

The Bully's Pulpit 10.11 - Increasing the Opportunities for Cronies to Make \$\$\$

February 2, 2011

The Governor's "Opportunity Scholarship Act", or voucher bill, is scheduled to appear before the Assembly Education Committee tomorrow. The bill will be another nail in the coffin of public education, virtually destroying the Paterson Public Schools by taking away millions of dollars from the District to be spent in private and religious schools.

Take a look at the information on this bill provided by NJEA:

WHAT IT DOES:	This law would forfeit almost a billion dollars out of the state treasury to create New Jersey's first-ever publicly funded private school voucher program. Under the bill, students in 13 school districts would be entitled to take a voucher (called a "scholarship" by the bill's sponsors) to attend private and religious schools. The program would allow up to 40,000 students to participate by the fifth year.
HOW IT WORKS:	The State Treasury would fully fund the program by granting dollar-for-dollar tax credits to corporations that donate to a "scholarship organization." These organizations, staffed by corporate representatives, distribute the money to private and religious schools. This shell game is designed to escape the appearance of a direct entanglement of the state with religion.
DISTRICTS:	Asbury Park, Camden, East Orange, Elizabeth, Jersey City, Lakewood, Newark, Orange, Passaic, Paterson, Perth Amboy, Plainfield, and Trenton.
COST:	Up to \$1 billion – OR MORE -- over five years. Incredibly, the bill allows "scholarship organizations" giving out vouchers to keep up to \$50 million in management fees.
ELIGIBLE STUDENTS:	At least 25% of the money goes to parents of currently enrolled private school students. Additional currently enrolled private school students may receive the money if public school student demand is low.
INCOME ELIGIBILITY:	2.5 times federal poverty level, about \$55,000/yr. income for family of four
VOUCHER AMOUNT:	At least \$8,000 for elementary school; at least \$11,000 for high school
SPECIAL EDUCATION:	A parent is required to sign away their federally guaranteed rights to special education services for their child to participate in the program. That means special education students will be essentially shut out of the program because private schools are not required to provide special education services.
TRANSPORTATION:	The local school district is required to pay for and provide transportation for the voucher students to attend the private schools.
ACCOUNTABILITY:	Private schools do not have to hire certified teachers, administer state achievement tests to all students, or even report overall academic results. The voucher students will be required to take a state test, but the results are unlikely to be made public

We must act to try to stop this bill. I urge you to email 35th Legislative District Assemblywomen Elease Evans and Nellie Pou today to ask that they vote against A-2810. Below you will find the email I'm sending to each. Feel free to copy, modify and send.

Email addresses are:

AswEvans@njleg.org and AswPou@njleg.org

Dear Assemblywoman _____,

I am writing to you to ask that you oppose A-2810, the so-called "Opportunity Scholarship Act". I believe this bill will aid in Governor Christie's systematic plan to destroy public education in the State of New Jersey, and especially in struggling school systems like Paterson.

Christie took millions of dollars from the Paterson Public Schools this year. As a result, virtually all of our students have lost art, music and world language classes taught by certificated professional staff members. School libraries are without certified librarians. Student Assistance Coordinator, Guidance Counselor and other positions have been reduced. Classroom teachers have been let go, leading to larger classes.

It is clear that the Governor intends to cut state aid even more in 2011-12, leading to another round of reductions in services to children and greater numbers of unemployed staff members. The loss of funding through A-2810 will create even greater harm to our school system.

I am well aware of the image that our school system has, but I urge you to remember that the State of New Jersey has been running our schools for 20 years. We, as educators, have no power or authority over what we teach, what programs are thrown at us, class size, the substandard working and learning conditions in our buildings or even the availability of materials for our classes. The administration and the State control all of those things. While these conditions have been permitted to continue, I go into my classroom, with my students, and we work to improve their futures through education.

A-2810 is a bad bill, with mean-spirited motivation. Students throughout your legislative district will suffer with its passage. I urge you to vote against A-2810.

Thank you.

Peter A. Tirri, President
Paterson Education Association

On another issue . . . P.E.A. sent the following to the Herald yesterday ...

February 1, 2011

North Jersey Herald News

To the Editor:

I am sick to death of listening to the Governor rant and rave about "200 continually failing schools". I recognize that there are persistently failing schools in the state, but before he condemns them all to his death watch, we need to look at the reasons for the failure. He consistently misleads the public citing the exception as if it were the rule when it comes to education.

He rants about 200 failing schools but purposely fails to speak of the thousands of successful public schools throughout the state. He fails to point out that many of the "failing" public schools do not meet Annual Yearly Progress standards because of Bushian testing groups of developmentally challenged students required to be on grade level or bilingual students whose traditions all help to contribute to failing school categorization.

He ignores the fact that many of the "failing schools" in urban areas have been under the direct control of the State Department of Education for two decades. He places blame on teachers in these schools for the "failure" while ignoring the fact that they have no control over curricula, or teaching practices, or requirements thrust upon them by the State appointed management.

I recognize that these points may not save many of the schools in Paterson, or Newark, or Jersey City where socio-economic problems cannot be solved by the schools without a lot of money; money well-spent and not wasted on administrative costs. But people need to see Christie for what he does, playing the extreme card and claiming it to be the norm. His facts are skewed to hurt education, a subject he knows very little about. His facts, as well as his motivations, should be held to higher scrutiny before he is permitted to declare the death penalty for 200 New Jersey public schools.

In his presentation in Paramus, the Governor said "We have the moral obligation to tell the truth." He should abide by his own words.

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The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits