



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Beware of Mayors Seeking Tax Hikes

I guess I rained on the parade and I have to admit, it felt pretty good.

I'm talking about New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio's ill-conceived plan to raise taxes to purportedly pay for universal pre-k in New York City public schools. On its surface, it's a noble idea and one that would eventually bridge gaps of inequality for future New Yorkers. Honestly, who wouldn't be in favor of improving the education system? I guess that's why the mayor made it one of his core campaign promises even though he knew full well that enacting it was totally out of his control. What he continuously failed to point out is that responsibility for making such an aggressive plan actually work falls squarely on the shoulders of state legislators and Governor Cuomo in Albany. And it's no secret that together, we've spent the last four years fervently trying to lower taxes – not raise them.

So Governor Cuomo's team went straight to work and somehow managed to offer Mayor DeBlasio state funds totaling a very generous \$1.5 billion over five years without having to raise taxes on anyone! Problem solved, right? Wrong. Inexplicably, the mayor flat out refused the assistance. Like me, you're probably wondering why anyone would look a billion dollar gift horse in the mouth. So I asked the mayor at a recent hearing and here's what I learned.

First off, pre-k already exists in New York City although not throughout the rest of our state. Currently, approximately 60,000 NYC children participate but there isn't enough funding to allow all of them to attend full-time. These children come from all over the City including its most socio-economically challenged areas. When I asked how many more needed full-time status the answer was about 27,000. I pointed to New York City's \$70 billion budget and maintained that certainly, savings could be found somewhere that might allow the city to feasibly fund a few more hours a day for 27,000 youngsters. His team flatly responded that it had to be an "add on and not a subtract." Frankly, after years of belt-tightening across all levels of government, I find it disconcerting that this new team should remove themselves from the effort.

That's when I moved to surpluses that are mysteriously being left out of the pre-k equation. The New York Times wrote, "State Senator Jack M. Martins, a Republican from Long Island, asked why the city could not use projected surpluses — \$2.4 billion this year and \$1.9 billion next year, according to the city's Independent Budget Office — to pay for prekindergarten. 'Why is a tax increase necessary?' Mr. Martins asked. Mr. de Blasio said the surpluses were needed to settle contracts with unions representing city workers, all of which have lapsed."

There it was – that moment of uncomfortable truth hanging in mid-air that the Daily News would later categorize as a de Blasio "misstep." Clearly, the jeers from his supporters were meant for me but I don't apologize because the whole exchange made things abundantly clear. Mayor de Blasio and his allies are willing to walk away from an immediate and certain victory for our children to make sure there's money in the coffers for the unions, the same unions that supported his bid for mayor. That also explains why he turned down Governor Cuomo's offer of state funding. He is openly insisting on a new revenue stream, one that will ultimately free precious budget dollars for labor negotiations.

Now he can call it whatever he wants and promise the funds will be kept separate but that does absolutely nothing to change reality. With sleight of hand they're robbing Peter to pay Paul and we all know it. The funds are there for the taking, in the city as well as state budget, and they're walking away from it. They are fixed on raising taxes so he can use the surplus for labor negotiations, the complete antithesis of our "taxpayer first" approach these last three years.

Friends, we've seen this movie before and we know how it ends. Special interests groups feed at the public trough, political operatives congratulate each other with slaps on the back, and the taxpayer gets the bill. "Order whatever you like folks, because someone else is getting stuck with the tab." Unfortunately, the Mayor doesn't understand that every New York City taxpayer he chases away is one less taxpayer for the entire state, so we all suffer for his high handed approach.

What a sideshow our education system has become, first with the ongoing debacle of Common Core and now this slap in the face. An educator I spoke with earlier this week likened it to a sinking ship. Only instead of bailing out the water, they're taking on more passengers. Let's focus on saving the ship first.