

OPINION: SWEENEY'S JERSEY CITY GAMBIT FOR EDUCATION AID

CARL GOLDEN | APRIL 26, 2018

The Senate president's strategy to redistribute aid from overfunded districts is far more palatable than Murphy's plan to raise taxes



State Senate President Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) is on his way to becoming one of the most consequential presiding officers in recent history, his hands firmly on the levers of power — political and policy. He has demonstrated that he is both adroit and willing to push and pull those levers in relentless pursuit of his goal.

When, for instance, he singled out the Jersey City school district as the prime example of the unfair application of the state's formula for aid to local education, he accomplished two things:

- He assumed full command of the legislative mission to revise the formula and wring out the inequities that for years have denied growing districts their fair share of aid.
- He dramatically altered the political dynamic that he and other critics maintain produced the aid imbalance in the first place and has thwarted efforts to correct it ever since.

Sweeney has been on a crusade to reduce or eliminate the transition-aid component of the formula that has ensured that districts with declining enrollments would continue to receive their level of funding. This "hold harmless" provision has, in its practical application, punished districts that have experienced enrollment increases but have not received the amount of aid to keep pace.

Sweeney, the go-to guy

He has established himself as the go-to guy in the Legislature on the school-funding issue. And he has left no doubt about his commitment to revamping the formula this year with his public threat to delay Senate confirmation of Lamont Repollet as commissioner of education after the commissioner-designate indicated any action to do so wouldn't occur until 2019.

Within 24 hours of Sweeney's drawing a line in the sand, both Repollet and Gov. Phil Murphy

