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SMITH CALLS ON CHRISTIE ADMINISTRATION TO FOLLOW THROUGH ON SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION LAW

Author of Landmark Special Session Legislation Dismayed By DOE's Disregard for Cost-Saving Measures

TRENTON – Senator Bob Smith today called on the Christie administration to explain its refusal to carry through with statutorily-mandated requirements to eliminate and consolidate various school districts and functions to achieve long-term cost savings. In doing so, Sen. Smith sent a letter to Education Commissioner Bret Schundler today seeking clarification to media reports last week where Schundler admitted that the state was abandoning plans that were already underway to eliminate non-operating school districts, opting instead to “do what’s easier.”

“Respectfully this is not the commissioner’s choice. This is the law,” said Sen. Smith (D-Middlesex). “While it may be convenient, or ‘easier’ as the commissioner put it, to ignore the laws of our state, it is neither cost-efficient or in the best interest of taxpayers. How can the administration continuously talk about achieving cost savings and holding the line on property taxes when we have over 600 school districts, many of which are top heavy with administration? Why do we want to continue to assume the costs for so many superintendents, transportation departments, administrative staffs, and so on?”

Senator Smith co-chaired the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services during the Legislature’s 2006 special session on property tax reform, which labored intensively for months over legislation that was designed to promote government consolidation and shared services. One of the end results was passage of P.L. 2007, ch. 63 (the CORE proposals and the “Uniform Shared Services and Consolidation Act”), of which Sen. Smith was one of the prime sponsors. The law calls for the state to eliminate non-operating districts and create plans, subject to voter approval, to consolidate districts that are not full kindergarten-through-12th grade districts.

Sen. Smith is also the sponsor of a bill (S450) pending in the legislature right now that would allow for a referendum to give voters in each county the opportunity to establish a county administrative school district to consolidate public school governance and operations at the county level, and allow local boards of education to remain in place only in an advisory capacity.

“The shared services committee that I chaired found that there could be significant cost savings through these various consolidation efforts. Abandoning these plans because they are not the ‘easiest’ thing to do is a terrible message to send to taxpayers. It also suggests that the Governor’s repeated talk about making ‘difficult choices’ applies only in theory, not in practice. Non-operating districts are just that, and they serve little function other than to drive up property taxes. To me, the easiest choice to help ease the property tax burden is to eliminate this obvious non-necessity,” added Sen. Smith.

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