. We're building a building. You design it first and then you cost it out."

Only a person with unlimited income can ignore the cost of a new home, let alone the income to cover that cost. And only the federal government can ignore the cost of public programs because, unlike our state, the federal government does not require a balanced budget.

It's time for a reality check. The Massachusetts constitution requires a balanced budget. The budget year will close this week precariously balanced, taking at least \$275 million from reserves to attain that balance. Next year the state will call on even more from the state's rainy day fund – without any of Governor Patrick's innovations. Economic indicators warn us of difficult times ahead.

It would be nice to say money is no object, but in this case, money *is* an object.

Massachusetts spent the '90s increasing school spending. And the money has been well spent. Our kids are leading the nation in learning. But our schools are running out of money. The small town of Monson fired more than 20 teachers in order to balance its budget. Longmeadow barely passed an override last year, and the budget is still strained. Neither school district offers universal pre-K or full day kindergarten.

I recall hearing former Springfield School Superintendent Peter Negroni talk with a group of students. He pulled out a dollar bill and said, "This is money. It is green. It is fungible. You can only spend it once." Bearing his comments in mind, this is my response to the governor's proposals.

Update Chapter 70. Before introducing any new items, cities and towns need help taking care of today's needs. School districts throughout the state rely on a 15-year-old formula for Chapter 70, state school aid. It worked in 1993, but the state has changed and the formula remains frozen in time.

Develop cost estimates for the many programs in the initiative. They may be worthwhile, but people need to know the price tags.

Disclose the manner of paying for the programs sooner rather than later. If property taxes are off the table and the legislature is unwilling to raise the income tax, people deserve to know how the proposals will be funded.

Discard the in-state tuition for illegal aliens. That proposal has already been defeated by the legislature.

The education reform law of 1993 resulted after several years of study and required the collaboration of many stakeholders. It has carried our schools to the top of national charts. We can build on our successes, and we must work to extend that success to all children. Let's secure our foundation before we build a new house.