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The Record: A new lesson plan

THE RECORD

GOVERNOR Christie was back in Washington this week, talking up his education reform agenda. In his address to the Excellence in Education foundation, he hailed education reform as "the seminal civil rights issue of our time" and said it is time to stop tolerating poor-performing teachers and schools.

Then, he repeated his criticism of the New Jersey Education Association for opposing tenure reform, charter schools and merit pay. And he blasted Parsippany-Troy Hills Superintendent LeRoy Seitz, calling him "the new poster boy of greed and arrogance" because his board of education is suing the state to protect his pay raise, Washington Correspondent Herb Jackson reported.

We agree with the governor's starting sentiment — in a global knowledge-based economy, an outstanding education is an absolute necessity for every child. And we appreciate his willingness to spend political capital on the pockets of academic failure that persist in poor city neighborhoods. There are ineffective teachers who must be fired, and struggling schools that must be restructured or shut down.

But we're concerned that Christie is drowning in his own negative rhetoric. With so much focus on howling examples of tenure absurdities and whether educators earn too much, we're not seeing enough forward motion when it comes to actual reforms.

Meanwhile, new headlines reveal more missed opportunities for federal education aid — this time, a \$14 million grant for charter schools denied to New Jersey for want of an adequate system to track success, on top of the \$400 million Race to the Top debacle. And we're looking at an Education Department with no permanent commissioner, stalled legislation and an increasingly bitter relationship with the state's teaching force. The biggest education reform to come out of Trenton recently: a new law allowing advertising on school buses. A lazy Band-Aid of a financial fix.

It's true that the NJEA is ripe for some criticism, and expanding successful charter schools and experimenting with merit pay are fine ideas. But none of these is a wholesale strategy for educational improvement. They are small parts of a bigger enterprise. And they do nothing to address the poverty and segregation in New Jersey that also contribute to poor academic performance.

It's important to remember that overall, New Jersey public schools perform exceptionally well when compared with our peers nationwide. Our students rank No. 1 on a national writing test and are near or at the top in math and reading. Yet our population is far more racially and economically diverse than other top scorers.

We should be asking what has made public education overall in New Jersey so effective, rather than simply asking why it is so expensive. Researchers point to New Jersey's high per-pupil spending, focus on teacher quality and court-ordered Abbott program, which prescribed two years of preschool and the sorts of social services like those at charter schools favored by the governor. They have documented their effects in local inner-city success stories, such as the Union City public schools.

To be sure, New Jersey's pockets of academic failure are true emergencies for the children who attend them. They need major reform — now. But rather than focusing solely on those problems, we must look at the solutions that already surround us. Surely the teachers and superintendents already working hard at successful public schools could lend some expertise to the conversation — including ways to retrain or fire their lesser colleagues. If only the governor would include them.

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