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Making the case for school funds

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May 1, 2007

STAMFORD - "Every time I come down here, the sun shines," state Rep. Christopher Donovan told the city's legislative delegation during its tour yesterday of K.T. Murphy Elementary School.

The House majority leader's admiration of the spring weather and the city's tree and flower-lined streets could have been easily dismissed as small talk.

But on a day when Stamford's state representatives and school officials wanted to convince Donovan, D-Meriden, that the city's wealthy image belies pockets of poverty placing great pressures on the school district, even a joke about the weather received a response.

"You commented on the trees, the beauty. You really have to start going behind closed doors to see" the problems, Eileen Swerdlick, the city's assistant superintendent for elementary education, told Donovan.

For years, legislators from Stamford, Norwalk and other lower Fairfield County communities have complained that their General Assembly colleagues in Hartford mistakenly assume municipalities with high property values have few needs and can easily foot their education costs. Stamford - despite having 15,130 students, many from lower-income and immigrant families - this year received less state education aid than small towns such as Hebron with 1,244 students and Stafford with 1,965.

Seeing that trend continued in the legislative Democrats' 2008-09 biennium budget proposal, Stamford's five Democratic state representatives asked their House leader to come to the city.

Donovan said the legislature constantly struggles with how best to distribute school grants to the state's 169 cities and towns to meet "our constitutional call for equality in education.

"It's good to get this information as we try to figure out what makes sense for our state," Donovan told the group, which also included Superintendent Joshua Starr and Sandra Dennies, Stamford's director of administration.

K.T. Murphy Elementary was chosen as representative of Stamford's challenges.



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More than 44 percent of the city's public school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, 35 percent come from homes where English is not the primary language and 15 percent of students are enrolled in English as a second language classes.

About 61 percent of K.T. Murphy's 542 students qualify for free or reduced lunches, and more than 200 students attend English as a second language classes.

"We do a lot with a little," state Rep. Carlo Leone, D-Stamford, who represents the neighborhoods surrounding the elementary school, told Donovan. "Our pitch is any more money we can send down here - (money) we feel we deserve - is not going to be thrown away."

The legislature's Democratic majority budget would increase Stamford's share of education funds from \$5.9 million to \$7.7 million for the next fiscal year. But the party also wants to boost the income taxes of joint filers earning \$190,000 or more - households area legislators say could be considered middle class for wealthy Fairfield County.

Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell's spending plan, which includes an across-the-board income tax increase, would give Stamford \$11 million for education in the first year. And House Republicans, led by Majority Leader Lawrence Cafero, R-Norwalk, last week put forth a plan they said could provide Stamford \$8.2 million in school aid without raising taxes.

Starr told Donovan that besides having to spend more to educate its students, Stamford also has to pay greater teachers' salaries to lure qualified professionals to lower Fairfield County, with its high housing prices and congested roadways.

"What we seem to forget in Hartford is the cost of living here," said state Rep. Christel Truglia, D-Stamford.

The Stamford delegation is scheduled to have a similar discussion in Hartford today with Speaker of the House James Amann, D-Milford.

"People are tempted to be cynical and say 'What's this going to do?' " state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, said during Donovan's tour. "I think it's going to do quite a lot over time."

Donovan made no promises that the state budget passed later this session would include additional money for the city's schools.

"The delegation's pressing for more dough, which is their job as representatives," Donovan said. "It's not over until we put our budget together. All of this helps."

State Rep. Christopher Perone, D-Norwalk, said he was unaware of Donovan's visit to Stamford and would consider inviting him and Amann to his city's schools to witness similar types of need.

But Norwalk does not have as much to complain about under the Democratic budget. Although the city has nearly 30 percent fewer public school students than Stamford, it already gets more state education funds than Stamford and would receive more. The Democrats' plan would increase Norwalk's grants from \$8.7 million to \$9.2 million.

But it still would not match Rell's offer to boost Norwalk's education grants to \$11.4 million and the Republican House plan to increase school aid to Norwalk to \$10.5 million.