

NJ Planning a Radical Rethink of Schools

By Rita Giordano
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In a call for change that has raised eyebrows within the New Jersey education community, Gov. Christie's transition advisors have recommended expanding the number of charter schools, re-evaluating hundreds of education regulations and radically tightening eligibility for high-schoolers applying to the NJ STARS college-tuition program.

That's just a start. The education transition subcommittee, in a recent 25-page report, suggested Christie think about stripping the state Board of Education of policy powers. Ditto for the state Council on Higher Education.

And in a move that snapped union members to attention, it floated the idea of tying teacher and principal raises to student performance and requiring teachers to work five years, up from three, before they can get tenure.

What the naming of Bret Schundler, the political maverick and conservative school-choice champion, as state education commissioner strongly suggested, the subcommittee's recommendations solidified:

The Christie Administration plans a radical rethink of the public education system.

"That's the point," said Christie spokesman Mike Drewniak.

The report - which is advisory, not indicative of definite policies the governor will pursue - has both delighted and concerned interested parties.

Much of it calls for further study. And to enact some changes, legislation would be required. That takes time.

"Overall, we think it's pretty good and it's pretty tuned in to many of the educational needs of the local districts," said Lynne Strickland, executive director of the Garden State Coalition of Schools, which represents about 100 districts, many in South Jersey.

A number of her group's recommendations made it into the report, Strickland said, including reviewing regulations adopted over recent years, relaxing some paperwork requirements for high-performing schools, and taking a critical look at funded and unfunded education mandates.

Among the mandates the subcommittee would like assessed are paid time off for teachers to attend New Jersey Education Association conferences and the requirement that districts join the New Jersey School Boards Association.

"We don't object to them looking at us because we provide a service," said School Boards Association spokesman Frank Belluscio.

However, officials with the education association, which represents most of the state's teachers, strongly objects to several recommendations.

One would give districts back the right to impose a 'best last offer' in the case of stalled teachers' contract talks.

Before the law to disallow the practice - passed during the McGreevey Administration - strikes were not uncommon, education association spokesman Steve Baker said. Since then, he said, "we've settled every contract at the table."

The report appears to support merit pay for teachers based on student performance, which the association argues has not been proven to improve education quality and could even undermine it.

"There's real concern it would create a more competitive than collaborative environment" among teachers, Baker said.

One thing he did find encouraging, Baker said, was the value the report's authors placed on preschool as opposed to "what happened in the campaign," when Christie chided Gov. Corzine's support of preschool, likening it to baby-sitting.

"We hope [the subcommittee's position] reflects the feeling of the administration," Baker said.

Despite its praise for early-childhood education, the report recommended delaying expansion of the preschool program due to current fiscal constraints.

That doesn't sit well with David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, which has long advocated for the state's urban and low-income districts.

"We will continue to press for full implementation of the preschool as enacted in the funding formula," Sciarra said.

The report recommended a review of that formula, which Corzine pushed hard and was adopted in 2008. The panelists said they wanted to see if the education funding system could be made more efficient.

The subcommittee members are no fans of the Department of Education bureaucracy, which they called "complex, duplicative, and inefficient." The entire state "education enterprise" needs to be evaluated, they contend.

They recommended more consolidation, regionalization and service-sharing, another Corzine goal. They also called for putting a hold on new programs and rules and doing an immediate 90-day assessment of education spending with an eye for waste.

Not surprisingly, given Christie's campaign promises, the subcommittee wants the state to develop "a robust offering of charter schools and private school options." The group called for five to 10 new charters to open in the fall; as many as eight are already in the works.

It also advocated school-choice legislation to allow students to attend public schools outside their home districts and a bill that would give corporations tax breaks for supporting scholarships to lower-income students.

Some proposals, if pursued, are sure to cause public outcry. For example, the subcommittee recommended severely cutting the popular NJ STARS scholarship program that gives high-performing students the chance to attend community college tuition-free.

The benefit - now extended to those in the top 15 percent of their high school class - should be limited to the top two or five percent, the subcommittee suggested. Before the current school year, the top 20 percent of graduates were eligible.

Also suggested was cutting the benefit itself. NJ STARS II students - who until recently could earn four-year degrees tuition-free after completing community college in the first NJ STARS program - would have to pony up even more of their tuition. The subcommittee cited state budgetary considerations.

Jacob Farbman, spokesman for the New Jersey Council of County Colleges, said no action should be taken until STARS enrollment this academic year can be analyzed. If the new lower benefit sharply reduced the number of qualified students attending, another cut could be false economy, he suggested.

"Look at the number of kids who can go to college because of NJ STARS," Farbman said. "If they get out of school and they're debt-free, they can immediately contribute to the state economy."

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