

## **Schools Revived by Special Aid in New Jersey Brace for New Formula**

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By WINNIE HU

PERTH AMBOY, N.J. — The Perth Amboy schools were once so impoverished that the teachers used yellowing textbooks, class sizes crept up to 35 students, and makeshift gyms were fashioned out of hallways and basements.

All that changed in the mid-1990s after the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in a landmark school equity case, *Abbott v. Burke*, that poor urban districts were entitled to spend as much on their students as wealthier suburban ones. The ruling triggered an influx of state aid to these so-called Abbott districts that in turn brought teaching assistants, computers and new textbooks by the crateful into bare-bones classrooms.

Perth Amboy teachers, elated by their sudden fortune, stamped every new purchase with “Abbott Funds” in red or black ink to show exactly how every dollar was being spent. Jane Edge, a former fourth-grade teacher who is now a district supervisor, remembers that her classroom was plastered with so many Abbott stamps that her students asked: “Who’s Abbott?”

“A really nice person,” she told them.

But under a new school financing law approved last month, the state’s 31 Abbott districts will no longer receive special financial consideration; under the current two-tiered financing system, the districts have come to receive a majority of state aid.

In preliminary projections, 22 Abbott districts — including some of the largest, Newark, Paterson, Camden— are scheduled to receive only the minimum increase of 2 percent next year even as some non-Abbott districts will receive as much as a 20 percent increase.

Among the Abbotts, Garfield fared the best with a 17 percent increase, followed by Union City, with 16 percent, and New Brunswick, with 12 percent, because these smaller districts have growing enrollments or currently spend less per student than the state considers necessary to provide an adequate education.

Many Abbott districts that are receiving minimal increases say they are bracing for staff layoffs and program cuts because the money will not begin to cover rising costs for teacher salaries and benefits, utilities, building insurance and instruction. These districts say that the new formula could roll back years of hard-won academic gains under the Abbott rulings, which

not only ensured additional resources but also put in place a host of regulations for smaller class sizes, literacy programs, early childhood development and social services for disadvantaged families.

“It’s absolutely a setback,” said Dennis Brunn, director of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee, which represents students and parents in the Abbott districts. “It’s more than just the Abbott districts saying, ‘We’re going to get less money, and so we have to be at the head of the line.’ It’s that the requirements and support for the education reforms under the Abbott regulations appear to be done away with.”

The education commissioner, Lucille E. Davy, said resources and regulations to support continued achievement were being built into the new formula. She said the department had been meeting with Abbott districts and drafting new regulations, which will be unveiled in the next few weeks. In contrast with the Abbott regulations, the new rules will apply to other districts as well and account for differences between districts.

“They will be far less prescriptive than we’ve had in the past,” Ms. Davy said. “It’s going to be allowing them more flexibility and local decision making.”

For the last decade, the Abbott system has been one of the most closely watched experiments in narrowing the achievement gap for poor and minority students. The sheer amount of state money poured into the Abbott districts — a total of \$37.7 billion since 1998 — has made them among the highest spending public school districts in the country. By 2004, the Abbott districts spent nearly \$5,000 more per student on average than non-Abbott districts.

Commissioner Davy said the new financing formula was intended to meet the needs of more children by directing money to poor students regardless of where they live. Critics of the Abbott system have said that districts in rural and suburban communities served families who are just as poor as those in the Abbotts, and needed the funds to serve them.

The new formula will apportion money to schools based largely on their enrollments and on the characteristics of their students, including family income, language ability and special academic needs.

Jerome C. Harris, chairman of the New Jersey Black Issues Convention, a coalition of 35 statewide African-American organizations, said that his group had heard “very deep concerns” from parents and community leaders in about half the 31 Abbott districts since the new financing law was passed. “It may be seen as a more fair formula, but I’m not certain it’s as effective in terms of educational outcome and making the kind of investment

New Jersey needs to make to continue making improvements,” he said.

In Elizabeth, the 22,000-student district will receive a 3 percent increase in state aid next year, faring slightly better than other Abbott districts. Even so, that translates into an additional \$7.6 million, or less than the \$12 million increase for the current year, according to district officials.

“The money won’t buy the same staff and programs I have in place this year,” said Pablo Muñoz, the superintendent. “That means I’m going to have to cut. I’m going to try my best to keep it away from the classroom, but eventually the money’s going to run out.”

The Paterson district faces a \$40 million to \$50 million shortfall in its projected \$537 million budget for 2008-9, said Laura Franklin, a district spokeswoman. The 27,000-student district, which will receive a 2 percent increase, is considering layoffs for the first time in several years after having already cut back on field trips and school supplies and reduced hours for summer school and recreation programs in the last two years. “The purse strings have been tightened, and tightened, and tightened,” she said.

Here in Perth Amboy, many school officials, teachers and parents view the new formula with skepticism and concern. John M. Rodecker, the superintendent, said that while the district was to receive an additional \$9.4 million in state aid next year, or a 9 percent increase, he expected future increases to be much smaller.

“It was enacted to keep everybody somewhat happy knowing that down the road there are going to be changes,” he said. “We’re concerned about the formula, that eventually we’re going to have to do more with less.”

Mr. Rodecker said it was difficult to overstate the impact of the Abbott decision on the Perth Amboy schools. The money not only ushered in an era of abundance but propelled a host of changes under the Abbott regulations that resulted in smaller class sizes, increased training for teachers, and expanded services like tutoring and literacy programs.

With the extras, the district’s budget has grown to \$160 million this year from \$41 million in 1991.

At the Edward J. Patten Elementary School, students have teaching assistants, math and language specialists, two nurses and two guidance counselors. Every classroom has at least 300 books, and a free program teaches parents how to read more effectively to their children.

This year, the school also opened a “book room” just for teachers to give them ready access to 4,500 textbooks and novels in English and Spanish for

their classes.

On a recent afternoon, a kindergarten class was learning about the value of money as the teacher, Shelly Gallanter, held up oversize paper cut-outs of coins.

“How much is a penny worth?” she asked.

“One cent,” a student answered.

Standing in the back of the classroom, Joyce DeFeo, the principal, pointed to the well-stocked bookshelves, the two computers, and the brightly colored posters on the walls — all of it paid for with Abbott money.

“It’s hard to look back at where we were,” Mrs. DeFeo said. “The Abbott money has made such a difference in the lives of these kids.”