

Suggestions range from longer teaching days and academic years, teacher competency exams, more pre-kindergarten, district consolidations and the recruitment of top high school and college graduates as educators.

Merryl H. Tisch, chancellor of the State Board of Regents, said it well when she talked about Cuomo's leadership in putting education issues on the front burner. The Regents praised the work - far from over - of laying out a clear road map for improving education. The commission's recommendations are well aligned, she said, with the Regents Reform Agenda and with the priorities in the state's Race to the Top funding and programs.

But real reforms must have political will behind them, particularly on the topic of district consolidation. Erie County is one of the state's worst offenders when it comes to the number of school districts, with a staggering 27,

education in the city, including choosing a superintendent. Unfortunately, with board elections in May, barely 4 percent of Buffalo voters bother to cast ballots.

That low turnout hands over a disproportionate amount of power to special interest groups able to get their voters to the polls. Albany, therefore, should move school board elections from May to the general election in November, when voters are more likely to focus on the candidates and go to the polls.

The governor's Education Reform Commission has said that its action plan is designed to take the first steps to implement its vision for New York's future. Members will continue their work over the next year.

Everyone in New York has a stake in education. Vigorous discussion of the issues, followed by action, can make 2013 really count for children.

## County's cash problem

Better management is needed to ensure bills can be paid on time

Although there are any number of reasons Erie County ran short of cash last week, it should never be allowed to happen again.

Newly minted Erie County Comptroller Stefan Mychajliw spent his first days on the job sounding the alarm on the county's inability to pay a \$15 million bill.

The cash shortage was the result of the lag in receiving property taxes and other revenue due to begin showing up in late winter. Last year, the county borrowed \$75 million through a revenue anticipation note to help cover expenses, including a \$15 million bill related to Erie County Medical Center that the state said would be debited from the county's bank accounts this week.

Mychajliw said the county had only \$9.6 million on hand to pay bills at the end of last year - far less than the \$41 million his office calculates should have been available. That raises the troubling question of why the books were so far out of balance, and why wasn't it spotted sooner?

Mychajliw met with County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz, and swiftly worked out an agreement with ECMC to

delay the \$15 million payment until March 12, when the comptroller's office expects the cash balance to improve.

That solved the immediate problem, but the situation should never have gotten to the alarm stage. It is the job of the comptroller to manage the cash, examining cash flows and comparing predictions to results.

Mychajliw defeated David Shenk in a special election in November to fill the unexpired term of then-Comptroller Poloncarz. Shenk was appointed to the post after the office had been empty at the beginning of last year. In essence, the county went without sharp oversight for a period of time.

Under good cash management principles, the county should be able to forecast well ahead of time whether it is going to run short on cash. The county should always file for reimbursements and pay its bills in a timely manner. If it needs to make adjustments along the way to account for low cash periods, such as the end of one fiscal year and the beginning of the next before property taxes come in, that's a management function that should happen within the comptroller's office.

Mychajliw brought this situation involving the previous comptroller to light. Now he should make sure this sort of thing doesn't happen on his own watch.

College and worked at the University at Buffalo for 10 years until lack of funding closed the program in which he worked.

***It just doesn't make sense that people like Mike and thousands of others like him who cannot advocate for themselves can be treated so callously.***

Mike played for the Silver Wheels wheelchair football team for 15 years, plays softball in the Touching Bases League and loves to bowl. He's a huge fan of the Sabres and Bandits, and is a member of two area sports halls of fame in recognition of his spirit and perseverance. He loves to travel and has been to Europe many times, as well as toured throughout North America.

So what's the rub?

I am 78 and Vivian is 80. I have been under treatment for cancer for almost five years. We are aging by the day and facing health complications and, as a result, we are deeply concerned about Mike's future. We are approaching a time when we will no longer be able to care for him, and the only solution is placement in an appropriate group home.

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mid 1990s. He is not alone on the list; there are 1,100 disabled citizens in Western New York on the waiting list, and statewide the number is 16,000.

With a moratorium on developing and staffing new group homes placement is now based on crisis. An individual must be on the verge of homelessness to attain placement.

No one in his right mind would think this is an appropriate strategy to deal with the needs of our most vulnerable citizens. Actually it is no strategy at all. Worse, there is no plan to improve the situation. And we continue to wait.

As we approach the end of a long and full life, my wife and I are not afraid of dying, but we are terrified that our son will not have been placed in an appropriate setting before we go.

This is a crisis throughout New York and it involves the most vulnerable people in our society. If government was ever intended to serve as a safety net, this is it.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and state legislators, please act. New York spends \$52 billion annually on Medicaid and it just doesn't make sense that people like Mike and thousands of others like him who cannot advocate for themselves can be treated so callously.

This calls to mind an appropriate passage from the Bible: Whatever you do for the least of my brothers, you do unto me.

### Another Voice / Workers' compensation

## New push for reform ignores savings coming in 2013

By GREGORY CONNORS

Workers' compensation is not a topic many of us spend much time thinking about. Most employees in New York are healthy and have full use of their arms, legs and backs. We have no reason to imagine we'll be injured on the job, so why should we care if regional business leaders are aggressively pursuing more workers' compensation reform?

But I propose *all* workers in Western New York should care about the latest attempts by Unshackle Upstate to push for more reform. The outcome they are pursuing could leave workers unprotected, find businesses still paying higher premiums and be a windfall for insurance companies.

Hard-working Western New Yorkers

will bear the brunt of this windfall for insurance companies. Most employees who find themselves applying for workers' compensation are blue-collar men and women between 35 and 55 years old who make between \$400 and \$600 each week. These are men and women in their prime income-generating years who have families to support and who cannot afford to lose a paycheck.

In reality, less than 2 percent of people ever apply for workers' compensation. And business owners in New York State pay only 1.6 percent of their operating budgets to workers' compensation insurance. So why is Unshackle Upstate working so hard to pretend more reform is needed?

It's important to recognize that the organization's work on the last reform,

finalized in 2007, hasn't even been given a chance to pay off. In that reform, the total payout for certain lifelong injuries will be capped - beginning in mid-2013. So why does the organization pretend to have expected cost savings through 2011? The claim is ridiculous.

But Unshackle Upstate leaders are claiming that because no cost savings have yet been realized, further reform is required. If this happens, business owners will see very little difference, and their workers will be left with even less coverage. However, insurance companies will benefit significantly. With more money in the system and payouts reduced, insurance companies will be able to increase their profits.

Workers' compensation is fundamental to the social safety net. Fair com-

ensation for injured workers should not be sacrificed to increase profits for insurance companies. Injured workers are not organized to defend themselves, and there are far fewer of them than there are businesses and associations that protect their interests.

I hope business leaders and elected officials ask for verified information from insurance companies, and the real projected cost savings if the 2007 reform is allowed to bear fruit - *not* the unverified data they used to justify proposed premium increases. Until leaders have accurate data, they cannot make informed decisions that might seriously affect workers and their families.

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