

Closing the Gap

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BY MICHELLE FUETSCH

New Jersey's achievement gaps are the result of its failure to manage its collective wealth in a way that mitigates the effects of poverty on children.

THE BIBLE is wrong. If there's anything harder than getting a camel through the eye of a needle, it isn't getting a rich man to heaven.

It's getting the richest state in the nation to properly educate its poor children.

New Jersey has the highest median household income in the nation and, in the region, the lowest percentage of poor schoolchildren -- meaning resources are great, the burden relatively light.

Yet, decades after its Supreme Court first ordered the state to equalize educational opportunities, New Jersey's known nationally for some of the worst academic achievement gaps between poor and luckier youngsters.

On the latest federal achievement tests, poor fourth-graders in 15 other states -- including Kansas, where they're still duking it out over Darwin -- scored higher in reading than they did in New Jersey.

At the eighth-grade level on the same tests, only Connecticut had wider gaps in math and reading.

New Jersey's own state test results show spotty gains for some poor children and stagnant results for most.

So it's intriguing that Governor Corzine has said one of his goals this year is to improve schools in the state's urban districts. Wiping out billions in state debt with nickels and dimes from the tollbooths will be easier.

Corzine brushed off criticism last month that he rushed his new school funding formula through the Legislature and on to the state Supreme Court, where it awaits approval or rejection. He must know that the formula is just a starting point.

The Herculean task is convincing New Jerseyans -- unable to see past their property tax bills and dysfunctional urban school districts -- that their state ought to do more for poor schoolchildren. New Jersey's achievement gaps stem from its failure to manage its collective wealth to mitigate the effects of poverty on children.

New narrative

After decades of school reform across the country, we've got a clear picture of which educational strategies are misguided gimmicks and which improve the long-term academic performance of poor youngsters.

Before he can get to the strategies, though, Corzine has to change the narrative -- about dysfunction, wealth and poverty.

New Jersey's poverty burden is eminently more manageable than that of neighboring states. The school poverty rate here is only 27 percent, based on enrollment in the free and reduced-price lunch program.

Delaware's rate is 36 percent. But for years its poor kids -- without all-day kindergarten, let alone a preschool program like New Jersey's -- have been outscoring New Jersey's poor on the federal National Assessment of Educational Progress. New York State bears a staggering 44 percent school poverty rate, but its poor fourth-graders are only one point behind New Jersey's.

On the other side of the coin, New Jersey's wealth obscures its failures. As Corzine and others are touting, fourth-graders here posted the second highest overall reading score in the nation. But that's the wealth talking.

New Jersey has overwhelming numbers of well-off, well-educated parents, the strongest predictors of children's academic success. But New Jersey's poor fourth-graders posted a reading score 27 points behind that of other children.

New Jersey's wealth also makes it a profligate spender, like a guy with a lot of cash and no class, at risk of bankruptcy because he doesn't know how to manage money. What else to call some 600 school districts but excessive? In what kind of education system do voters vociferously defend their right to districts with only one or two schools, but blame state government for soaring property taxes?

If the Norwood and Northvale school districts consolidated tomorrow, they'd have to lure in Alpine to get four schools among them. The Moonachie school district has only 280 students; South Hackensack, even fewer.

Do these 600 small districts create a rush to an untalented bottom?

Nationwide today, great Super Bowl coaches are easier to find than great school superintendents. Worse yet, for a governor trying to improve the lot of poor children, an education system built on hundreds of small enclaves breeds a sense of entitlement impervious to pleas for a more communitarian sensibility.

Moral management

Whatever the state's fiscal problem, the Republican solution is always the same: Cut funds to the Abbotts -- meaning take money from poor, mostly minority children in the 31 school districts named for the court case on school funding equity.

If the Republicans look unseemly trying to take from the poor, Democrats look unsavory, perpetuating a Faustian bargain in urban school districts that reaps votes in exchange for ignoring administrative chaos and malfeasance. In Passaic, school board members pack the district payroll with relatives. In Jersey City until last month, Superintendent Charles Epps Jr. was a truant, serving in Trenton as a Democratic state assemblyman.

Once Corzine starts challenging the narrative, his best strategy for improving urban schools probably lies in his prodigious management skills and his moral compass.

Management -- when it's about meeting the needs of something as vulnerable as an impoverished child -- is a moral issue. To adequately educate poor children, Corzine has to make school management equitable -- something no state has been able to do in urban schools.

Children living in affluent school districts benefit from enough administrative oversight to prevent crumbs on the lunchroom floor. Meanwhile, poor children are corralled in hyper-segregated, economically ravaged school districts with chaotic management and inconsistent instruction.

If Corzine can change the equation, New Jersey will be light-years ahead of other states in improving the academic performance of poor children.

For all the talk about better teachers in urban schools, 97 percent of those in New Jersey's high-poverty areas are considered highly qualified under No Child Left Behind Act. The more precious commodities in urban districts are highly qualified administrators.

Lacking professional leadership, the best teachers move on to other school districts, while average teachers, with no path to further professional development, become cynical about the prospects for their students.

Buttressing DOE

Corzine ought to build a professional, centralized state Department of Education that can find and support a talented cadre urban administrators. What is more, the department needs sufficient staff and legal power to help the districts.

As it is, New Jersey exercises more oversight of its preschool program than it does of elementary and secondary education. That's why the state has never attracted top-flight school commissioners.

If better urban schools mean rewriting statutes and parts of the state constitution, so be it. It's the 21st century, time state legislators found the courage to come out from behind the home-rule flag and give urban districts more than a new funding formula.

It will take money to create a strong, engaged Department of Education that can underwrite and underpin urban districts. Good management doesn't come cheap.

Corzine has to convince New Jerseyans that the state has wealth enough to do better by poor schoolchildren. Beyond that, the governor's case for improving educational opportunities for poor children can be pedestrian and profound -- as pedestrian as choosing schools over prisons, and as profound as asking, to paraphrase Matthew, What is the richest state profited if it shall gain the whole world and lose its soul?