*** SPECIAL BUDGET UPDATE - EDUCATION ***

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While we are still working to finalize a state budget, news flashes and rumors race across the Internet from various groups and the media, offering instant analysis of the talks – and frequent indictment of those who have long supported our local schools.

I hope you're not believing everything you read in the press, or the breathless talking points being e-mailed by every group with a mailing list.

Let me offer my own update.

First, there is NO senate plan or agreement to withhold school aid until June when a proposed commission might report on teaching changes. If you have been told so, let me assure you that it is a lie. The senate has consistently taken the position that school aid should never be contingent upon the legislature's acquiescence to the governor's proposed governance and teaching changes. I continue to oppose the governor's threats and linkage of these issues and we have successfully uncoupled the governor's proposed teaching 'reforms' from the threat of withheld state aid.

Second, in rejecting the governor's agenda as proposed, there has been discussion of an independent panel of teaching professionals, administrators and educators to review the APPR system. APPR was not well thought out when enacted and it still produces problems for our schools and teachers. The panel's deliberations would not be linked to funding.

I am continuing to press for additional funding for our schools in line with the senate's stated goal of eliminating the GEA. The senate alone staked out a position in favor of complete elimination of the GEA and offered the richest aid package -- $1.9 billion. We need to convince the assembly and the governor to agree that the GEA must go this year.

I alone do not prepare the final budget, but I have been in the schools in my district over the years, talking with teachers, administrators and parents. I will continue my advocacy for our upstate, rural schools.