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NJ majority favors protecting education from cuts

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With Gov. Chris Christie tightening the belt on New Jersey's budget, residents feel state education and poverty relief should be the areas least affected by funding cuts, according to a poll from the University's Eagleton Institute of Politics.

The poll, conducted March 31 to April 3, reported that 57 percent of the 953 N.J. adults polled want no cuts in aid to local schools, while 49 percent oppose cuts to state colleges and universities. Seventy-two percent was also against making it easier to lay off schoolteachers.

A slight majority of 51 percent said they oppose cuts in programs for the poor.

Despite their desire to protect education, the poll also indicated that New Jerseyans overwhelmingly oppose any sort of tax increase or surcharges to increase state revenue.

The strongest resistance was against the options of raising the state gas and income taxes, which 72 percent of those polled opposed.

But those polled do favor making it easier to lay off municipal workers to balance local budgets. About 57 percent agree with making it easier to fire municipal workers, with 38 percent in opposition.

The willingness for people to take cuts to their town and see municipal workers laid off was a big surprise, said David Redlawsk, Eagleton poll director.

"It's hard for the average person to really see how bad the problem is," said Redlawsk, who is also a University professor of political science. "People don't see why they have to deal with such big cuts right now."

Redlawsk said the poll results are not purely a reaction to Christie or his plan as governor.

"I think there would be similar reactions to any governor who takes massive cuts to the budget," Redlawsk said. But New Brunswick resident Janelle Clarke disagrees.

"I think this poll shows that people are unhappy with what the governor is doing right now," she said.

Clarke said she opposes cuts in both local and higher education and feels education is one of the best things about New Jersey.

"We shouldn't take away from our children's education. It will hurt us in the future," she said.

Instead, Clarke suggested that taxes should be raised to help close the budget gap.

"I feel we can all dig a little deeper and pay a little bit more and help solve this budget problem. But I can never approve of taking away from children's education," she said.

While Redlawsk maintains the poll is not a just a reaction to Christie, he does feel that Christie has upset many

N.J. residents by taking such an aggressive approach to dealing with the New Jersey Education Association.

“The strong attacks on teachers aren’t doing him much good,” Redlawsk said.

When cuts are made to local schools, most people are not going to be silent about it, he said.

“What it comes down to is people are proud of their local schools,” Redlawsk said. “When they see what’s happening, they’re going to feel threatened, and they’re going to react.”

Ian Aspin, a School of Arts and Sciences sophomore, disagrees with the recent cuts in both local schools and higher education.

“Cuts in education are never really beneficial in my opinion,” he said.

But Aspin recognized that the state budget crisis would not go away unless serious changes are made.

“I can understand why [Christie] is cutting education, but I think it should be used as a last resort,” he said.

“Education is vital to the state.”

Rutgers Business School first-year student Michael Ades believes the state is in desperate times, and such drastic cuts are necessary.

“From my perspective, [Christie] is doing a good job,” Ades said. “He’s in a tough spot right now because of the budget gap. He walked into a big mess.”

