

**Address of Governor Christine Todd Whitman
to the
New Jersey State Legislature
concerning the
State of the State**

January 11, 1996

Before I begin my formal address this afternoon, I want to take a moment to say a few "thank you's."

Earlier this week, we weathered quite a storm. The efforts of our state and local road crews, our Department of Transportation, the National Guard, the New Jersey State Police, and other emergency management personnel were extraordinary. Their dedication was something to see. I know I speak for everyone in New Jersey when I say how grateful we are for their efforts.

We can say, with real pride, that our state is in good hands with people like them on the job.

I also want to thank all the people of our state for their patience and cooperation during this emergency. That cooperation made it easier to clear our streets and highways and get New Jersey back on the road again.

It has also put us in good shape to face the next winter storm, which, if the weather forecasts are right, could be just around the corner. I know everyone will continue to pull together no matter what comes our way.

Finally, I want to express a word of appreciation to the news media. Your efforts to keep New Jerseyans fully informed about the situation were extremely important, and I want you to know how much I value your contribution as well.

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, distinguished members of the Legislature, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I want to begin this State of the State Address by congratulating the returning legislators and welcoming the new members. You are serving in a rewarding and demanding arena. The challenges will be many, and the thanks few. But never doubt that your work is important. What you do here will help prepare our state for the next century.

Let me also congratulate the new Speaker of the General Assembly from Salem County, Jack Collins.

Jack. I know that you will do as fine a job as Speaker as you have done representing the 3rd district for the past decade. I look forward to working with you, and with Senate President Don DiFrancesco, in the session ahead.

As I look around this Chamber, I realize we've come a long way together in two years.

When I ran for Governor, mothers and fathers, friends and neighbors were reeling under the heavy burden of high taxes.

I'm happy to say that together we have reversed that trend. As of ten days ago, income tax rates for most New Jerseyans are now a full 30 percent lower than they were just two years ago.

And our tax cuts are working.

Since I took office in January of 1994, New Jersey has gained a net increase of 117,000 jobs. And while we can't stop corporate downsizing, we can continue to create a climate that ensures that lost jobs are replaced with others. We must add to the opportunity for work.

That's important, but we need to continue to move forward.

So today, I am going to take the traditional State of the State speech in a new direction. Usually, I would reflect on the past year's achievements and the challenges that lie ahead. But this year you can read all about them in this book and on the Internet.

I want to discuss with you only one issue -- the one issue that will determine, more than any other, what kind of a place New Jersey will be in the 21st century.

I'm speaking, of course, about the education of New Jersey's children.

No issue we confront this year will be more challenging or more important than our efforts to provide every New Jersey child with a world-class education.

No one in this room can argue that our system does not need help. No one can claim that we are giving young people every opportunity to lead a productive and fulfilling life. And no one can say that we are meeting all our obligations to our children.

We all know we have some excellent schools in New Jersey. Unfortunately, far too many of our children don't have access to them.

They venture forth from high school unable to read and comprehend a job application. Some barely have the math skills to make change for a dollar. Others communicate so poorly they can't make themselves understood.

It is not long before these young adults see a future of bleak despair. A job, if they ever get one, will be at the lowest end of the economic scale and will never move them closer to the dream of owning a home or supporting a family.

They think they have been cheated of their future -- and they have been.

I have seen the schools that are sending students like these out their doors.

At some of them, it's obvious why students are not learning. At others, the reasons are not as apparent. The results are discouraging in both cases.

But this grim picture can be changed. There are examples of educational excellence and innovation here in New Jersey that can help guide us where we ought to be going.

Come with me for a moment to a school where every classroom has a full complement of computers that students -- starting in kindergarten -- use with confidence as an integrated part of their learning.

A school where parents can call every night to find out by voice mail what their children's homework assignments are for that evening.

A school whose faculty is as engaged and excited about increasing their own knowledge as the students are about pursuing their education.

We have schools like this in New Jersey. I've visited them. And it doesn't cost a fortune to run them.

In fact, some of these schools are within an hour's drive of this chamber -- and they are spending less than the state per pupil average.

But these schools are the exception. We must make them the rule.

The reasons why are simple.

We live in a world increasingly driven by technology. The ability to understand and manage information is becoming critically important. This much is clear: our children will not be able to succeed in the economy of the next century if their education doesn't even meet the standards of this century.

Having visited a number of new and expanding businesses, I have seen the dominant role technology is playing -- from making air conditioners to making mortgages.

Earning ability is closely linked to education. The average high school graduate earns more than twice as much a month as the average high school dropout. Over the course of their careers, high school graduates will earn in excess of \$200,000 more than those who have not graduated. And a diploma helps give them the confidence to continue to achieve in life.

Obviously, a lack of education closes doors, while education itself is the gateway to a successful career. Education also builds a productive and successful state.

Each child we challenge and empower in the classroom is a child we keep away from the temptations and seductions of the streets.

But that should only be a minimum goal. Every piece of evidence -- empirical, anecdotal, and historical -- convinces me that the future prosperity of our state depends on the richness of the education we provide to our students.

The quality of life in this state tomorrow will be directly determined by the quality of education we provide to our children today.

Now, we are all familiar with our state's history of attempting to provide a "thorough and efficient" education to our children. For the past 20 years, funding for our system has been under challenge. We have been ordered to equalize spending between our 30 special needs districts and our wealthiest districts.

Through a lack of any better measurement, we have reduced the goal of educational equity to spending parity alone.

New Jersey has been going 'round in circles on this issue for two decades. People of good will have argued on all sides, but to no avail.

Governors and legislators have come and gone -- yet this problem remains. Three branches of government have wrestled with the issue -- and we still don't have a solution.

Somewhere along the way, our children have been lost in the shuffle.

Clearly, we take education seriously in this state. Just look at how much we spend on it.

Over the past 15 years, total school spending in New Jersey has jumped from \$3 billion a year to about \$11 billion a year, nearly a 400 percent increase. That's almost three times the growth in the rate of inflation for that same period.

Since 1970, the growth in New Jersey's education spending has outpaced every other state in the union. Today, we spend more per pupil than anyone else.

Yet, our state colleges and universities spend \$40 million a year just to teach entering students the skills they should have had before they received their high school diplomas.

It has become increasingly clear that making a direct link between high spending and high achievement leads to a false conclusion. A great deal more goes into a successful education than an expansive spending program.

Let me point out that the district with the highest average SAT scores in the state -- Holmdel in Monmouth County -- spends below the state average. Of the 25 highest spending districts in the state, only five are among the highest achieving.

And despite the fact that we have enabled our special needs districts to spend more than the state average and 80 percent above the national average, the combined SAT scores in those districts last year was a dismal 718.

That's not just proof that we are failing the children in these districts. It also proves that money alone does not equal learning.

On the other side of the equation, we can point to districts that produce solid academic results while spending below the state average.

These districts, which include Fort Lee, South Brunswick, and Pitman, are delivering a thorough and efficient education.

Obviously, if there was a direct link between spending and learning, New Jersey students would consistently outperform students in classrooms around America. But they do not.

That is why I am committed to changing the way New Jersey defines and measures educational achievement.

That is why I am committed to improving the way we deliver a "thorough and efficient" education to our children.

And that is why I am asking you today to fundamentally change a system that has not served anyone well. Not students, not teachers, not parents, and not taxpayers.

Let me tell you at the outset: change will not be easy.

We must expect opposition from those who benefit from the status quo.

There is one group, however, whose voices will not be raised. The one group this matters to the most. The one group that has the most to lose if we do not act. Our children.

They are why we must head in a new direction.

We must stop chasing dollars and start creating scholars. Educational equality will only come when we commit ourselves to educational quality for all our students.

At the heart of our efforts are core curriculum standards. I called for them when I was running for Governor, and I feel even more strongly now that they are essential to improving education.

If we want our students to compete successfully with their peers at home and abroad -- in Asia as well as Arizona, Europe as well as Utah -- we must define what we expect them to learn.

And we will not settle for setting the bar low. We must expect all of our students, including those who are now doing relatively well, to aim higher and do better. By the end of the century, they must be able to take their place, not just at the head of America's class, but at the head of the world's class.

If we encourage our children to reach beyond what's comfortable -- to take on the tough stuff -- we will instill the discipline that comes from mastering difficult subjects.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." We are defining core subjects that will foster those abilities and provide our students with the full opportunity to succeed in the next millennium.

Since the start of this administration, we have been working with groups of teachers, school board members, business leaders, professors, and taxpayers to define what children should know in eight core subjects.

Last week, these groups shared the standards they produced with the State Board of Education. After Education Commissioner Klagholz makes his formal recommendations next month, the Board will hold public hearings before finalizing them.

I urge everyone to keep actively involved in this process. To date, we have held a total of 70 public forums in every part of the state to discuss this important issue.

Thousands of citizens have made their views known. Now, all of us together must ensure that the standards represent the highest academic expectations we can possibly set.

But once the standards are in place, we will give our schools the flexibility they need to meet them. Our emphasis will be on progress, not process.

In the meantime, the Department of Education will revise our testing system to measure student achievement on the new standards.

No student should be permitted to graduate without meeting those standards. High school diplomas should be worth more than the paper they're printed on.

For the first time, we will fundamentally redefine what we expect students to learn when they attend schools in New Jersey.

Of course, we must also fund the delivery of this new curriculum in every one of our school districts.

We have the responsibility to make certain that every school district has the resources necessary to do its job. Parents expect it. The Constitution requires it. And common sense demands it.

Some have suggested that the state of education in New Jersey represents a serious problem for my administration and this Legislature. I do not agree.

What we have now is an opportunity to make fundamental change and lead our education system in a truly new direction. In reality, we are not talking solely, or even mainly, about money. Already nearly one-third of the state's budget supports New Jersey's public schools. That commitment is a given. We are talking about the future of our children.

Toward this end, I want to state the principles I believe should guide our efforts.

First, we must reject the notion that education will improve if every district spends the maximum amount possible. Instead, we should enact meaningful reforms -- reforms that will enable each school district to educate our children well and spend each dollar wisely.

We have to address this question: "What must each district spend to provide a system of education that is both thorough and efficient?"

Specifically, we must define the programs, services, materials, and staffing that are needed to enable students to achieve the high standards we will set for them. Only then can we figure out how much it will cost to provide those things.

Second, we must not ignore or forget that the word "efficient" is an equal part of the Constitutional requirement.

As we equalize spending across school districts, we cannot continue to tolerate expenditures that support duplication, inefficiency, excess, and waste. That's not good management. It's not good government. And it doesn't make for good education.

Third, we must help New Jersey's more than 600 school districts reduce costs and use a greater proportion of available dollars for instruction. Over the past two years, we ranked forty-sixth of the fifty states in the proportion of education dollars that reach the classroom.

We can improve that number by rewarding efficiency and penalizing waste.

And we can do it by providing incentives for regional coordination, so that districts can increase their efficiency by joining with others to share transportation routes, business services, food services, and the like.

Fourth, we must return to local voters the authority to accept or reject inefficient or excessive spending by their local districts.

In the two years prior to this administration, the Department of Education restored 94 percent of school budget increases rejected by voters as unjustified hikes to their property taxes.

I am pleased to report that, by 1995, we were able to cut that proportion to 27 percent. To the greatest extent possible, local property tax rates should be within the control of local voters.

And, as we move forward, we must do so for all districts in our state, not just the poorest and not just the wealthiest. The more than 300 districts that are neither wealthy nor poor must not be squeezed from both ends.

Fifth, for inspiration and example we must look to the school districts that are already providing a thorough and efficient education.

Districts like Pittsgrove in Salem County, a leader statewide in contracting out financial and support services, and arranging cross-district purchasing.

Or Pompton Lakes, in Passaic County, which has streamlined its administrative structure to free-up more dollars for the classroom.

What makes these and other districts like them worthy models is the simple fact that they do not empty the wallets of their taxpayers to support overspending. Instead, they have learned how to manage public resources efficiently in support of clearly defined educational goals, and they are delivering quality education.

Sixth, we must continue to meet our responsibility to the more than 100 districts and schools, both urban and nonurban, facing the toughest challenges, where poverty and social conditions frustrate learning for even the most motivated children.

We should not only be sure these districts have the funding they need for their regular education programs. We should also give them added resources to help counter the negative effects of poverty on learning.

But we must make absolutely certain that these funds are used to support specific educational programs -- such as preschool and full-day kindergarten -- that have been shown to make a positive difference in the lives and learning of children.

There is no reason that children who live in poverty should receive an impoverished education. We have the resources. We just have to make sure they're put to the best use.

I want to work with you, my colleagues in the Legislature on both sides of the aisle, to develop school funding legislation that incorporates these principles. We must provide our children with a high-quality education while respecting hard-working taxpayers and their money.

I want to assure parents, teachers, and school boards throughout this state that we have no intention of dropping this new plan in your laps and walking away.

We intend to be your partners in progress.

We will work to remove whatever regulatory barriers get in the way of local decision making.

We will act as a clearinghouse for the good practices that will emerge from local efforts.

We will help ensure that all educators are prepared to assume whatever new responsibilities these efforts will require. Our teachers are on the front line, and they deserve our support.

We will reward those schools that use dollars wisely to support children's education and penalize those that spend wastefully or consistently fail to educate students.

And, we will make certain the people of our state have the information they need to participate more fully in our schools.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Legislature, my administration has presented you with a plan -- a plan that includes core curriculum standards, a solid structure through which to deliver that curriculum, a funding approach, and system reforms.

And while I know, that at the end of the day, the details may differ, I trust the principles behind them will hold.

Now we must test our own principles.

How firm is our resolve?

How real is our commitment?

How determined are we to make a positive difference for New Jersey students?

Do we have the will to make our children the only special interest?

My friends, the way we answer these questions will determine the way we will be remembered.

Meeting this challenge head-on will not be easy; moving in a new direction rarely is.

It will not always be pleasant: the rewards may seem, at times, too few or far removed.

But we must act.

I look forward to working with Senate President DiFrancesco, Speaker Collins, and Minority Leaders John Lynch and Joe Doria, all of whom have long demonstrated a commitment to improving education.

United, nothing can stand in our way.

We have, in fact, already started our work together. The bipartisan Charter School Bill that reached my desk last week is exactly the sort of fundamental change we need. I want to thank Senator Jack Ewing and Assemblyman John Rocco for shepherding this important bill through the Legislature.

So, as I end this speech today, I will reinforce our commitment by signing the Charter School Bill.

In the weeks and months ahead, I hope this moment will stand as a reminder that, together, we can give our children the hope and the opportunity they deserve, and, in the process, help prepare our state for the next century.

And now I'd like to invite children, who stand to benefit the most from our efforts, to stand with me as I sign this bill.

Thank you.