

# Radar Screen DLT 1-2-3

November 2006

Brought to you by the Scotch Plains – Fanwood PTA District Legislative Team (DLT)

## Resource Center

District Policy Book:  
[http://www.spfk12.org/sp-f\\_policies.htm](http://www.spfk12.org/sp-f_policies.htm)

Board of Ed. Meeting Schedule:  
[http://www.spfk12.org/sp-f\\_board\\_mtgs.htm](http://www.spfk12.org/sp-f_board_mtgs.htm)

Garden State Coalition of Schools Website:  
[www.gscschools.org](http://www.gscschools.org)

New Jersey School Boards Association:

Special Session on NJ Property Tax Reform:  
<http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/PropertyTaxSession/specialsessionpt.asp>

About DLT:  
<http://www.spfk12.org/ptacouncil/Membership/Legislation.html>

Contact DLT newsletter editor at  
[webmaster\\_council@spfk12.org](mailto:webmaster_council@spfk12.org) or 908-322-9142

## DLT 1: Local Issues

### ➤ Deep concern over Task Force meetings in Trenton regarding NJ Tax Reforms

Board members, Linda Nelson & Donald Parisi, who are currently attending Task Force Committee meetings on Government Consolidation of Shared Services & Public School Funding committees, reported their deep concern regarding

#### 1. lack of public information

on deliberations of committee members

#### 2. lack of focus on quality education in favor of cost reduction

#### 3. rush to promote legislation which may not be well thought out in order to meet the January 1 deadline

[Read details on page 2.](#)

### ➤ HS football & soccer field improvements

Facilities Committee recommends going forward with planning. Project would include the HS football field, the track surrounding it, and the adjacent lower soccer field. Decision by Board on whether a referendum should be included in April ballot for the project, will be taken in Nov/Dec 2006.

## DLT 2: State Issues

### **NJ Property Tax: Special Legislative Session**

This session is expected to bring significant changes in our public education system including regionalization of school districts by county (see highlights in sidebar on Page 2) and new school funding formula among others.

DLT urges readers and the SPF community to stay informed on this issue & be ready to assist at short notice with advocacy efforts as soon as recommendations from Committee members are submitted (Nov 15<sup>th</sup>).

### **Call to attend GSCS Press Conference on Nov 1<sup>st</sup> (10:30 am) at Statehouse in Trenton**

The Conference/ Rally will address school funding and governance issues under deliberation in Trenton in its Special Session on Property Taxes. The legislature and the Governor are set to recommend significant change to our system of public education. This rally will vocalize concerns that need to be heard. If you are interested, please contact Barbara Cronenberger-Meyer at 322-9148 or email @ [meyercron@juno.com](mailto:meyercron@juno.com) for car pooling.

**"Educators shake their heads at idea of county districts"**: Read what New Jersey educators have to say regarding county-wide districts on Page 3. Taken from Star Ledger article.

## DLT 3: Federal Issues

At the time of writing this piece, there is no major federal issue to report.

## About DLT

### **Have a question about DLT- Ask the Team!**

**Chairperson:** Jodi Heinz  
**HS Rep:** Barbara Cronenberger-Meyer  
**Terrill Rep:** Margaret Ames  
**Park Rep:** Smita Palejwala  
**School One Rep:** Melissa Kearns  
**McGinn Rep:** Cindy Clancy-Warren & Amy Koslow  
**Evergreen Rep:** Betsy Ringel  
**Coles Rep :** JoAnn Halberstadter & David Barash  
**Brunner Rep:** Kaneez Madraswala  
**DLT Newsletter:** Kalpana Krishna Kumar

### **Join the DLT**

➤ **Attend our meetings** (Nov 27<sup>th</sup> 1:00 pm)  
➤ **Sign up for DLT Email Alert Chain** to receive important messages about the legislation issues. (via form on PTA Council website @ [www.spfk12.org/ptacouncil/](http://www.spfk12.org/ptacouncil/) or send email to [webmaster\\_council@spfk12.org](mailto:webmaster_council@spfk12.org)

**What county-wide regionalization could mean to us**

- ✓ Each county will have one school district
- ✓ One superintendent & Business Administrator's office for the entire county appointed by the Governor.
- ✓ Superintendent will have sole control over decisions such as curriculum & textbooks, transportation, purchasing, hiring & salary negotiations, facilities management, extracurricular offerings.
- ✓ Local school boards, whether elected or appointed, will become advisory only.
- ✓ Redistricting of schools

**“Consolidation of school districts is no cure for high property taxes” - NJ School Boards Assn.**  
[Read entire](#)

[www.njsba.org](http://www.njsba.org)

## New Jersey's Educational Quality At Risk

*Appeared in Record Press (Oct 23, 2006). Reprinted with permission from Linda Nelson*

As I attend the hearings of the Public School Funding Reform Task Force in Trenton this fall, I'm hearing a lot about possible ways—some realistic, some not— to cut local school spending in order to lower property taxes. Unfortunately I'm not hearing very much about maintaining the quality educational system in New Jersey that has made it one of the best in the country. **Four bi-partisan legislative task forces** appointed by the governor have been meeting weekly in Trenton since mid-August. Beside Public School Funding Reform, they are: Public Employee Benefits Reform; Government Consolidation and Shared Services; and Constitutional Reform and Citizens Property Tax Convention. Their charge is **to find solutions to the high property tax crisis in New Jersey.**

The task forces will meet through October and expect **to make recommendations by November 15**, with resulting **legislation by January 1**. Gov. Corzine wants sustainable solutions by then, or he will press for a public vote in November 2007 for a Constitutional Convention.

Representing both, the **Garden State Coalition of Schools (GSCS)**, a coalition of over 100 suburban school districts, and the **SPF Board of Education**, I have been attending the Public School Funding Reform hearings.

This task force has been hearing **invited testimony** from experts in the fields of special education funding, school district accountability and monitoring, developing education funding, analysis of educational policy, and merging of school districts. At two of the hearings educational groups were invited to send representatives to sit on panels to give suggestions for ways to contain costs or to make needed changes. News coverage of the hearings has focused on the more dramatic statements and has left out important testimony, so it's **hard to know what's going on only by reading the newspapers.**

It's also hard to know what's going on even if you attend the hearings, because there is **little or no public discussion** between task force members. They ask questions of those testifying, but it's impossible to know what actually is being considered behind the scenes.

And there has been only vague and occasional reference to maintaining educational quality, always thrown in as an afterthought.

Nor has there been discussion of how legislators should and must control their own spending, which also has had an impact on local property taxes. Because of a **lack of available funds** at the state level, in the **past five years the state has not followed its own legislation, the Comprehensive Educational Improvement Funding Act (CEIFA)**, which dictates how schools receive state aid. In those same five years local property taxes have steadily risen in direct response to the loss statewide of billion of dollars of needed state aid.

It is common knowledge that the Department of Education and legislative staff are working to develop a **new school funding formula**. A new formula would be welcome, since the current one (CEIFA) hasn't been used in five years. Again, however, all discussions are being done behind the scenes with **no public input from stakeholders in New Jersey education.**

When the task forces makes their recommendations in early November, there will be **little time for public comments**, suggestions or additions in the **rush to pass legislation by December.**

What would I like to see being discussed in Trenton, along with the expert testimony? Here are some thoughts:

- ✓ **Quality education** should not be left out of the debate. Efficiency is only one side of the equation. Effectiveness and educational results must be the other side.
- ✓ **School district consolidation must be voluntary.** Merging does not automatically produce savings immediately, for usually one or more municipalities in the group find their costs increasing. Financial incentives from the state could help communities get over that hump.
- ✓ **Property taxes in no city or town should have to provide less than 15% of the cost to run the local school district, nor more than 85%.** At present 45% of the districts in New Jersey, including many local Union County communities, are considered too wealthy to receive regular state aid.
- ✓ **Special education and disabled students should receive state support**, no matter where they live. The funding for these students should follow them if they move. This alone would provide huge tax relief to such communities as Scotch Plains, Fanwood, Westfield, Cranford and Mountainside.

And the most important point of all? **Good public policy is not done quickly and with little public input.** Before adopting any law, let's **do enough research** to be informed of its impact and avoid unintended consequences and surprises. Changing how we structure and fund education is important enough to take the time to do it right.

Want to know more?

- ✓ To read bills introduced regarding school funding, county-wide regionalization and related issues, visit [www.njleg.state.nj.gov](http://www.njleg.state.nj.gov)
- ✓ To view or hear recordings of testimonies to Legislative Task Forces, visit <http://www.njleg.state.nj.gov>
- ✓ Schedule of Joint Legislative Committee hearings where testimony from the public is invited: <http://www.njleg.state.nj.gov>

## Educator's shake their heads at idea of county districts

*Star Ledger, October 19, 2006*

Proposals to cut property taxes by centralizing school administrative costs at the county level drew a skeptical reception from the state's educational establishment yesterday. The state's largest teachers union, along with associations of school boards and administrators, told lawmakers the proposals could hurt education while doing little or nothing to lower property tax bills.

"We must never sacrifice the quality of our public schools in pursuit of savings -- savings that may be minimal, ephemeral or even nonexistent," Barbara Keshishian, vice president of the New Jersey Education Association, said.

John Lichtenberg, speaking for the state Principals and Supervisors Association, warned that by creating larger districts, "we risk kids spending more time on the bus, larger class sizes, losing kids in the crowd."

Sen. Robert Smith (D-Middlesex), co-chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation, called those reactions "wholly expected. We knew there would be push-back from school officials whose continued employment relies on what we do to rein in property taxes."

Smith said his proposal "could save as much as \$400 million" by eliminating the "glaring inefficiencies" created by having 618 school districts, each with its own superintendent. His proposal would allow voters in each county to establish, by referendum, a "county administrative school district" responsible for purchasing textbooks and other supplies, providing transportation, negotiating contracts, hiring personnel and erecting and repairing school buildings.

Local school districts would continue to exist and be responsible for all local costs, from teachers to janitors, Smith said, but local superintendents would be abolished. Each district would get a bill for the cost of centralized administrative services, which could be as little as one-fifth what they are now paying for local superintendents, Smith said.

"There are no losers," Smith said.

A draft version of Smith's legislation states "no student would be required to change the school at which the student was enrolled prior to the creation of the county district."

Assemblyman Joseph Malone (R-Burlington) questioned whether such a restriction is workable in a bill intended to save money. He suggested that if one district needs space and a neighboring district has it, the county superintendent would order students bused rather than incur the cost of building a new school.

"To not do that is not going to take advantage of all the efficiencies," replied John Donahue, assistant executive director of the N.J. Association of School Business Administrators.

Malone said: "I can imagine how contentious it would be, moving students from Town X to Town Y. Parents go a little bit berserk when that happens."

David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, which represents students in the state's poorest districts, said creating countywide districts "could help open up opportunities for children to transfer under the federal No Child Left Behind law." Depending on availability of space, that could "allow a student at Trenton Central High School to transfer to Princeton High."

Sciarra said the discussion about school consolidation should focus on its educational benefits rather than possible cost savings. He said numerous studies have shown that "if you can create more socio-economic mix in our schools, all students do better."

An alternative to Smith's bill, sponsored by Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts (D-Camden), would give existing county superintendents expanded powers to promote cost savings and veto local budgets that fail to achieve them.

Donahue questioned whether either proposal puts too much expectation on one official. Noting that Roberts' proposal has been dubbed the "super-superintendent," Donahue said, "I don't know if we have super men and women out there who can handle the likes of 70 school districts in Bergen. The scope and size of it worries me."

*Robert Schwaneberg covers legislation. He may be reached at [rschwaneberg@starledger.com](mailto:rschwaneberg@starledger.com) or (609) 989-0324.*