
Myth
VS. REALITY

**30 common misconceptions about public education
– and the facts that set the record straight**

School Funding and Property Taxes

Myth #1: **If all New Jersey teachers had agreed to a pay freeze last year, there would have been no budget cuts or layoffs.**

REALITY: Not true. According to the Office of Legislative Services (OLS), if every teacher in New Jersey had taken a pay freeze, the savings would have covered only 22 percent of Gov. Christie's education cuts, leaving 78 percent of those cuts – or about \$850 million – to be taken out of local school budgets.

Myth #2: **According to Gov. Christie, Newark (which is receiving a \$100 million gift from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg) spends \$24,000 per pupil.**

REALITY: According to the NJ Department of Education, per pupil spending in Newark was \$16,911 in 2009-2010 – down from \$19,756 the year before. Gov. Christie's figure includes a number of non-instructional costs that are not universally used to calculate per-pupil expenditure, including pension contributions (which the state has failed to make).

Myth #3: **Private charity (e.g. \$100 million from Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for Newark's schools) is the way to bring about reform in education.**

REALITY: Public education is a public responsibility, and true reform must come as a result of a predictable, adequate revenue stream from state, local, and federal sources. Private money is a temporary infusion, with no guarantee that it will be sustained – and there are often strings attached to it. Even before Governor Christie and the Legislature cut \$1.3 billion from state school spending, New Jersey ranked 45th among the 50 states in state support for local public schools. We cannot rely on charity to carry out our obligation to educate New Jersey's children. And for the record, Gov. Christie and the Legislature cut \$56 million from Newark's state education aid this year.

Myth #4: **Teacher salaries and benefits are the reason property taxes are so high.**

REALITY: Not true. For the past 30 years, school spending has consumed a constant percentage (approximately 55 percent) of local property tax costs. Property taxes in New Jersey are high because New Jersey ranks 45th among the 50 states in state support for local public schools, which puts the lion's share of the burden on property taxpayers. Only 35 cents of every public school dollar comes from the state, while nearly 60 cents comes from the property tax.

Myth #5: **Privatization costs less.**

REALITY: Many districts that have privatized services such as transportation or custodial/maintenance have found the "savings" to be short-lived or non-existent. Private, for-profit companies exist to make money, and will charge as much as possible for as little service as possible in order to maximize their profits. Many districts have also experienced a significant decline in the quality of the services they receive once they switch to private contractors. When the health and safety of children are on the line, it does not make sense to pursue privatization options that may generate little or no savings while causing significant declines in quality, safety and service. Finally, Education Support Professionals tend to live in their districts, pay taxes there, and contribute to the local economy. They are our neighbors and community volunteers.

Quality of Education

Myth #6: **New Jersey public schools are failing.**

REALITY: By any objective measure, New Jersey's schools are among the very best in the nation. From high quality public preschools, to exceptional performance on national assessments, to graduates who are among the very best prepared for college and careers, our schools excel. Of course there is still room for progress in some areas, and New Jersey is a leader there as well. Our schools lead the nation in closing the achievement gap, due in large measure to our ongoing commitment to our urban schools. (For detailed information about New Jersey's excellent public schools, go to njea.org/goodnews)

Myth #7: **New Jersey hasn't closed the achievement gap between minority and white students.**

REALITY: New Jersey is a national leader in closing the achievement gap. Thanks to programs and funding that flowed from the historic Abbott school equity cases – including quality preschool, early literacy, and after-school programs – we have cut the achievement gap in half over the last decade. New Jersey's African-American and Hispanic students outscore the average student in California. That is why the *Christian Science Monitor* ("Blacks' test scores lag, but New Jersey is a bright spot," July 14, 2009) cited New Jersey as the only state in the nation that narrowed the achievement gap in both reading and math at the fourth grade level.

Myth #8: **Preschool education has no lasting impact on student achievement.**

REALITY: According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, considerable research shows that attending high-quality pre-kindergarten has a lasting impact on a child's success both in school and in life. Leading economists find that investing dollars in high-quality preschool yields significant returns – not only in terms of educational achievement, but even in terms of lower social costs (unemployment, welfare, incarceration). New Jersey's unprecedented investment in preschool for disadvantaged students is a driving reason why the state is leading the nation in closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged counterparts.

Charter Schools

Myth #9: **Charter schools out-perform public schools.**

REALITY: Not true. According to a Stanford University study of 2,400 charter schools in America (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, June 2009), only 17 percent of charter schools out-perform public schools in math, while 37 percent of charters perform at a lower level. In New Jersey, a study by Rutgers professor Dr. Bruce Baker in November 2009 (“NJ Charters: Worthy of the Hype?”, on edlawcenter.org) found that charter schools perform near the bottom of all public schools, and only on a par with public schools in the districts in which they are located. Charter schools have a role to play in education reform, but they are not the “magic bullet” that many advocates make them out to be.

Tenure and Seniority

Myth #10: **Tenure is a job for life.**

REALITY: That's absolutely not true. The tenure law in New Jersey simply spells out the process for fair dismissal of teachers who are found to be unable to improve their performance. It guarantees them due process, but not a job for life. And when budgets are cut, even tenured teachers can lose their jobs.

Myth #11: **It is impossible to dismiss a tenured teacher.**

REALITY: Not true. It happens hundreds of times every year in New Jersey. There are not many court cases filed, however, because in most cases, tenured teachers face dismissal as a result of documented and undeniable charges, and are unable to improve their performance. So, they do not appeal the decision and leave the profession. For those few cases that go forward legally, NJEA believes the fair dismissal process can be made less costly and more efficient. In fact, NJEA supported an amendment to the tenure statute in 1998 that cut the time in half for dismissing a tenured teacher.

Myth #12: Tenure protects bad teachers.

REALITY: Not true. Tenure prevents bad things from happening to good teachers. Before tenure, teachers were often fired for the wrong reasons: politics, administrative whim, nepotism, and even their marital status. Tenure prevents administrators and boards of education from engaging in such unfair personnel decisions. But administrators can still take action against bad teachers. Teachers are evaluated a minimum of three times per year during their first three years of employment. Tenured teachers continue to receive annual observations/evaluations and are subject to dismissal for just cause. As part of the evaluation process, administrators are required to identify deficiencies and steps that must be taken to improve performance. If the district proves that an individual teacher has not improved or there is other just cause for dismissal, that individual can be dismissed. Due process simply ensures that any charges and findings are valid and true.

Myth #13: Seniority protects bad teachers and punishes younger teachers.

REALITY: Seniority ensures that administrators cannot use budget cuts as an excuse to replace more-experienced, higher-paid teachers with less-experienced, lower-paid teachers. The experience of veteran teachers is valuable, both to their students and to fellow teachers. They are leaders within their schools and mentor younger teachers to ensure their success. Experienced teachers should not be targeted because they are older or have earned higher salaries. The seniority system ensures a fair, objective process when budget cuts or other circumstances require layoffs in public schools.

Merit Pay

Myth #14: Merit pay works.

REALITY: Merit pay has never been shown to work anywhere it has been tried. In the most recent study intended to show that merit pay could boost student performance, researchers in Nashville, Tenn. (“Teacher Pay for Performance – Experimental Evidence from the Project on Incentives in Teaching,” National Center on Performance Incentives, Vanderbilt University, Sept. 21, 2010) concluded just the opposite. They found that students of teachers eligible for large merit pay bonuses did not perform any better than students of teachers who were not eligible for the merit pay program. They also found that participation in the merit pay program had little effect on what teachers did in the classroom. In addition, when teachers are forced to compete for a limited pool of money, they are less likely to share strategies and good ideas.

Myth #15: Merit pay makes for better teachers.

REALITY: The most recent major merit pay study (see Myth #14) showed that merit pay did not change either teacher practices or student test scores. Merit pay, however, can undermine the collegiality, cooperation, and collaboration among teachers that is essential to improving teaching and learning for all students. It can lead to focusing more on test preparation in limited subject areas than on ensuring that students learn a broad array of subjects – thereby inhibiting their ability to apply many of the concepts which enable them to succeed in life.

Compensation, Pensions, and Benefits

Myth #16: Teachers and school employees have huge pensions.

REALITY: Teachers and school employees have modest pensions that are earned only after a career of service. Every teacher or school employee in the pension fund contributes toward his or her pension out of every paycheck. While some politicians and their cronies have found ways to abuse the pension system, teachers and school employees have played by the rules, paid their share and earned their pensions.

Myth #17: Our pension system is broken because its benefits are too generous.

REALITY: Our pension system is in trouble because in 12 out of the last 16 years, a succession of governors and legislatures made NO contributions. During that time period, when teachers alone contributed more than \$6 billion out of their own paychecks into the system, the state contributed a little more than \$1 billion. If the state had made all of its required contributions, the pension system would be healthy and well-funded.

Myth #18: Taxpayers have been paying too much for school employees' pensions. It's time for school employees to take responsibility for their pensions.

REALITY: In 12 of the past 16 years, taxpayers – through their elected governors and legislatures – have contributed NOTHING to the state pension system. Meanwhile, teachers, who also are taxpayers, have contributed between 5 and 5.5 percent every paycheck – more than \$6 billion – during that same period. That's almost SIX TIMES what other taxpayers have contributed.

Myth #19: Even if the state made its required pension contributions, the system would still be grossly underfunded.

REALITY: Not true. Our pension system is primarily in trouble because the state failed to make any contribution at all in 12 of the past 16 years. Like a credit card bill that goes unpaid from month to month, the state's obligation has grown rapidly because of its irresponsibility. Meanwhile, employees have never stopped paying their share.

Myth #20: **New Jersey teachers continue to get 4-5 percent raises in the midst of the recession.**

REALITY: Not true. In fact, the average salary increase over the past year has been approximately 2 percent. Collective bargaining doesn't drive the economy – it reflects the economy.

Myth #21: **New Jersey teachers are overpaid.**

REALITY: According to the Economic Policy Institute, New Jersey teachers earn 87.8 percent as much as other professionals with equivalent levels of education. The average teacher salary of \$65,988 ranks us fifth in the nation, which makes sense given that New Jersey ranks second in the nation in per capita income.

Myth #22: **Public sector employees earn more than private sector employees.**

REALITY: According to the Economic Policy Institute (“Debunking the Myth of the Overcompensated Public Employee – The Evidence” – 9/15/10), full-time state and local employees make 3.7 percent less than their private sector counterparts. And college-educated public employees like teachers make 25 percent less, on average, than college-educated private sector employees.

Myth #23: **New Jersey teachers on salary guides get annual increments “just for breathing” (Chris Christie, Sept. 28, 1010).**

REALITY: There are no “automatic” salary increments for teachers in New Jersey. They must be negotiated. Increments can be withheld for poor performance, and administration almost always wins such cases since they are not subject to due process arbitration proceedings.

Myth #24: **School employees get free medical benefits from the day they are hired until the day they die.**

REALITY: Under a new law signed last spring, every new school employee contract must include a health care contribution equal to at least 1.5 percent of each employee's salary. Even before the law was signed, many school employees contributed toward their health insurance premiums, and let's not forget that every health benefit was negotiated – meaning that school employees had to give something (usually part of a pay increase) to get their health benefits. Even in districts that have not already negotiated premium contributions, many employees are paying higher deductibles and co-payments. There is no free lunch when it comes to health insurance for school employees.

Vouchers

Myth #25: Private school vouchers (also known as tuition tax credits or “opportunity scholarships”) will save taxpayers money.

REALITY: Vouchers always end up costing taxpayers more. The “opportunity scholarship” bill awaiting action in the Legislature would cost taxpayers \$360 million, and at least \$90 million of it would go to students already attending private and religious schools.

Myth #26: Vouchers will help improve public education by providing competition.

REALITY: There is no fair “competition” between public schools and private and religious schools, because they play by different rules. Unlike public schools, private schools limit their enrollments and choose their students. Three-quarters of private schools do not even offer special education programs. Private and religious schools openly discriminate in their admissions on the basis of academic and athletic achievement, behavior, family background, special needs, and religion. Public schools must accept all students. And private and religious schools do not have to comply with state and federal accountability laws and regulations, including the administration of standardized tests.

Tying Evaluation to Test Scores

Myth #27: Tying student test scores to teacher evaluations, tenure, and compensation is the best way to measure teacher effectiveness.

REALITY: The best research demonstrates that student test scores are not a valid way to measure teacher effectiveness. Too many other factors – from home environment to health to nutrition to other teachers and school employees to variations in how students learn and perform on tests – play a major role in what scores students achieve. Making high stakes decisions about salary and even employment based on test scores won’t help students learn more, because teachers will be forced to teach to the test, which inhibits real learning. A recent study from the Economic Policy Institute (“Problems With the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers,” Aug. 29, 2010) concluded that “Legislatures should not mandate a test-based approach to teacher evaluation that is unproven and likely to harm not only teachers, but also the children they instruct.”

Teacher Unions

Myth #28: **Teacher unions are the barrier to real reform and high student achievement.**

REALITY: Students in states with unionized teachers who can negotiate collectively with their employers routinely perform at the highest levels on standardized tests. New Jersey, with one of the strongest teacher unions in America, ranks in the top five states in all subject areas and grade levels on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. Our African-American and Hispanic students scored well above their national peers in reading and math, and we have dramatically reduced the achievement gap for both students with disabilities and students who are economically disadvantaged. NJEA founded the Center for Teaching and Learning, a non-profit organization governed by an independent board that works to empower teachers to be leaders in the transformation of public schools. One of the Center's first achievements was its Progressive Science Initiative, which helped quadruple the number of physics teachers entering the workforce in New Jersey.

Class Size

Myth #29: **Class size doesn't matter.**

REALITY: Class size makes an enormous difference in grades K-3, as proven by the Tennessee Project STAR research study. The only longitudinal class size study in America, Project STAR began in the 1980s and followed students who had small class sizes in K-3 and those who did not. Students in smaller classes performed at higher levels throughout their academic careers. Smaller classes in the early grades are particularly important for disadvantaged students, who enter school with the need for more individualized attention in reading, math, and basic skills. That's why they are a cornerstone of the Abbott reforms that have placed New Jersey at the top in closing the achievement gap.

And finally...

Myth #30: **The public doesn't like teachers and school employees.**

REALITY: Despite Gov. Christie's attempts to demonize teachers and school employees, they remain the most trusted and admired individuals in every public opinion poll. We should never be afraid to discuss the issues with politicians, the public, or the press.