



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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## From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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### **Say No! to Attica University**

If you're a Seinfeld fan like me, you'll probably remember the episode "Bizarro Jerry," in which the gang's world seems strangely inversed. The writers were apparently inspired by the Bizarro World found in the old D.C. comic books where good and sensible things were shunned and stupidity and recklessness were embraced.

Sometimes, I think I work Bizarro Albany, especially after I hear plans like Governor Cuomo's recent proposal to give convicted felons free college educations on our taxpayer dime. You read that correctly. Our Governor has actually proposed providing prison inmates with free Associates and Bachelors degrees and he's serious. His public relations machine is already out there making the argument.

They claim it's an effort to reduce recidivism, the rate at which released inmates return to prison and base it on one very small, privately funded inmate college program that produced 250 graduates. (There are more than 55,000 inmates in New York.) Their recidivism rate was about 4% compared to the state-wide average 41%. But most agree that the program results were inherently flawed as those inmates were already focused on improving themselves and were the least likely to return to prison.

In any case, we all understand the value of inmate rehabilitation and as I've written time and again, society benefits when you educate anyone. But let's get real. It may be you reading this column, or it may be a friend or neighbor but we all know someone being crushed by sacrifice to send their kids to college. They're refinancing their homes, borrowing against pensions, working countless hours of overtime and in some cases, even two or three jobs. And it's still not enough. Our children are graduating and starting their lives with astonishing debt, the total surpassing \$1 trillion nationally. That's more than all our credit card debt combined and two million of these college graduates are unemployed!

But what are we to do? Tuition at private universities jumped 474% percent from 1970 to 1990. In 1980, it commanded about 26% of the median family income while in 2004, it more than doubled to 56%. And in the face of this genuine national dilemma, rather than advance some sort of relief for the thousands of hard-working New Yorkers that are doing the right thing but barely making it, Governor Cuomo wants to reward a "prison perk" to those who have committed crimes? It's a smack in our faces.

Why not give families who are putting their children through college a reasonable tax credit? Or at least extend it to those working full-time, like single moms, to put themselves through school. Or even minimally lower the cost our state university. We could restore funding that would extend the state Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to graduate students or offer low-cost, state-backed loans. I can think of countless better way to invest in higher education, but in all of them the taxpayer would take priority. Do you remember George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* arguing with Mr. Potter on behalf of the people who "do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community?" Well, is it too much to ask that someone help our kids with what is essentially our money? I don't think so.

Supporters of the proposal claim that the "estimated" expenditure of \$5,000 per inmate will eventually save some of \$60,000 spent per year on each felon. I suggest their time would be

better spent asking why New York prisons cost as much as an Ivy-League education and then looking for savings within that system. Our first responsibility is to be good stewards of public monies, not use it to gain votes via special interests.

And that's exactly what this is. It is not coincidence that the Governor's proposal dovetails with a recent national effort to change how convicted felons regain their right to vote. Traditionally, government demands a waiting period with the understanding that if you aren't willing to follow the law yourself, then you should hardly have the right to shape it for everyone else. This common sense social contract is now being assailed by partisan groups trying lure the loyalty of a potential new voting bloc.

It's pitiful. The discussion should be about common sense priorities. New York has a long and venerable tradition of taking care of our most vulnerable but this is simply ill-conceived. Frankly, if they wanted to make a real difference they'd focus on getting inner city schools on track so as to give real opportunities and avoid prison all together.

My eldest daughter will be heading off to college soon and with three more little girls right behind her, my wife and I are left breathless by the costs of higher education. Like you, we'll make sacrifices and we'll find a way. Hopefully none of us will be educating felons at the expense of our own children. Please sign the petition on my website at <http://www.nysenate.gov/webform/say-no-taxpayer-funded-college-inmates-3> and say No! to Attica University.