

## **Poor schools improving**

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THE RECORD EDITORIAL STAFF

IT'S easy for some New Jersey legislators to call the billions of dollars in state aid to poor districts a waste. It's easy, too, for them to propose cutting funding to these districts.

It's harder to argue with the substantial difference that state money has made in the education of poor children in these districts, including Garfield, Passaic and Paterson in North Jersey.

Test results released this week showed that in 1999, only 32.8 percent of students tested in the so-called Abbott districts passed state math exams. By last year, the passing rate in math for the 31 Abbott districts doubled to an average of 65 percent for all grades tested.

Education officials were silent about Abbott school results in language arts. Statewide the 2005 scores in language arts were mixed.

But in math, the gap between the 31 Abbott districts and the rest of the state is narrowing. That is exactly what the state Supreme Court sought in the Abbott v. Burke court rulings. Justices wanted to give poor children the same educational opportunities as kids in well-heeled suburbs.

New Jersey now sends billions of dollars a year to the 31 districts. That amount of Abbott aid has become increasingly controversial as state funding to middle-class districts has stayed fairly flat for several years, leading to big hikes in property taxes.

State legislators rightly want to alleviate the property tax burden on middle-class homeowners. The problem is their efforts may undo the progress in poor districts. That would be a costly mistake.

A special legislative committee on school funding has proposed removing the Abbott designation from the 31 poor districts. Voilà! The Abbotts would no longer be treated differently from other districts. The committee also called for changing how state aid is doled out. Extra funding for poor children would no longer be focused on Abbott districts; it would be divided among all districts based on the number of needy students in each.

It's a fact that middle-class communities such as Clifton, Pompton Lakes and Lyndhurst need more state aid. It's also true that many districts with sizeable numbers of poor children could use more state funding to pay for the educational needs of these kids.

But like so many things that sound good in theory, the reality is less clear-cut.

Even if the Abbotts are no longer called Abbotts, most would still receive lots of state funding because they have so many poor children. But with the Abbott designation lifted, the state would have less involvement in these districts. The poor districts could have more freedom to divert money from programs that work -- such as one-on-one tutoring for academically struggling students -- to programs of questionable merit.

Education is improving in many of the 31 poor districts. The Legislature must be careful not to undo that progress.

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