



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on January 27, 2014

N.J. Gov. Chris Christie's Costly Education Proposals

On January 23, during a visit to the Dudley Family School in Camden — a poverty-stricken city with a high school dropout rate — New Jersey Governor Chris Christie (shown) [proposed](#) several new school programs for his state's schools. Among his proposals for six of Camden's schools was an after-school dinner program, in which 75-125 students are already enrolled.



Christie made the announcement accompanied by Camden Mayor Dana Redd and Superintendent of Schools Paymon Rouhanifard.

"In Camden, we are beginning to see real progress on education issues from creating safety corridors to tackling the problem of high-school drop-outs. This new After School Dinner Pilot Program is another innovative way to ensure children have an opportunity for a nourishing meal, which is a critical element to improving student performance and achievement," Christie said, as was quoted by [CBS News in Philadelphia](#).

The After School Dinner Pilot Program, run in partnership with food-service giant Aramark, begins at 3:30 p.m. and ends by 4:00 p.m.

Mayor Redd said during the press conference, "The After School Dinner Pilot Program is a great initiative that will truly help many of our Camden families who are working hard to provide basic necessities for their children. I am confident that the success of the pilot program will eventually allow us to extend it citywide. I thank the Governor and Superintendent for their continued commitment and support to our Camden children and families."

According to the 2007 publication *Poverty in the City of Camden* by the Poverty Benchmarks Project of Legal Services of New Jersey, "Nearly two out of every five adults between 18 and 64 years old [and 57 percent of the city's children] lived below the federal poverty line in Camden ... in 2005."

The report showed that in 2005, 57.2 percent of children in Camden were receiving welfare benefits, and more than 25 percent of all households in the city received food stamps.

With such benefits being widely distributed to help impoverished families feed their children at home, neither Christie nor Redd nor Rouhanifard explained why an after-school dinner program is necessary, unless the mothers of impoverished children are deemed incapable of using the proceeds of these programs to buy food and cook meals.

In his [State of the State address](#) on January 14, Christie offered his plan to improve the education of his state's students: "And one key step is to lengthen the school day and the school year."

Before suggesting the extended school calendar, Christie noted, "Last year, New Jersey's high school graduation rate increased by a full percentage point, to 87.5%. Student achievement is strong in many of our public schools, and New Jersey's students are among the country's greatest achievers."



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The 18th annual Education Week “Quality Counts” report released this month, which “measures key education outcomes and provides ranks and grades for each state based on their commitment to improve educational policies and practices,” ranked New Jersey third in the nation, behind Massachusetts and Maryland. However, noted Christie, “Our per pupil expenditure is the highest in the nation at over \$17,000 per year.” New Jersey spent nearly five percent of its taxable resources on K-12 schooling last year, second only to Vermont. The generous salary offered to New Jersey’s teachers contributes to the high costs; New Jersey has the [fifth highest average salary](#) for teachers (\$66,612) — and is first in pay for starting teachers as well (\$48,101).

Despite all that expenditure and high ratings, statewide, New Jersey’s urban schools are still substandard. In Camden, for example, public schools spent \$23,770 per student (\$19,118 on a budgetary per-pupil basis) in the 2009-10 school year and only two-thirds of the students there manage to graduate from high school.

In his address, Christie cited improvements made in Newark and Camden (where, he noted, “last year, only three students graduated ‘college ready.’”) Christie then stated:

Despite the improvements we are seeing in Newark and Camden, I believe we need to take bigger and broader steps to adjust our approach to K-12 education to address the new competitive world we live in. Our school calendar is antiquated both educationally and culturally. Life in 2014 demands something more for our students. It is time to lengthen both the school day and school year in New Jersey....

So, working with Commissioner Cerf, I will present to you shortly a proposal to increase the length of both the school day and the school year in New Jersey. This is a key step to improve student outcomes and boost our competitiveness.

An article in the [Star-Ledger](#) (the largest circulated newspaper in New Jersey) reported mixed reaction to Christie’s proposal to expand the school schedules.

“Education is such a precious gift. It is the best thing that anybody can do for themselves so doing more of it has to be good,” the paper quoted Mount Olive Superintendent Larrie Reynolds. “I think it’s a great idea.”

New Jersey Education Association president Wendell Steinhauer said he welcomed the opportunity to discuss the “benefits and challenges of implementing an extended school day and school year.”

“That discussion must include educators and parents as well, to ensure that all concerns are taken into account and it should be based on research and evidence,” Steinhauer said in a statement quoted by the *Star-Ledger*.

While the education professionals quoted tended to like the idea of a longer school schedule, they also expressed concern about the obvious impediment — cost.

State Senator Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex), chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, said, “When we talk about improving education, we have to talk about extending the school day and the school year.” However, Ruiz added, “Funding is obviously the greatest question, but I think we can do it responsibly and collectively.”

Steinhauer also questioned the funding of the expanded-schedule plan, noting that the costs would include facility upgrades as well as personnel.

Few New Jersey schools are air conditioned, since the current 180-day school year typically runs from



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after Labor Day until early June. Expanding the schedule on either end would require cooling the schools, at great expense.

Another *Star-Ledger* article explored the potential cost of implementing Christie's proposal. Among the findings:

The range of costs was broad. An elementary school in Arizona added 132 hours to the school year at a cost of \$290 per student, while a school in Massachusetts added 540 hours at a cost of \$1,695 a student. When calculated as cost per hour per student, the additional expenses ranged from \$2.20 to \$5.23.

Supposing, for example, that New Jersey added 300 hours to the school year (one extra hour for each of 180 days currently on the schedule, plus an extra month of four 30-hour weeks), and that costs in New Jersey would be similar to the school in Massachusetts, where the increase cost \$3.14 per hour per student, we would see an increase in New Jersey of \$942 per student annually. This would result in a per pupil expenditure (which the Federal Education Budget Project currently lists as \$18,737 per year) of nearly \$19,679 a year.

The obvious question is: Who will pay for this extra cost? Especially since Christie said in his State of the State address, "I will tell you one choice we will not make — because it is one answer that will not help grow our state: raising taxes." How Gov. Christie intends to pay for this without raising taxes is not clear.

If taxes are raised, it could be problematic. New Jersey's property taxes are already the highest in the nation, being nothing short of draconian. The Garden States in 2012 had mean property taxes of \$7,318, with second-place New Hampshire a distant second at \$5,230. New Jersey is also first in property taxes paid compared to home value, at 1.89 percent, with New Hampshire second at 1.86 percent. (New Hampshire, however, has no broad sales tax or income tax.)

In an article entitled "By the Numbers: Analyzing New Jersey's Tax and Budget Growth, published by [NJSpotlight.com](#) on May 7, 2012, we read:

School taxes, which grew from \$7.3 billion in 2000 to an anticipated \$13.7 billion this year, make up more than half of the total property tax bill — 52.4% to be exact....

The relative weight of school, municipal, and county property taxes varies widely from county to county, with school taxes often topping 60 percent of the property tax mix in suburban counties with low crime, while municipal taxes fall heavier in poorer cities, where state aid covers most school costs.

The cost of school taxes, then, averages over half of municipal taxes — mainly property taxes — and can be as high as 60 percent of the property tax in some New Jersey communities.

In short, considering the onerous property tax burden currently being shouldered by New Jersey's homeowners, a tax increase to fund a longer school day and school year just might be the straw that breaks the camel's back, accelerating the exodus of Garden State taxpayers to other states.

Photo of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie speaking on education in Camden, N.J.: AP Images



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