

Education Commissioner Bret Schundler Addresses Local Crowd and Protestors About Controversial Education Initiatives

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PHOTO BY SANDY STUCKI

Education Commissioner Bret Schundler talked to a group of teachers and protestors unhappy with state budget cuts and reform proposals on May 24 at the Wanaque Golden Age Club. Schundler gained notoriety for previously endorsing a voucher program when he was mayor of Jersey City. The teachers came from districts like Hawthorne, Oakland and Paterson to confront the education commissioner.

On Monday evening, teachers from throughout North Jersey awaited the arrival of Education Commissioner Bret Schundler in the borough, wanting to give him a piece of their minds.

With signs saying "We're not the problem" and "Save our Schools," they instead encountered a commissioner willing to engage them on issues that have become contentious and at times downright confrontational throughout the state.

Schundler, whose history includes being the former mayor of Jersey City and backing a controversial voucher program in the 1990s, was invited by Wanaque council candidate Ed Leonard, who worked with him back in Jersey City over a decade ago, to speak to the Republican Club at the Golden Age Club on May 24.

After personally addressing and answering the questions and comments from the crowd of protestors outside the Golden Age Club, Schundler turned his attention to answering the local residents' concerns inside the building.

His speech focused on what he called "very financially-troublesome times," and touched upon endorsing the second round of the Race to the Top grant, while talking about the state of education in the school.

The Race to the Top grant is a federal initiative that will give money to states that encourage several reforms in education. Among these reforms are calls for merit pay, which has been a contentious issue with the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA).

The local teachers' unions throughout the state didn't endorse the first round of the program, and are often blamed for New Jersey not being one of the several states selected. New Jersey was looking at a potential \$400 million from the Race to the Top grant.

Schundler felt that the Race to the Top is not a "financial issue," since the reforms could be done without spending money. Schundler touched upon how the merit pay would affect teachers who help to close the achievement gaps for previous classes, and reward teachers that are highly effective.

"Everything in education is always controversial, but the merit pay shouldn't be as controversial," Schundler said.

Schundler also talked about the so-called millionaires' tax, which he estimated would collect roughly \$900 million if passed and would last nine months. Gov. Christie vetoed the previous attempt the Legislature passed.

However, Schundler said that someone who makes that kind of money in New Jersey is usually a business owner, and felt that the money gained from a millionaires' tax could be negated by business owners leaving the state and taking jobs and revenue with them.

"I fear we can't solve the problem by increasing taxes," Schundler said. "If we keep on raising taxes, unemployment will increase."

Educating the education commissioner

Several residents remained skeptical about Schundler's appearance to the borough and came to the meeting to talk about their concerns. Barry Hain, an educator for 37 years, said he feels that the Wanaque School System has done an excellent job educating its children, and the current budget cuts have "decimated the town."

Resident Grace Maiello, a former Board of Education trustee, said that the current budget process is "appalling" and the state needs to "wake up to the issues."

"Children come first," Maiello said.

Ringwood resident Marilyn Dondero, a member of the Ringwood Education Association and teacher for over 43 years, came to hear Schundler's opinion on charter schools and how this might help New Jersey. She was "disappointed" with the current state administration and felt it is "misguided."

Deborah Greenspan, a local resident and special education teacher in Paterson, had a number of concerns from both an educational viewpoint and as a parent, mostly about how the new proposals will benefit the children and if the taxpayers will pay the price.

"With merit pay, who will be the evaluators?" Greenspan asked. "This is the field I want to be in."

Greenspan asked Schundler if special education children ought to be evaluated on the same level as regular children. Schundler said that the federal No Child Left Behind Act ought to be revised, and that it is an "inappropriate" evaluation system.

I want to see the kind of learning growth the special education child is doing," Schundler said. "We can't make an evaluation without data, but we need to look at what the data means as well."

One resident asked what the current administration can do to help out with the future budgets and said that eliminating superintendents ought to be something that the administration should look at.

An example brought up was the fact that Wanaque School District and Lakeland Regional High School (LRHS) in Wanaque are both expected to lose a superintendent. One of the ideas was that the two districts should consolidate into one through shared services, with the elimination of the extra superintendents and administrators if needed.

Schundler said that ways to create "economies of scale" ought to be looked at, but the current state regulations create disincentives for mergers.

On smugness and sacrifice

Resident Linda Martin said that the state's education system is the one of the top in the nation. She asked Schundler why he said it was only doing "fairly well" and whether he's asking the state to "decimate" the current school system.

Schundler said that residents should be proud that New Jersey is committed to the education system but they shouldn't accept the status quo. He cited a 1967 study done by James Samuel Coleman, which found a correlation between parental wealth and educational status.

"New Jersey should be number one according to this study," Schundler said. "I think a lot of good stuff is going on, but why aren't all schools doing well?"

Jaime Landis, the local Republican Club president and a teacher in Paterson, wanted Schundler to pass along a message to Gov. Christie that she felt that although the teachers are their own worst enemy and need to sacrifice as well, the governor's attitude was "smug" on April 20 after many budgets were defeated. She said Christie should have been solemn after voters defeated more than half of all the school district budgets.