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Issue:

One of the most pressing issues in our state right now is the disappointing educational performance in inner cities such as Camden, Newark, Jersey City, and Trenton.

Necessary Background:

Although these four school districts receive substantial amounts of aid - each spends over \$20,000 annually to educate one high school student - graduation rates for these schools have ranged from 30% to 73%, far below the average New Jersey graduation rate of 87.5%. These four districts, in addition to various other urban New Jersey schools, are currently listed as Abbott districts by New Jersey law: failing districts that, by law, receive a substantially greater amount of state aid than average annually (5). Yet misallocation of resources (and, in some cases, ostensible corruption) has introduced a significant degree of inefficiency into these districts, exemplified by their falling graduation rates (4). Governor Christie's proposals to improve the lackluster performance of the urban public school system have been met with mixed criticism. The governor has proposed reforming tenure for failing teachers - those whose students do not meet standardized test performance minimums - and rewarding teachers whose students do meet the test guidelines. Opponents, on the contrary, have argued that these standards would detract from job security in the struggling teaching sector, disincentivizing teaching as a profession overall. The governor has additionally proposed to promote "effective, quality teaching" (NJDE) by doing away with the seniority system and improving teacher evaluation standards. The Christie administration has, in addition, promoted charter schools and renaissance schools in urban districts to provide alternatives for high school students. Yet little has improved in the quality of education during the implementation of these policies in the last four years. Critics argue that the new requirements have made teaching more difficult and reduced incentives for college graduates to become teachers, reducing the quality of education as a whole.

Evidence:

Schools in New Jersey's inner cities have struggled to motivate their poverty-afflicted students to study and succeed. According to their SAT scores, only 19 students in the Paterson school district were considered "ready for college" (nj.com). However, the state funnels tens of thousands of tax dollars into the education of every child in these districts, far more than the average school; this past year, the state distributed over \$11.9 billion to public school districts in financial aid.

Impact:

A large portion of New Jersey's income inequality is attributed to lack of education; nationally, the gap between college graduates and students without a high school diploma is nearly \$100,000 in annual income (8). Beyond mere income levels, however, lack of education for inner city students has significant impact on urban communities. Public school education is directly correlated to employment levels and crime statistics: differences in education levels between whites and African Americans explains as much as 23% of the racial disparities in incarceration rates nationwide. Educational levels are also related to alcohol and substance abuse, unemployment, and violence in urban areas both in New Jersey and nationwide.

Possible Solutions:

Educational reform remains an area with manifold issues - misallocation of resources, teacher performance evaluations, and income inequality all play a role - and only a multipronged approach can hope to resolve the problems at hand. Some educational experts and politicians have proposed a voucher system, in which the state government converts each citizen's tax dollars into a tax "voucher," which can then be used to choose a schooling option for the child, including parochial and private options. This system increases competition between schools and promotes efficiency by having parents promote successful schools with their tax dollars, and it also has been attributed to lower incidences of substance abuse because of lower peer pressure levels in higher-performing schools.

However, the voucher system stands in controversy for several reasons: depopulation of inner city schools, job security for urban teachers, and overcrowding of schools in nearby districts. In addition, Governor Christie's administration is pushing for teacher tenure reform to improve educational quality in urban schools, championing performance-based pay over guaranteed job security; as expected, this policy has met severe opposition from teachers' unions insisting on job security to incentivize the teaching profession. Debate over the issue continues, even as schools struggle to provide for their students.

Educational reform is an issue with as many potential solutions as urgent problems. Possible bill topics could include teacher tenure reform, job-specific educational innovation, teacher training standardization, and further reallocation of funding.

Sources:

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