

**Corzine bungling school-funding crisis again**  
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Given a few days to rest and recuperate after the latest operation on his leg, Gov. Jon S. Corzine held a wide-ranging news conference at Drumthwacket this week, the sort of event that has come to define his governorship. The news conference was full of energy and ideas, with the governor speaking thoughtfully on a variety of issues and promising rapid progress on the most pressing of them.

At one point, Corzine said he would put forth an energy master plan, an anti-crime plan and a new school-funding formula in the six weeks between the November election and the end of the year.

This is heady stuff, or it would be if the governor and his staff had not so often fallen far short of their predicted goals and timetables. For all of Corzine's eloquence and his promises, the fact of the matter is that the governor's term thus far has not been defined by what he has done but by what he has left undone.

The school-funding formula is a perfect example of how the governor's great promise of responsible reform has been nullified by his hesitation and missteps.

Just months after taking office, Corzine forcefully inserted himself into the school-funding debate by appearing before the New Jersey Supreme Court to request that the state's 30 poorest districts — known as the Abbott districts and funded primarily through state aid — share in the state's belt-tightening efforts. The justices granted him his wish, largely, it seemed, because he promised to spend time reworking the state-aid formula and demanding more accountability from the Abbott districts themselves.

In announcing his decision to appear before the court, Corzine wrote that he was committed to a review of the entire school-funding system — one that will meet the needs of all students: "Our focus must be to get resources to the children, rather than to the districts. All disadvantaged students, no matter which district they attend, must have the benefit of sufficient fiscal resources to meet their needs. I believe with hard work and knowledgeable debate all of these goals can be met and a funding formula created that will be acceptable to all."

Corzine's promise, which seemed reinforced by his practice of putting the best minds to work on the state's thorniest issues, was welcomed by virtually everyone connected to the school-funding debate. Educators and parents have long decried the funding system, both for its inequities and its inadequacies. The Education Law Center, which brought the Abbott lawsuit, has long called for accountability reforms at both the state and district levels, and Corzine's pledge seemed to promise those sorts of wide-ranging changes.

The school funding formula was later made part of the Legislature's special session on tax reform; there was some interesting testimony but no action. And the governor seemed to have forgotten the matter entirely. He made no move to put the issue on the table for his second budget.

In fact, by the time he raised the issue last week, his timeline seemed more threatening than hopeful to longtime advocates. The issue is so complex and the state has got it wrong so often — and is, in the eyes of many, so far from being able even to collect the data necessary to determine what works and

what doesn't — that many advocates fear the governor simply will seek to push an unworkable solution through a lame duck Legislature.

Politics often have gotten in the way of sensible and equitable school-funding formulas, so it's reasonable for the governor to want to avoid the usual political turf wars. But in order to do that the right way, he needs first to get the public on board with a formula that makes sense to all of them, both the elderly taxpayers and the many parents with school-aged children. He can't do that without an exhaustive public debate.

The school-funding-formula crisis is an issue that deserves to be handled thoughtfully and well, just as the governor eloquently promised nearly two years ago. Instead, like so many critical issues facing the state, the entire effort threatens to be undone by the governor's clumsy, erratic and tentative maneuvering.