

Killing N.J.'s 26 "non-operating" school districts hurts small town taxpayers

Posted by [kheyboer](#) July 02, 2009 05:29AM



ROBERT SCIARRINO/THE

STAR-LEDGER

Whenever I drive around the state and get off the major highways, I am amazed by the sheer number of pleasant little towns and villages I find.

The only thing I find more amazing is the open hostility the Trenton crowd exhibits toward the people in these towns.

On Tuesday morning, for example, Gov. **Jon Corzine** signed a bill that will abolish the rights of many small-town taxpayers to vote on where their kids go to school and how much to pay for that schooling.

By Tuesday afternoon, I was hearing from residents of small towns all over the state who were wondering what effect this bill would have on them.

Good question. On that morning, this paper carried [a column of mine](#) showing what had happened the last time the governor signed a bill on school funding.

Last year's School Funding Reform Act included a provision that canceled a school funding agreement between the small Monmouth County town of Loch Arbour and nearby Ocean Township. That agreement called for Loch Arbour to pay Ocean Township on a per-pupil basis.

The new law changed that to a formula based on home values. When that formula took effect yesterday, which was the beginning of the new fiscal year, property taxes in Loch Arbour rose by an average of about \$10,000 per household.

Several small-town people who read that column contacted me on Tuesday to ask whether the same fate awaited them under this new bill. One was **Ed Zimmerman**, who is the mayor of the small town of Rocky Hill in Somerset County. I was already on the road, so I decided to drive by and chat with Ed.

Rocky Hill is a town with about 300 homes just north of Princeton. Though it is small, Rocky Hill is not

inefficient. The elected officials are unpaid and volunteers provide most of the services.

"We have a very low tax rate, yet we're being penalized by the state," said Zimmerman.

One reason the tax rate is low is that instead of running its own school, Rocky Hill contracts with adjacent Montgomery Township to educate its kids. This is the most efficient arrangement imaginable, yet the bill Corzine signed eliminates all 26 "non-operating" school districts in the state.

The bill's backers say this will save money, but Zimmerman's wife **Randi**, who is also his secretary at their business, disagrees. She is - make that "was" -- on the Rocky Hill school board. As we chatted on Tuesday, she had no idea whether the board would still be in existence the following day. This presented numerous problems, such as the question of who would write the checks for essential services.

"We have at least one special education kid in a summer program," Randi said. "Who pays that bill if we go out of existence?"

Good question, and as of yesterday it became a better question. The school board members got notice that the board no longer exists.

The administration argues this will save money. Zimmerman's salary was zero. Multiply that by the other four members of the board and the product is still zero.

The real question here is not what's saved but what's lost. And that's local control. The school board used to have the power to make crucial decisions concerning the welfare of their children.

"Eight years ago we had a big argument over whether to go to the Montgomery or the Princeton schools," she said. "But now, once we're in Montgomery, we're in Montgomery for good."

Montgomery is an excellent school district, but the question of cost remains. The state can set the formula based on either pupil numbers or ratables. The residents of Rocky Hill and those other districts have no say in the matter.

If the state chooses to impose a tax based on ratables, some towns could be hit as hard as Loch Arbour. And that's hard indeed, according to former Loch Arbour mayor **Bill Rosenblatt**. I called him Tuesday evening after I got back home.

Rosenblatt was mayor back when Loch Arbour made that deal with Ocean Township, which also covered police services. And he's still mystified as to why the town's being punished for entering into the sort of shared-service agreement Corzine claims to support.

"My taxes will go from \$6,700 to \$19,000 in an hour and a half," he said as the witching hour approached. "It makes no sense."

No sense? Well, the Corzine plan calls for consolidating all of the small school districts in the state into larger districts by next year. And it also calls for the salaries in the small districts to rise to the level of the larger districts.

So that makes perfect sense - if you're a governor looking for the teachers union vote in the November election.

If you live in a small town, however, it sounds positively insane.

Categories: [Economy](#), [Statehouse](#), [Taxes](#)

Comments

sburns54 says...

Moron Perspective Alert

This commenter also fails to read my columns before posting inane responses. My plan is obvious and I have stated it over and over again. The fact that this guy hasn't read it reflects his ignorance, not my lack of a plan. Also the people in Rocky Hill and Locharbour are not any richer than those in neighboring towns, so that is idiotic as well.

-PM

So this plan is unfair to the rich people in Loch Arbour and Rocky Hill- WHAT IS YOUR PLAN? You're good at whining- got an answer to NJ having 580 different school districts, Mr. smart guy? What they should really do is consolidate the POLICE forces in the small towns- eliminate many of them, lay off the cops in no/ low serious crime places where I live like Helmetta (the cops here are nothing more than warm- blooded traffic cones, for the most part- any serious police work is done by outsiders brought in as needed.) THAT would save some money, with most of the donut- eaters getting \$75,000 and more with benefits... but of course we NEED police to protect us from ourselves or anarchy would prevail...

Posted on 07/02/09 at 8:05AM

cmnjcom says...

From each according to worth, to each according to political/union affiliation. The law according to Kommrades Korzine and Kodey, People's Republic of NJ

Posted on 07/02/09 at 8:05AM

cchuba says...

sburns you are a very mean spirited person. Property taxes are dedicated to paying for town expenses like education and other local services like the police. Both Rocky Hill and Lock Arbour are currently pulling their own weight so why force them to pay higher property taxes?

You are boasint that you know how they can save costs while gloating that they are paying higher taxes. This reminds me of a Vietnam era sound bite ... 'We raised their property taxes so that we could lower them'.

>>>You're good at whining- got an answer to NJ having 580 different school districts, Mr. smart guy?

The number of school districts is totally irrelevant. What matters is the cost per student. Since larger school districts have a higher cost per student then forcing small towns to consolidate with them will increase costs. So what's the point in eliminating small districts.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 8:44AM

nohesitation says...

Moron Perspective Alert

Let me see if you got this right: No, you didn't. I noted right in the column that by joining they didn't surrender their autonomy. They could leave at any time and join another district, such as Princeton.

From now on, read the column before commenting.

-PM

Mulshine - let me see if I got this right:

Rocky Hill voluntarily agrees to join Montgomery. Yet, you and they still want "local control"?

If so, why did they join? By joining, don't they surrender autonomy?

Are we to believe that the small fraction of Rocky Hill kids in Montgomery should have a disproportionate impact on far larger Montgomery?

Your argument is senseless.

And I thought you conservatives were for fiscal discipline! How do you get that with over 600 school districts?

And what about all those excess and high paid police officers?

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:14AM

nohesitation says...

cchuba- do you have data to support this counterintuitive statement?:

"larger school districts have a higher cost per student"

Cost per pupil obviously is impacted by the number of school districts.

Each District needs buildings, a Superintendent, Assistants, principals, administrators, supervisors, et al.

Larger districts can spread these functions and costs over larger number of students, thus reducing cost per pupil.

It's called economy of scale. Or simple math.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:21AM

politburo says...

The school district issue is really a red herring here. The problem is the tax system.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:32AM

FPParent says...

Paul,

It's about time you mentioned the largest potential cost of consolidation - the teachers' unions. The NJEA is on record as saying they will support consolidation ONLY if all districts involved move their staffs to the contract of the largest district. Since the larger districts tend to pay higher salaries, it's very likely that consolidation will cost taxpayers MORE, not less.

Can't anyone read? That's right in the column. Sheesh!

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:35AM

steveo2287 says...

Rocky Hill pays a fixed amount per pupil to Montgomery. Both sides are comfortable with the arrangement.

The best way to establish fiscal control is to tell districts like Newark and the other Abbotts they can only spend what towns like Montgomery spend per pupil. Montgomery spends about 1/2 per pupil that Newark spends.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:55AM

cchuba says...

To nohesitation regarding this statement....

>>>cchuba- do you have data to support this counterintuitive statement?:

"larger school districts have a higher cost per student"

Look at Newark. I have seen figures from the Star Ledger that it costs \$18,500 per student for education.

<http://www.state.nj.us/education/guide/2008/csg1ind.shtml>

from nohesitatino >>>>Each District needs buildings, a Superintendent, Assistants, principals, administrators, supervisors, et al

Uh, no. Since Rocky Hill has no schools they do not have any of those things that you mentioned (supervisor, principal, etc).

The only think that they have is a board of education consisting of unpaid volunteers.

From nohesitation, >>>Rocky Hill voluntarily agrees to join Montgomery.

If you read the aticle you would have seen that Rocky Hill did NOT join Montgomery township, they CONTACTED out the education of their students. Capitalism at its best.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 10:12AM

tzuckerman says...

This is insanity.

The only way to fix the problem is to have every school district pay for their own children. Livingston pays for Livingston, Newark pays for Newark. Livingston and Newark keep the property taxes and the State stay

out of education. Local school boards will have the power to make their own decisions. If they spend too much (or too little), they have to answer to their residents who are directly paying through property taxes.

Oh, some cities cant afford it? Newark found \$250 million or so to build a stadium.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 10:14AM

RTS123 says...

Unfortunately these small towns will pay the same insanely high property taxes as the rest of us.

Until we get individuals in office that look out for the taxpayers instead of the NJEA members the only thing that will change is your tax bill each year and it will not be changing in the direction you want. The blame starts at the top and in November it will be time to give someone else a chance as Corzine had 4 years and has done a lot but unfourtunately its all been for the NJEA, nothing for the taxpayers.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 11:17AM

greekgoodies says...

I don't know why everyone is complaining about taxes being raised, quality of life deminishing; political leaders in front of judges; gangs running amok with one killing each day; students leaving school at the rate of just about 30% and 50% around the country; higher taxes on beer, wine, cigarettes and eventually property taxes will go up in a year or two and last but not least.....

PEOPLE STILL VOTE DEMOCRATIC!!

Congrats to alldumb, dumb, dumb.

You deserve all the crape that goes on in this state, now suck it up and stop complaining.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 11:43AM

gtreiner says...

Rocky Hill actually does not have a all volunteer school board. The secretary to the board is Francis Chilson and is paid in fact she also has two other municipal jobs for a total salary of \$170,134.

PM: Wrong. Frank is a guy, for one thing. And he is not on the school board, which is unpaid. I can't confirm those salaries, but most of his payment comes from Demarest, where he is a full-time employee. He makes only a small amount from Rocky Hill, where he is part-time. Most non-ops pay their clerks only about \$10,000 a year and then only because the state requires them to do so.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 1:54PM

james82 says...

Having lived on Long Island for many years where they have county police, I agree that having county police seems more efficient, cost-effective, and results in a more professional force. I see so many towns with \$10k a year property taxes. and the local police drive around all day in 12mpg SUVs giving out speeding tickets to raise revenue. I have family members in the PDs, so I am not anti-police.

But, like John Gault in Atlas Shrugged, I want to watch the political takers drive this over the cliff as fast as possible, so maybe the public can learn, and we can start making NJ an economic power house again. With the rare exception of an occasional Loneyan, I have come to see that people that run for political office are "fake, phoney, frauds".

Posted on 07/02/09 at 2:20PM

jersey10006 says...

Mulshine is a genius and I worship him for his brilliance.

Why can't I be that smart?

Posted on 07/02/09 at 3:44PM

paulisavajj says...

This comment was deleted on the grounds that the person who posted it has no idea what a "neocon" is. He is encouraged to learn about this by reading the work of the most persuasive opponent of neoconservatism in American journalism: me.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 4:15PM

hlwaswrong says...

Paul Mulshine is a genius. As for me, I can't seem to follow a simple comments policy that requires me to make an intelligent comment on the issue at hand.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 5:13PM

skip3house says...

'Politburo' has it right. Distraction from the almost confiscatory tax system in NJ for funding schools.

If we still want schools for all, we better use our 8th grade arithmetic to expose the weakness of guessing the home value indicates ability-to-pay.

Get rid of home school taxes (and rebates). Stop Abbotts, only fund necessities (think modern Abe Lincoln), and let each school district tax their incomes for desired 'extras' - beyond NJ State Aid evenly divided by pupils.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 7:06PM

NJStuck says...

Guys on Wall Street believe that economies of scale can be had if companies merge to become more efficient. There is a profit motive to be had. Corzine is ex - Wall Street and thinks this way.

Unfortunately, this does not work in the public sector because there is no similar profit motive. Big public leads to big government and gross inefficiency and corruption. Corzine doesn't know this or chooses to pretend not to.

As a 2nd career teacher with 25 years experience in private industry, I abhor some of the stuff going on which is bankrupting our state. Although I haven't made a poll, I suspect that most of the teachers in my suburban district are republicans too. You see, we're also tax payers who live in the "burbs"..

Once upon a time, our district had the money to built a big, grand high school. Now, 35 years later, it needs refurbishing and upgrades because stuff wears out over time. But, our taxpayers are "taxed out" and can't afford any more. They overwhelmingly defeated the budget. All their money is sucked into the county and disappears into the coffers of some of the "dirty 30" that exist here.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 8:50PM

blarneyboy says...

James82 has insights that are on the money.

Neighborhood schools worked. The "economy of scale" Nohesitation cites, applies to widget production, not the building of a moral citizen.

Kids should be educated within walking distance to their school through high school. My pop walked a few miles, barefoot, to a single classroom with several grades taught by one teacher. I walked a couple miles a day for a dozen years, with no ill effects, aside from being as skinny as a rail. "Bussing" appeared to engineer the social statics of a misguided judge...or...economy of scale.. somethin'...I guess control? We have gyms to produce the fattest young people in the world, intentionally, if they have a shot at a college football scholarship. Is that a worthy scholastic goal? Is it educationally ethical? Of course not.

The one room schoolhouse produced geniuses like Lincoln, free from asst. superintendents, chief maintainance officers and security guards with metal detectors, of all things. Somethings wrong with our public schools and it's just not a governor kanoodling with the union rep. It goes to the values of a neighborhood: You know the principal because she lives down the road and goes to the Baptist Church, while you go to the Catholic. Students learn from that, and grow to value that principal and her beliefs. I did. In districts of 5,000 students it is like a widget factory, but counterintuitively, the cost DOES go up. These school factories are anti-neighborhood. What would Mr. Rogers say?

Do we really want a bricklayers' union, or laborer's local, to decide the size of schools based on their political contribution to the DemClubHouse? That's what's happening now, so some miserable hack gets re-elected.

No, when it comes to the education of children, small is better, keep it local, and let the kids walk, study, play and then walk some more. They'll be happy to read a book if you can confiscate the damned %#&* MP3. Is anyone listening? Do you hear me?

There are thousands of great young scholars in Jersey's school systems, big and small, and wonderful teachers....most appreciated. We haven't done enough to praise their achievements and demand more of those who have failed us....the gov, the NJEA and the court.

Posted on 07/02/09 at 9:21PM

slimey11 says...

BlarneyBoy,

As a second career Alternate Route high school teacher I thank you for your kind (and very correct) perspective on education.

It's very discouraging to see that the NJEA exists first to protect its own bureaucracy and second to protect all dues-paying teachers, no matter how bad. If there's time left over and it doesn't conflict with points 1 and 2, they support child education.

It's very discouraging to find that both state democrats and republicans exist first to ensure their personal re-election, second to protect their own bureaucracies, and if there's time and money left, to toss a bone to taxpayers.

Understanding this explains all legislation, press releases, and referendums from Trenton. "What's in this for the senator?" makes their actions clear.

Posted on 07/03/09 at 8:53AM

skip3house says...

BlarneyBoy -

!00% on, so why omit an equitable funding method so your defined goals don't turn into 'pipedreams'?

Posted on 07/03/09 at 12:59PM

Bobo99 says...

The real question is where is Chris Christie on this and the answer, unfortunately, is that he supports this and more.

Chris needs to explain how he's going to be different than Corzine, other than replacing the people scamming the taxpayers with new people scamming the taxpayers.

PM: You're right that Christie should be speaking out on this issue. However during the campaign he did state that he opposes forced consolidation. He just needs to oppose it more loudly.

Posted on 07/04/09 at 8:48AM

madinnj says...

The districts they should go after are the ones with ridiculously small classes because they are too small to be independent districts. The one like Rocky Hill and Loch Arbour are doing the right thing and sending their kids to a district large enough to provide and efficient and effective education.

The districts that have less than five hundred or kids and pay for a superintendent + principal + business administrator, etc. and have classes with a dozen/dozen-and-a-half kids in them are completely hosing their tax payers. They could close the whole district/school/administration down, send their kids to the district of their choice and cut the school portion of their property taxes in half.

Posted on 07/06/09 at 1:12AM

notadope says...

Here is what is funny, the state targets 'non ops' as a way to increase efficiency...(most non op boards are unpaid positions I think..... !!!.....this shows how stupid the state officials are, why not go after the failing

operating districts and reduce costs? Increasing revenue so officials can find a better way to blow the money is stupid.....there is a reason they don't do this now (in an election year) but the dark future is inevitable for small towns. Small towns get ready, the tax collector will be coming around soon enough. The solution, vote everyone who supported the bill out of office this November. Start with Corzine and work your way down, but it is really the state legislature that needs an overhaul.

Sad for the small towns and the people who have lived in them for 20, 30 , 40 years. It is like NJ is saying ' screw you and your fixed incomes, and since you own your own home, we will punish you too." Shame on NJ and its 'leaders.' So many better plans could have been implemented, but the moronic solution is chosen. This ought to fix public schools, right? HAHHAHAHAHA Good Work ,Jersey, following California down the rabbit hole.....What do we expect from a bunch of dopes who got NJ 33 billion in the hole anyway? Maybe we could get financial advice from bernie madoff to get out of this mess , or lets create a school based ponzi scheme to increase revenue, oh wait, we already got that.....

Posted on 07/06/09 at 2:54PM

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