



## NEW JERSEY POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

Committed to  
Quality Research  
on Behalf of  
New Jersey  
Employers

# New Jersey School Board Elections: Who Cares?

## FACTS FOR DISCUSSION

April 2004

### WHY EMPLOYERS SHOULD CARE

New Jersey spends more per public-school student than any other state, yet employers are consistently disappointed with the quality of entry-level workers entering the workforce from our public high schools. These students frequently lack essential math and verbal skills. This gap between educational spending and workforce quality compels us to examine the basic components of our public education system: how is it funded, how is it managed, and how is it held accountable? Employers should care for two reasons: 1) their future employees will come largely from New Jersey's public schools, and 2) the property taxes they pay, which are among the nation's highest, support their local public schools.

### Educational expenditures

On average it costs \$11,248 to educate a public school child in New Jersey, compared to the national average of \$7,376 (source: United States Department of Education). According to the National Center for Education, New Jersey school districts had total revenues of close to \$15.6 billion in Fiscal Year 2002. More than half of those revenues or \$8.6 billion came from local property taxes that were approved by voters in local school board elections (source <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd>). The remainder comes from State and federal support.

In some communities, business pays as much as 40% of local property taxes. On a Statewide basis, the cost of providing quality education is a multi-billion-dollar undertaking. For the most part, at the district level, the process is managed and overseen by a local board of education, elected by the voters, who get the first chance to approve or reject annual school budgets.

### School elections

On Tuesday, April 20, 2004, school budgets proposed by 549 local school boards will be on the ballot in local school board elections. In addition, voters will elect approximately 1,550 school board members who will decide how our education system is managed at the local level. Who votes in these elections and what are the implications for the business community? We have gathered the following *Facts for Discussion*.

### How many school board elections are held in New Jersey?

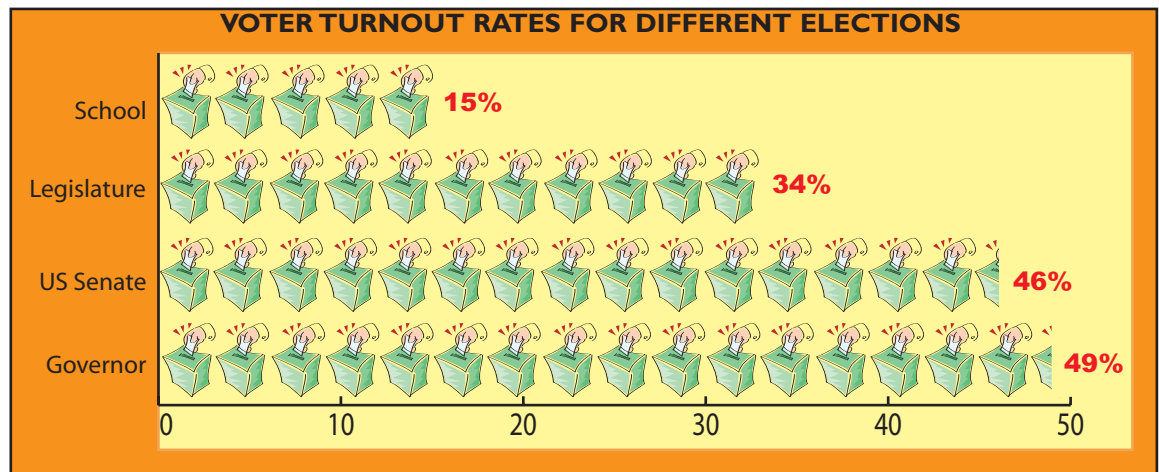
There are a total of 609 districts in New Jersey, of which 549 hold elections on their school budgets. Fifty-three districts do not vote on their school budgets: these include the three State takeover districts (Jersey City, Newark, Paterson), 18 "Type 1" districts, 21 county vocational districts, and eight special service county districts. The three State takeover districts and Maplewood South Orange district do elect their school board representatives, but do not directly vote on the school budget. Type 1 districts are districts in which the mayor appoints a school board, and a board of school estimate reviews the proposed budget.

### How do school board election turnouts compare to other recent elections?

Approximately 685,000 New Jersey voters, or 15% of the State's electorate, participated in the April 16, 2003, school budget vote: 62% of NJ school budgets passed, many by only a handful of votes. A total of 347,027 "Yes" votes and 337,978 "No" votes were cast Statewide (source: [www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/education/data/vote/03/vote2.pl](http://www.state.nj.us/cgi-bin/education/data/vote/03/vote2.pl)). By comparison, 34% of New Jersey's registered voters participated in the November 2003 legislative elections, 46% in the 2002 US Senate elections, 49% in the 2001 gubernatorial election, and 68% in the 2000 presidential election.

### Where do I vote?

All registered voters receive a sample ballot listing all of the candidates for the local school board, the proposed budget questions, and any additional questions. The polling location and hours of operation are also listed. Voters may also call their local board of education or county clerk for polling times and locations. State laws require annual school board elections to be held from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., although most communities schedule additional polling hours.



About the

## New Jersey Policy Research Organization (NJPRO)

The New Jersey Policy Research Organization (NJPRO) Foundation is an independent public policy research affiliate of the New Jersey Business & Industry Association. NJPRO produces innovative, timely and practical research. NJPRO is New Jersey's leading policy organization, conducting research on behalf of New Jersey employers. NJPRO advocates more efficient and effective government and a wiser expenditure of taxpayer dollars. Governed by an independent Board of Trustees, NJPRO is a nonpartisan, tax-exempt organization. NJPRO depends on the support of corporations, individuals and foundations for its income.

# FACTS FOR DISCUSSION

April 20, 2004

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### Summary of the facts

1. Half of public school revenues come from local property taxes.
2. Businesses pay up to 40% of local property taxes.
3. School spending is decided by a very small percentage of registered voters.

### Policy questions and implications

1. Why don't more people vote on school budgets?
2. What is the cost of holding these low turnout elections, both in operations to run the election and costs to the municipal residents who do not vote?
3. Should a relatively small number of voters determine the budget approval process?
4. Does the existing system benefit well-organized, special-interest groups?
5. Would New Jerseyans benefit from greater voter involvement?
6. Why do we hold a separate election day in April versus combining it with the May non-partisan, June primary, or November general election?
7. Is there a better way to involve citizens and business in the school monitoring process?

### Additional resources

With the development of the New Jersey State School Report Card and Comparison Spending Guide, a wealth of data is now available to help New Jersey voters examine the performance and efficiency of their local public schools. These annual reports (available in print or at the NJ State Department of Education Website [www.state.nj.us/education](http://www.state.nj.us/education)) give people the tools to assess the achievement and spending practices of any school district or any individual school within the district and to compare the performance of two or more districts.

### NJ TAXPAYERS FUND NATION'S MOST COSTLY SCHOOL SYSTEM

New Jersey averages vs. national averages

|                             | N.J.     | Nat'l rank | Nat'l avg. |
|-----------------------------|----------|------------|------------|
| Spending per pupil          | \$11,248 | 1          | \$7,376    |
| Instruction                 | \$6,668  | 2          | \$4,539    |
| % spent in the classroom    | 59.3     | 39         | n/a        |
| % spent on admin. & support | 37.7     | 8          | n/a        |
| <b>REVENUE</b>              |          |            |            |
| % raised locally            | 60.2     | 2          | 42.6       |
| % state aid                 | 37.0     | 46         | 49.7       |
| % federal                   | 2.8      | 50         | 7.3        |

Sources: U.S. Dept. of Education and the National Education Association

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NOTE: Nothing written herein is to be construed as an attempt to aid, or hinder, the passage of any specific bill before Congress or the NJ State Legislature.