



Home | Newsroom | Media | Administration | NJ's Priorities | Contact Us

Press Releases | Public Addresses | Executive Orders | Press Kit | Reports

Home > Newsroom > Press Releases > 2010 > In Case You Missed It: New York Post – “Christie's Approach...Is The Only Way To Bring Spending In Line.”

## In Case You Missed It: New York Post – “Christie's Approach...Is The Only Way To Bring Spending In Line.”

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Yes, There's Bloat In NJ's Schools  
Steven Malanga  
New York Post  
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Gov. Chris Christie is trying to solve New Jersey's chronic budget problems by cutting spending, including state aid to local schools. But the state's powerful teacher unions and many school boards are balking -- claiming that this will either drive up local property taxes or result in devastating cuts to school services.

In fact, there's plenty of fat to cut. For proof, just take a close look at the recent hiring and spending patterns of Jersey's school districts: Both hiring and spending have risen far faster than can be justified by the mild growth in enrollment. Thus, most should have plenty of room to cut spending without major impact.

Given the state's chronic budget woes, the schools' hiring spree defies logic. Since 2001, just as budget problems began in earnest, public-school enrollment in Jersey has risen by less than 3 percent, or slightly more than 36,000 students. But total school hiring (full-time employees and equivalents) has jumped by 14 percent, or nearly 28,000 employees, according to federal Census statistics.

That's right: Jersey's schools have added three-quarters of an employee for every new student -- during a period of deep fiscal pain for the state. Most of the new hires were teachers -- which is more than one new instructional worker for every two new students.

The hiring spree, along with rich benefit increases, has fueled payrolls. Wage costs alone have increased 43 percent since 2001 -- well ahead of the inflation rate plus enrollment growth.

But the real budget-buster has been health and pension costs. Between 2001 and 2006 (the latest year data are available), total benefit costs rose by a whopping 115 percent, adding several billion dollars to school costs.

After this runup, outlays are now a whopping \$16,000 per student, nearly 60 percent above the national average. Jersey already was a leader in this spending category back in 2001; the spending spree has widened the gap, at great taxpayer cost.

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Jersey now has the highest combined state and local tax burden in the country -- yet has been in an almost perpetual budget crisis since 2001.

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But the tax hikes didn't solve the budget crisis. The key reason: As the above data suggest, the spending hasn't slowed.

If anything, the numbers suggest that Christie's approach, which is to finally start weaning local schools off continual increases in state aid, is the only way to bring spending in line.

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