Editorial: N.J. Schools

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Waiting too long

The New Jersey Supreme Court let Gov. Corzine off the hook when it refused to set a deadline for the state to ante up billions of dollars to build new schools in the state's poorest districts.

In a 6-0 ruling (Chief Justice Stuart Rabner did not participate), the court last week took a "wait and see" approach - giving Corzine time to fulfill a pledge to ask the Legislature to approve borrowing $2.5 billion for school construction.

Corzine - in a desperate attempt to head off more court intervention - promised that a bill would be introduced by this week. He also said he would help get the bill passed by June.

That seems overly optimistic. But parents, teachers and children stuck in dilapidated schools must hope that a promise made is a promise kept. That hasn't always been the case when it comes to school funding in New Jersey.

The court's decision Tuesday is a letdown for the 31 mostly urban, poor school districts that receive additional state aid under a series of state Supreme Court rulings in the *Abbott v. Burke* case.

This is the third time since 2005 that the court has turned down requests by the Education Law Center, on behalf of the Abbott schools, to order the state to immediately restart projects that stalled when money ran out.

The justices said the districts could return to court if the state falls short on its latest pledge.

The delay means disadvantaged children will have to wait that much longer for relief while lawmakers argue over how to come up with the money.

Convincing lawmakers to approve more borrowing amid New Jersey's continuing fiscal crunch will be no easy task.

The court could have forced swifter action by imposing a deadline on the state.

Corzine has good ammunition to make the case that the school repairs are desperately needed. He need only remind legislators - and the public - that New Jersey has a constitutional obligation to give all of its students a "thorough and efficient" education - and that includes providing them decent buildings.

In a 1998 Abbott ruling, the court ordered the state to improve aging and crumbling school facilities and the Legislature agreed to spend $8.6 billion. But a decade later, some districts are still waiting for their share.

A state agency created to oversee school construction mismanaged the projects. The fund was drained by 2005, leaving hundreds of projects unfinished.

A new agency is now in charge of school construction. But before any work begins again, the state must make sure it has the right safeguards in place to see that money is spent wisely and spenders are held accountable.

Corzine shouldn't come back seeking any more time to get the school construction program on track. Neither should the court grant further delays. Children have waited long enough for better schools.