

# N.J. has allowed schools to become mediocre

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As the governor signed documents closing down state government, it must have been clear to all citizens of New Jersey that something is very wrong with the way tax revenues are spent in the service of the people. Our state is one of only 10 states with budget deficits. Forty states have surpluses and, unlike New Jersey, they are trying to figure out what to do with the excess funds rather than what to cut.

How did we get into this fix? The short answer is that since the progressive Kean administration, Jerseyans have had ineffectual and incompetent leaders in Trenton. Gov. Jon S. Corzine is trying his best to pick up the pieces of a failed system of governance. For the past 20 years or so, spending, waste and patronage have all ballooned. Do we get any more services with the increased spending? No! In many instances, we are the recipients of fewer services.

Consider real estate taxes. About 60 percent of local taxes go to education. Regardless of what the New Jersey Education Association self-promotion ads state, our kids essentially get the same level of education as those of earlier generations. The school budgeting process is designed to minimize the input of parents or taxpayers. If the taxpayers vote down a budget, local elected officials referee between the two sides and decide what the final budget is to become. Of course, whereas the taxpayer is immune to the political power of the NJEA, the mayors and town councils are not.

Public schools have become the domain of paper-pushers and the mediocre. Good teachers, of which there are many, cannot survive a system where covering one's behind rules the day. Endless rules exist at all levels of administration to assure funding. While the causes of present-day problems run from the local to the federal level, a large fraction of the problems are due to a very rigid union system whose primary purpose is to safeguard its power and make certain that teachers stay in line and not make waves with innovative and student-oriented ideas — one teacher that makes another look lazy or ineffective is in real trouble, even if tenured.

And that leads to the fundamental rule of tenure. With three years of average service, a teacher is tenured for life. Why? The reasons given are many: to withstand the pressures of overbearing parents, to be protected from tyrant principals, are two. It used to be that tenure protected teachers that were once patronage appointments and thus were easily fired (a century ago), and tenure compensated teachers for their minimal wages.

Teachers need to be paid a good wage because they do something very important. But today teachers start at a decent salary and work their way up to quite high salaries. All this for a 9-month working year and no chance of being fired. Why this sector of our society should be immune from supply and demand and rewards for exceptional efforts and successes is beyond understanding. How can the school system self-correct if the majority of the staff cannot be fired for almost any reason? How can the school system be improved if those who pay the bills can be ignored?

Therefore, there are many reasons why the public school systems are at best marginal for the average student. Even with the best intentions of the administrations and teachers, the system is very rigid.

What kind of system would be an improvement over the current one? Perhaps a system that retains some of the protections that teachers need, but also draws the best lessons from a free-market economy, where initiative, hard work and success are rewarded. The school system is a protected system where salary and benefits are almost independent of initiative, hard work and success. Human nature tells us that such a system is doomed to fail. We know this from all the failed socialist economic systems.

In my next essay, I will suggest a school system where the parents will have the ultimate power of choosing the schools that they view as best for their children. Schools will need to meet standards, and those that succeed will become more attractive to parents. Weaker-performing schools will need to fire those that cannot do what needs to be done or are unwilling to put in the efforts required. Excellent teachers and administrators will be rewarded with bonuses and higher salaries. Today this cannot happen. The excellent teacher is not rewarded. The key to such a

system will be to give all parents an equal financial ability to select their "public" school, and to hold each school accountable to those parents. More next time.

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