

## **Jersey's 'sacred obligation' to its children**

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On Aug. 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. called on the United States to honor "the sacred obligation" represented by the "promissory note" the founders had signed: "America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

It is a debt still owing, despite some incremental installments paid, and the shortfall is most evident where our national investment in education is concerned. The urban and rural schools that serve a disproportionate share of the country's low-income and minority students remain those likeliest to suffer from lack of funding.

The New Jersey Supreme Court's Abbott vs. Burke decisions have upheld American educational ideals, offering the state a unique opportunity to lead the nation. These decisions have confirmed that money should be deployed to improve schools serving poor children, affirming the constitutional right of these students to an adequate education. King would be proud of that affirmation.

For that matter, New Jersey should be proud that, in an index published this month by Education Week, the state ranks among the top five or six in the percentage of fourth-graders scoring as proficient on National Assessment of Educational Progress math and reading tests.

While we can applaud the advances that the court's leadership has made possible, the other two branches of government must build on New Jersey' progress in addressing school finance inequities. Yet many elected officials reject this opportunity, even though common sense would suggest otherwise. They reject the notion that urban schools are in bad shape because of funding. They assert that no new funds are needed.

And, although Gov. Jon Corzine has indicated that the new school funding formula he called for in his State of the State address would likely hold harmless the Abbott districts, there is no guarantee that their funds would not eventually be reduced.

Yet the evidence is clear that these funds have made a difference. Thousands of children are now being provided with an educational foundation as early childhood education and key resources in the primary grades become more available to children in Abbott districts. In these districts, for example, the proportion of children served by preschools has gone from less than half before Abbott to nearly three-quarters in 2006. Test scores for elementary school children are also rising dramatically, with notable increases in the proportions of children achieving proficiency each year.

Even so, some critics point to continued weakness in high school test scores as a sign that Abbott funds are not paying off. But the job is not yet done: An education begins in preschool and continues through high school. Students now in high school did not have the benefit of Abbott resources in the early grades, while the first cohort of students supported by Abbott funds is still in elementary school. It will take a full 12-year cycle of education to see the first real results.

Meanwhile, consider the challenges that school leaders must address. They are expected to educate all students at a higher level; teach thousands with special needs, including English language learners; provide continuous training and support for teachers; pay competitive salaries and cover double-digit annual increases in the cost of health care, repair or replace buildings more than half a century old and equip them with new technologies.

How is all of this done with no new dollars? The cost of doing business is increasing, not decreasing. School leaders require additional funds simply to do ordinary business. And in Abbott districts, where principals and superintendents have to address issues like school violence before they can even hope to recruit better teachers and replace aging equipment, it is far too soon to cut the lifeline that Abbott funds offer.

To be sure, observers have fairly noted that there must be better accountability, equitable distribution of funds and better aid for districts that, though not Abbott-designated, cannot match the wealthiest districts' resources. But addressing these concerns does not require terminating Abbott funding. We can mend, but must not end, Abbott funding.

As the governor and legislators consider changing the way New Jersey funds its schools, they must recognize that the future of an entire generation is in their hands because New Jersey will set important precedents. Our leaders can and must create national models for ensuring equity in education funding, leading the way for 49 other states to meet King's challenges and make good on the founders' promise.

This investment will not only yield a better prepared work force but make New Jersey's young people ready for genuine citizenship. Our children deserve no less.

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