

In Case You Missed It "Christie worked so hard to avoid reductions in state aid to New Jersey's public schools"

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Bret Schundler: School aid cuts unavoidable during N.J. budget crisis

By Bret Schundler

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Gov. Chris Christie has been criticized for cutting spending to close this year's massive state budget deficit. In truth, it was the only option he had.

If the governor had done nothing, the state would have run out of money before this current fiscal year is over. If the governor had raised taxes, people would have been hurt and an accelerated exodus of jobs and residents from New Jersey would have made our state's financial problems worse. Cutting spending was the governor's only option.

What pleases me, as New Jersey's acting commissioner of education, is that Christie worked so hard to avoid reductions in state aid to New Jersey's public schools.

Spending on education makes up well more than 40 percent of combined state and local spending in New Jersey - and there is no way you can close a massive state budget deficit without touching spending for education. But the governor made deep cuts in all other areas of the state budget so he could keep aid to New Jersey's school districts flowing to the maximum extent possible. As a result, the reduced state aid going to our school districts this year amounts to less than 2 percent of their total spending.

To ensure that this reduction of state aid to school districts didn't force districts to lay off teachers or eliminate programs in the middle of a school year, the governor allowed me to withhold aid only where a school district had more than enough in its surplus and reserve accounts to offset an aid reduction. As a result, all of our school districts will be able to finish this year without any adverse consequences, and most still have remaining surpluses and reserves.

What about the new fiscal year - when the state faces an \$11 billion budget deficit? Will state aid to school districts need to be slashed?

Not if the governor can help it. He has every single department of state government working to reduce its budget for the fiscal year ahead so that the state can close its budget deficit without a substantial decrease in total aid to school districts.

Keeping state aid flat from year to year may not be possible. The Corzine administration funded approximately 13 percent of this year's state aid to school districts with a one-time revenue source - New Jersey's federal stimulus dollars. We won't have that money next year. To keep total state aid to school districts at the same level next year as it was this year, we will need to take over \$1 billion from other state programs at a time when the state is already facing a massive deficit. We are trying hard to accomplish this difficult objective - but it may not be possible.

The Corzine administration knew how strained the state's finances would be in the fiscal year that begins this coming July and encouraged school districts to be prepared for the possibility of diminished aid. For some time now, districts across New Jersey have been preparing for the possibility of state aid being reduced by 5 percent, 10 percent or 15 percent. This is a prudent and responsible thing for districts to do, and that is why Christie and I have endorsed these actions. But it is the governor's hope that total state aid to school districts will not have to be decreased drastically - that we will be able to find enough savings in other areas of the budget to be able to maintain it at a consistent level.

If we can at least get close to our goal, and if legislators and educators will support us as we work to provide school districts new ways to stretch their available resources to the fullest, our children will be the winners.

Bret Schundler is Gov. Chris Christie's nominee to be commissioner of the Department of Education.

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