

Christie Showing His "True Colors" Rightist Policies a Poor Fit for New Jerseyans

From the NJEA June, 2010

There has been a noticeable lull in the battle between NJEA and Gov. Christie in the past week or so, for some obvious reasons.

The "Race To The Top" fiasco - which saw the governor openly disavow a negotiated agreement with NJEA on one version of the state's RTTT application, only to send his own version to Washington - led to a barrage of negative press for the administration. NJEA was more than willing to suggest to reporters that dysfunction was apparently rampant between the governor's office and the Department of Education, and Commissioner Schundler, from his vantage point under the school bus, has taken a horrible beating in the process.

Then, the administration backed down on its threat to force untold numbers of NJEA members to consider premature retirement in the face of rumored legislation that would have cut into their pensions and benefits if they retired after Aug. 1.

The news that pension legislation will not be filed this year unleashed a second round of anti-administration press coverage, and Schundler took yet another hit for his "ready, fire, aim" approach to policy-making. NJEA's view was - and remains - that the administration was trying to panic teachers and school employees into premature retirement in order to save money (by pocketing the "breakage" realized between the salaries of veteran retirees and first-year replacements), and we advanced that view in all media interviews.

Then came two stories causing even more trouble for the administration:

First, a column <<http://msg4svc.net/cpvkm/244697/62/42620/970/0/S/gjzh.html>> by Star-Ledger editorial page editor Tom Moran (see below) ripped Gov. Christie for his rapidly emerging "hard-right agenda" - something NJEA has been pitching to the press for weeks now. Moran exposed the ugly truth behind Christie's refusal to reappoint State Supreme Court Justice John Wallace: that it was the first step in stripping the former Abbott districts of funding, in order to provide more aid to wealthier districts.

As if on cue, the Education Law Center, which has litigated every Abbott case, was back in court yesterday filing a motion urging the Supreme Court to reverse Christie's \$1 billion in education cuts being proposed for September in the looming state budget debate, on the grounds that the cuts violate a Court ruling last year that upheld the state's school funding formula. An article <<http://msg4svc.net/cpvkm/244697/66/42620/974/0/S/gjzh.html>> in the Star-Ledger laid out the ELC case, and featured yet another Christie lie: that in the past 20 years, "we don't see much, if any, improvement in our urban schools." Apparently New Jersey's leading the nation in closing the achievement gap doesn't count.

In the meantime, we are still urging everyone to contact their Congressional representatives about the Education Employment bill that will SAVE TEACHERS JOBS! (P.E.A. will repost this blast later).

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N.J. Gov. Chris Christie's rant reveals a hard-right agenda

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Tom Moran/ The Star-Ledger

TRENTON - The reason fanatics like Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck adore Gov. Chris Christie has never been so clearly on display as it was last week during his Rant in Robbinsville. It was one of his town hall meetings, stuffed with friends as usual. But this time he went far beyond the familiar call for a reasonable cap on property taxes.

This time he attacked justices of the state Supreme Court as "people in black robes who are elected by no one" and suggested that they should never defy the majority will. So much for Alexander Hamilton's quaint notions of judicial independence.

The governor also revealed for the first time the real reason he removed Justice John Wallace from the bench: It was the first phase in a larger scheme to take money out of poor urban school districts and spread it around to wealthier suburbs.

"If people wonder why I want to change the Supreme Court, it's because I don't have the flexibility to change the school funding formula," he said. "The Supreme Court theory that if you put more money in, (schools are) going to just by magic get better has proven to be wrong."

The hope must be that if you repeat this nonsense enough, people will start to believe it. But for the record, New Jersey is closing the racial achievement gap faster than any other state. That's partly because we've built the nation's best preschool program, no small thing. Some districts, like Union City, have worked near miracles. Others, like Camden, are still failing horribly.

But let's place the blame where it belongs - with state and local officials who failed to make the most of the money directed to poor urban areas under the Abbott vs. Burke rulings. The court can only open the door. Union City showed that it's possible to walk through it.

The governor also claimed that the court mandated "the overwhelming majority" of state money to go to a "small number" of urban districts. It was half the money and it went to districts attended by nearly 1 in 4 New Jersey students.

Worse, the governor blamed the court for pinching school aid to suburbs like Robbinsville, when the real cause is the sweeping cuts to all districts the governor is pushing.

"He's just wrong," says David Sciarra of the Education Law Center, who represents students in poor districts. "If he funded the formula, Robbinsville would get \$1.7 million more in aid."

The governor is playing an ugly political game. He wants suburban taxpayers to blame their problems on the cities, with the Supreme Court as the enabler. If he has to smudge a few facts along the way, so be it.

Look up the word "demagogue" in Webster's dictionary and you find a pretty tight fit with the governor in Robbinsville: "A person who tries to stir up the people by appeals to emotion, prejudice, etc., in order to win them over quickly and so gain power."

Standing in his way, of course, is the Supreme Court. It found that the state's reliance on property taxes created enormous disparities that deprived kids in poor cities of a chance for a decent education, violating the state Constitution's promise.

Here's how the governor described it: "They've taken the power out of the hands of the Legislature to make this judgment and out of the hands of the governor, and the courts are making it. Well, that's wrong. If judges want to legislate, they should run for the Legislature." He added, "They're put there, and they believe they should stay there without any responsiveness to the people of the state."

Remember, though, that governors and legislatures in New Jersey created a system that was profoundly unequal. Kids in poor cities were crowded into decrepit buildings with poorly paid teachers in systems funded at slightly more than half the state average.

That's what majority rule delivered. And that's why the court jumped in. Is the governor really suggesting that justices should heel to the majority instead?

New Jersey is ready for a fiscal conservative after a decade in which the public sector continued to swell even as private sector jobs disappeared. Polls show solid majorities want to see Trenton go on a diet and support his plan to cap property taxes.

If the Rant in Robbinsville is any guide, though, Christie has grander plans to push a conservative agenda. That will no doubt tickle Limbaugh and friends.

But it will be a tough sell to the moderate voters of New Jersey.