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**School spending cap offers departure from status quo**

By Fred Snowflack, Daily Record

The status quo can be a wonderful thing. It is for the school community in New Jersey.

That's why the New Jersey Education Association, arguably the strongest public union in New Jersey, supported virtually every incumbent in the 2003 legislative elections. It made no difference whether they were Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal. If they were in office, the NJEA backed them.

This love for the status quo when it comes to education in New Jersey has widened. Now the teachers' union is in agreement with two groups that are normally on the other side: the New Jersey School Boards Association and local district administrators.

All three groups are opposing recently signed legislation that seeks to somewhat control school costs in New Jersey. The legislation, signed last summer, does two things: It caps annual increases in school budgets to around 3 percent and reduces the amount of surplus a district can carry from 6 percent of the total budget to 2 percent beginning in the 2005-06 school year.

No one should think these measures are going to significantly reduce school costs in New Jersey. That's not going to happen without reducing the heavy reliance on property taxes to support public education. On average, nearly 70 percent of a homeowner's property tax bill goes to support local education.

So, why are the bills any good?

Their value is that the bills are a departure from the status quo. That's what is needed.

To understand why the NJEA so loves the status quo, just remember that salary increases for teachers in Morris County are averaging more than 4 percent a year. That, coincidentally, is higher than the rate of inflation and also higher than the annual cap under the new bill. If you were a teacher, you would oppose the bill as well.

What is a little harder to figure out is why administrators and the school boards association also are opposed to this bill. As stewards of the public treasury -- at least in theory -- you would expect both these groups to support anything that gives them more power to control salary increases. But that's not happening. Suffice to say, management in this case is afraid of change even if it would benefit the taxpayers -- albeit in a small way.

Some also may conclude that school boards owe it to their constituents to explore new ways to reduce costs. They apparently don't see it that way either.

All three groups -- the school boards association, district administrators and the teachers union -- have combined forces and have scheduled a meeting for 7 p.m. tonight at Morristown High School to convince the public these bills should be repealed. Talk about an unholy alliance, but such, apparently, is the allure of keeping the status quo.

It would be comforting at this point if we could report that area lawmakers were coming down on the side of taxpayers and supporting the bills. That's not the case. Most Morris County legislators, all Republicans, support repealing or altering the bills. That's something to keep in mind the next time you hear one of our Republican legislators talking about cutting the cost of government. This is a bill that strives to do that and many are opposed. Now you know why the NJEA supports virtually every incumbent.

The nicest thing that can happen tonight is for average taxpayers to show up and say they support trying to control rising school costs. It's a cold night in January. That's probably not going to happen, but you never know.

- Morris County Republicans who are not making the trek to Washington on Thursday can still revel in the joyous glow of George W. Bush's inauguration by staying at home. The county's Republican committee has scheduled an inaugural lunch at the Famished Frog restaurant in Morristown from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Like an NFL playoff game, we assume "W" will be on the big screen TV. Cost is \$30 per person and attendance is limited to 60.

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