

## Needlessly Shortchanging Poor Children

*The Record*

Sunday, May 4, 2008

By LAWRENCE AARON

*Garfield City Manager Tom Duch said improvement in the district's scores has shown the effectiveness of Abbott funding.*

ATTORNEY GENERAL Anne Milgram wants the state Supreme Court to allow Governor Corzine's administration to bury Abbott school funding, even though others are arguing that there's a dire need for the 31 mostly urban districts affected to continue getting extra funding.

In an attempt to persuade the state's highest court to recognize the governor's school funding formula as an acceptable alternative, the administration has argued that gaps in per-pupil spending between Abbotts and the state's richest districts have closed.

Over the past decade, per-pupil spending in the Abbott districts rose 72 percent, giving the administration ammunition to contend that additional Abbott funding is no longer needed. Administration officials argue that many districts that have poor kids intermingled with affluent kids also deserve additional funding.

But Corzine's rationale in shortchanging the Abbott districts is mostly about saving money. And the long-range impact of pulling the rug out from under Abbott would be to send the poor districts back to square one.

Of Bergen County's 78 school districts, Garfield is the only Abbott district. It's not clear, however, why Garfield is an Abbott district.

The Garfield school district compares favorably with the state's average poverty. Statewide, 10.9 percent of children under 17 live below the poverty level. In Garfield, that figure is 9.6 percent.

That's in contrast with Paterson, at 28.8 percent, Newark, at 35.9 percent, and the average Abbott district, which counts 27.5 percent of its kids below the poverty level.

It is clear that Garfield is not like the Abbotts in neighboring Passaic County. The district is financially much better off and may not need the extra cash.

If the state really needs to save money on school funding, perhaps the administration can begin by cutting extraordinary aid to Garfield and other Abbott districts that don't need the funding as badly as the poorest among them. There are more creative ways to stretch the budget that could avoid killing Abbott completely, which seems to be the governor's goal. Corzine should find a way to balance the budget other than on the backs of kids from the most impoverished districts.

The Education Law Center, the longtime advocate for Abbott district students, filed a response Wednesday to Corzine's petition to the court, which seeks to override the Supreme Court rulings that established the Abbott system. The center is correct in criticizing the state for not adequately studying the effectiveness of Abbott money before making a move to cut it off.

"There's no evidence that the Abbott districts don't need all of these resources," center director David Sciarra said this week. "This formula is merely a throwback to the 1970s, in the sense that the state reduces the amount of state aid it gives to the Abbott districts, particularly beginning in the second year. Abbott has been vilified totally unfairly. ... It's not as though the Legislature got a study from the Department of Education."

I agree that the Corzine plan is too arbitrary. It was rushed through the Legislature too quickly. Where is the evidence that the plan is better or will serve Abbott districts as well? Corzine is caving in to fiscal pressures and to wealthier districts unhappy with their state aid levels.

A friend-of-the-court brief the American Civil Liberties Union filed on behalf of urban mayors argues that education burdens ultimately fall on cities obliged to make up the shortfall or find funding sources for school programs. Mayors of Passaic and Paterson signed on to the amicus brief challenging Milgram. Garfield did not.

But Garfield City Manager Tom Duch said improvement in the district's scores has shown the effectiveness of Abbott funding.

"We are deeply concerned about any change in the funding that would result in a decrease in aid to the Garfield school system," Duch said.

The Corzine administration may have advanced a legal argument for ending Abbott, but it should have studied how such a move might affect the state's poorest children.