

Schools could lose \$62M in aid next year

Could mean 1,500 layoffs – or a tax increase

by Ricardo Kaulesar

Reporter Staff Writer-February 28, 2010



Jersey City Board of Education member and former Mayor Gerald McCann foresees a dire scenario for the city school district: 1,500 school employees will have to be laid off before the next school year if Gov. Christopher Christie makes good on a recent warning.

That is, unless the school district decides in their April budget to make up the difference by raising taxes instead.

Gov. Christie recently said that school districts across New Jersey should brace themselves for state school aid cuts as high as 15 percent for 2010-2011, as part of an effort to reduce an \$11 billion state budget deficit in the next fiscal year.

Christie will announce the next state budget in mid-March. It goes into effect on July 1.

“We need to understand that this is a serious problem that we are facing.” – Gerald McCann

“We need to understand that this is a serious problem that we are facing,” McCann said at the Jersey City Board of Education’s Feb. 18 meeting.

Christie has already blocked payment of \$475 million in aid for the current school year ending June 30 by issuing an executive order on Feb. 11, forcing districts to spend money in their surplus funds to make up the difference. Hudson County school districts were cut by \$44 million, with Jersey City losing nearly \$3.6 million.

The Jersey City school district presently includes 40 schools, with approximately 28,000 students and 3,346 teachers. The district also includes nine of the 12 charter schools operating in Hudson County.

This year's Jersey City school budget is \$629 million, with \$417.7 million coming from state aid.

Could amount to \$62M loss

A 15 percent aid cut could mean the district could potentially get \$62 million less in next year's budget.

Thus, either the district will have to make extreme cuts, or the already burdened Jersey City taxpayer will have to make up the money. Taxpayers pay to three entities: The city, the schools, and the county. Jersey City taxpayers are already facing a 25 per cent increase in their first quarter tax bills for 2010 because of the municipal budget deficit.

The budget for each school year is approved by the board in March or April and then voted on by the public during the school board elections in April.

'Heartless'

McCann took the board to task for not dealing with the reality of the cuts, which Christie could announce during his state budget address on March 16. McCann said the board wants to continue to spend, when they should be looking at ways to scale back.

After the meeting ended, Carol Lester, a 21-year Jersey City resident and well-known singer/songwriter, excoriated the proposed Christie school aid cuts for the next school year.

"I think what Governor Christie is doing is truly heartless ... it's heartless, thoughtless, and punitive," said Lester, a longtime charter school advocate who plans to run in the school board elections in April.

Sterling Waterman, a downtown Jersey City resident with a son attending Public School 16, said after the meeting he hopes Christie's potential 15 percent trimming means administrators making top dollar in the Jersey City school system will be the ones eliminated, not the teachers.

"If you look at the budget for the Jersey City public schools, it is bloated at the top," said Waterman, who is looking to run for the Board of Education.

The school board is made up of nine members serving staggered three-year terms.

Three board members are up for re-election: McCann, Terry Dehere, and Angel Valentin.

Some parents, who wanted to remain anonymous, were offended by McCann taking about the school district cutting back when he was hired recently for a \$50,000 per year “political” job as an inspector at the Jersey City Incinerator Authority, they said.

As for the board dealing with Christie’s possible cost-cutting, school board member Sean Connors said the day after the meeting that the board has been meeting since the year began to look at where cuts can be made for the next year’s budget.

“I think we were one of the first school districts to look at any cuts that Christie was looking to do the schools,” Connors said.

However, Connors said the school district will be waiting for Christie’s budget address before making decisions.

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