

DISPATCHES: Keep Public Schools Public

By Hank Kalet, Managing Editor

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Bret Schundler may be the state's leading proponent of school vouchers.

The former Jersey City mayor, who twice ran unsuccessfully for governor, has been an outspoken advocate for using public money to help pay private-school tuition. And if newly sworn-in Gov. Chris Christie has his way, Mr. Schundler will be the state's new education commissioner.

With this appointment, it seems pretty clear the governor is not just firing a warning shot at the New Jersey Education Association, the state's teachers union. He is making it clear he plans to push one of the conservative establishment's pet causes during his four-year term in office.

"We agree on the type of significant reform that needs to happen in our educational system here in New Jersey," he said in announcing his education choice last week (The New York Times). "I want a strong, reasonable, bold leader who's going to help me implement those policies."

Advocates for school vouchers say they create competition among schools and improve education for all students. The theory is, by giving low-income parents a portion of the money that otherwise would go to their public school, they will be able to pay tuition so their children can attend better private or parochial schools. The threat of losing students — and money — then would spur the public schools to improve, improving quality for all students.

That's the theory. The reality is few studies show any improvement in the classroom and, in those that do, the improvements were what many of the studies called "modest."

Studies of the handful of cities that have experimented with vouchers have been inconclusive — studies can be found both to support and refute the conservative argument that vouchers improve test scores and education. And some studies have shown vouchers encourage self-segregation in urban areas with minorities gravitating toward members of their own groups while doing nothing to fix the de facto segregation, which occurs across district and municipal lines.

Just as importantly, voucher programs drain money from public schools, draw the best students and lack real accountability to the people whose tax money is being used. Remember, private schools, whether secular or religious, are not restricted by tight public budgets or required to make room for all students.

Democrats, who control both houses of the state Legislature, have signaled they are willing to listen to Mr. Schundler. But most also remain skeptical of vouchers, which could set up a confrontation during the confirmation process.

This would be a good thing. While Gov. Christie never made a secret of his antipathy toward the

teachers union or his support for school choice programs, education reform was never front and center during the campaign.

The Schundler confirmation hearings offer an opportunity for a robust discussion about the future of public schools, about how he thinks vouchers fit in to his conception of improved education and to defend himself against critics who — rightly, as I see it — view vouchers as more likely to further divide us, shut out those with the fewest resources and transfer public money into religious institutions.

My feeling is vouchers will not improve our educational system. Market principles do not apply in every situation, especially those like education that are a public good that must be available at a high quality to all.

If we are serious about improving public education — and keeping it public — we have to spend the money to train and hire good teachers, to reduce class sizes, to bring older schools into the 21st century, to build new schools where needed and to provide up-to-date texts and equipment.

We can't do that, of course, if we continue to tie our tax money up in ill-conceived wars and bailouts of the financial sector.

Hank Kalet is managing editor of the South Brunswick Post and The Cranbury Press. E-mail, hkalet@centraljersey.com