



Everything Jersey

## How a Hudson pol took the Guv to school

By Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

March 21, 2010, 5:06AM



John Munson/The Star-Ledger

The Jersey City skyline, seen from across the Hudson River in lower Manhattan.

I started off Thursday giving a presentation to the children at St. Genevieve School in Elizabeth.

This was the first school I attended when I was a kid. It hadn't changed a bit. The atmosphere of good conduct and respect for the teachers was exactly as I recalled it. Quite a contrast from Jersey City schools. I visited one later in the day, and the halls were packed with all sorts of sloppily dressed miscreants screaming in foul language. I'm not talking about the kids. I'm talking about the teachers.

The occasion was a meeting of the Jersey City Board of Education. A labor contract was up for a vote and hundreds of teachers overflowed the gymnasium at P.S. 11. I soon worked my way through the throngs and found a corner where I could get a good view of the spectacle of Hudson County politics.

I wasn't disappointed. As speaker after speaker rose to harangue the board members, various characters would move to my corner to answer their cell phones. I overheard one guy giving instructions on making a pizza: "No, you spread the oil with a brush," he said before heading back into the fray.

Meanwhile, the mob screamed at any board member who dared to point out that homeowners can't afford a tax hike. One board member, former mayor **Gerry McCann**, goaded the mob, saying he didn't want to keep them too long "because so many of you need to get to the Turnpike," a reference to the fact that most of the teachers don't live in town.

Even the mildest criticism from a board member prompted the pedagogues to vow vengeance in the next election. That's the sort of pressure that explains why teachers in Jersey City are paid better than college

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professors in other places. Under the current contract, a teacher with a masters degree and 14 years on the job earns a staggering \$94,660 a year. Under the new contract, which grants annual raises of more than 4 percent for three years, many teachers would soon be making more than \$100,000 a year, McCann said.

So you can see why those teachers were screaming. What you can't see, perhaps, is why you should have to foot the bill. The state pays about three-fourths of the school district's costs. Meanwhile, if you live in the suburbs, your schools receive little state aid and will soon be receiving even less.

There is an important lesson in this about the way in which those smart city pols outwit the slow-witted suburbanites. It seems that back in the early 1970s, a Jersey City mayor by the name of **Thomas Whelan** filed a lawsuit demanding more money for the city schools. Then as now, the members of the Hudson machine lived like kings, but Whelan poor-mouthed the judges into sending a big chunk of state aid his way.

This year the new governor, a do-gooder from the suburbs, decided he needed to cut state school aid by 10 percent. As luck would have it, though, the man he ordered to come up with the formula for the reductions was yet another former Jersey City mayor, **Bret Schundler**, now the state education commissioner.

You might think that formula is obvious. Just slice aid across the board. You're thinking like a stupid suburbanite. A smart city guy would realize that an across-the-board cut would mean a \$47 million reduction in the massive \$472 million allocation that goes to Jersey City.

So the former Wall Street whiz worked out a formula for saving the cities at the expense of the suburbs. He decided to cut all districts' state aid by 5 percent. But not 5 percent of their state aid — 5 percent of their total budget. This meant that a district that got 5 percent of its budget in state aid would lose all of that aid, not just 10 percent. Gov. **Chris Christie**'s home town, Mendham Township, lost 99.7 percent of its aid; all told, Morris County districts lost 37.6 percent of their aid. As for Jersey City, it will still get \$449 million next year, more than all the school districts in Bergen, Morris, Hunterdon, Cape May and Somerset counties combined.

The upshot for those angry teachers is that it won't be long before many of them hit that magical \$100,000 mark. The evening ended with the contract stalled on a tie vote. But afterwards, board members told me they expect to see the teachers eventually get a contract with substantial raises.

If that full 10 percent cut had gone through, however, raises would have been out of the question. But that's not the way the game is played in Hudson County — where the game is played very well indeed.

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