

N.J.'s Christie Takes Combative Tack on Education

By Stephen Sawchu

Perhaps no other governor has caught the zeitgeist of fiscal austerity as well as New Jersey's Chris Christie.

His aggressive, bare-knuckle style, cuts to public spending, and well-publicized clashes with the New Jersey Education Association have made the governor a media sensation and shoved his education reform ideas—which include expanding school choice options for students and overhauling teacher tenure, compensation, and pensions—into the national spotlight.



For now, such efforts appear to be paying off in a political sense. Mr. Christie, an effective draw on the campaign trail during the election season, was mentioned in an editorial in *The Record*, a newspaper that covers Bergen and Passaic counties, as a potential candidate for the U.S. presidency.

Mr. Christie's influence on education has been felt mostly through cuts and rescissions to spending, including a recent controversial move to cap superintendent salaries. Yet several of the governor's stated goals for education depend on action from a state legislature still controlled by Democrats, where bills on charter schools and choice programs are languishing, despite having some bipartisan support.

Meanwhile, proposals for reforming teacher tenure and merit pay—two areas for which Mr. Christie has voiced strong support—have yet to be introduced.

What his leadership means for education in the Garden State over the long haul, observers say, isn't yet clear especially as many stakeholders are still bracing to see what effects the spending cuts will have on programming.

"Will there be more teacher layoffs, a cutting back on programs like arts and sports, a backlash?" said Don Linky, a senior policy fellow at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. "He may be riding the crest now of visibility with his aggressive leadership, but it may take a while for us to see how it all comes out."

Budget Moves

Through his power of the purse, Mr. Christie has overseen over the past year:

- Education spending for fiscal 2011 of \$10 billion out of a \$29.4 billion budget in total, representing a cut to state appropriations for education of more than \$800 million.
- Rules not subject to legislative approval, introduced in early November, that cap salaries for school superintendents, based on school enrollment.
- A bill, signed in July, that caps property-tax increases at 2 percent. The cap goes into effect in January.

The property-tax cap is expected to require districts to pare education budgets still further, and Mr. Christie has called on legislators to pass a package, called the "toolkit," which he says would help local governments scale back costs.

Among other measures, the toolkit proposals, now in various stages in the legislature, would limit sick and

vacation-time payouts for retiring teachers and alter collective bargaining, permitting districts to cap wages and impose a “last-best” offer. Several of the proposals have met with resistance from the legislature, including from Senate President Steve Sweeney, a Democrat, who favors sharing services across municipalities to save funds.

Officials for the state’s teachers’ union, the NJEA, have argued that the toolkit constitutes a thinly veiled attack on their members.

“Teachers didn’t have anything to do with the global banking crisis, and it’s disingenuous to blame them for every problem,” said Steve Wollmer, a spokesman for the NJEA. “The governor doesn’t want people to take a close look at the impact of his cuts for education.”

So far, said Ben Dworkin, an adjunct professor of political science at Rider University, in Lawrenceville, N.J., Mr. Christie has made the NJEA an effective foil as he advances his agenda.

“It allows him to deflect anger for high property taxes and toward the cuts he is making in education,” Mr. Dworkin said. “But it’s not just deflecting anger. On merit pay and charter schools and tenure, he has some very legitimate policy differences with the union.”

Bipartisanship on Charters?

Gov. Christie’s agenda also includes additional support for school choice programs and changes to teacher-tenure and compensation systems.

Many of those ideas were outlined in the state’s bid for funding under Race to the Top, part of the federal economic-stimulus program. The state was a runner-up in the competition. Mr. Christie drew criticism for engaging in a highly publicized dispute with, and later firing, his commissioner of education, Bret Schundler, over the shape of the plan. (“[N.J. Clings to Education Agenda Despite Race to Top Loss](#),” Sept. 15, 2010.)

Two bills with at least some bipartisan backing include one that would give tax credits to businesses that establish scholarships for students attending underperforming schools. The bill has passed through the Senate’s economic-growth committee, but hasn’t yet reached the floor in either chamber.

A second proposal, also endorsed by Gov. Christie and sponsored by Democrats in both chambers, would create a new charter authorizer under the auspices of the Center for Effective School Practices, a unit of the Rutgers Graduate School of Education that is based in Somerset, N.J.

Charter supporters say that such reforms are now palatable among mainstream Democrats.

“I think the stars have lined up nationally on this issue, and particularly locally,” said Carlos Lejnieks, the chairman of the New Jersey Charter Schools Association. “I truly believe we have a partner in Gov. Christie, as well as with someone down in Washington—the president.”

So far, though, only one school choice proposal has been signed into law. The bill, completed in September, permits up to 10 percent of students in a district to transfer to public schools in other districts.

Conversely, observers say that Mr. Christie’s goals for teacher tenure and performance pay could be more difficult to advance. Tenure is written into state statute, while teacher compensation falls under the scope of the state’s collective bargaining laws.

Hearings about performance pay are scheduled to begin in the legislature Dec. 9. In the meantime, the governor has convened a panel to retool teacher evaluations.

A spokesman for the governor said he expects legislative proposals on teacher pay and compensation to be introduced in March, after the teacher-evaluation panel is due to release its report.



The chairman of the education committee in the lower chamber, Assemblyman Patrick Deigman, said that a proposal to overhaul the tenure-granting process could be introduced as early as this month. But he added that he would oppose merit pay or private-school scholarships.

Even groups that generally support the administration's education plans say the teacher proposals could be difficult to put into practice.

"Business has done this forever, and still business has struggled to make sure personnel evaluations are fair and adequate," said Dana G. Egreczsky, the senior vice president of workforce development for the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce. "So it's not going to be easy for a system that has never lived under these guidelines to put them in place and to make sure they're accurate and that the incentives produce the performance and outcomes we want."

Observers also said that Mr. Christie risks going too far out on a limb with his criticism of the NJEA.

A recent [poll](#) from Rutgers' Eagleton Institute found that 70 percent New Jersey residents supported tenure reform in principle, but they were far less sanguine about tying teacher pay to student performance.

"The public doesn't seem to be buying the idea that the NJEA is a bogeymen that has frustrated education reform in New Jersey," said Mr. Linky of the institute.

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