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## Effective tax-reform discussion stays positive, factual

BY KEVIN E. CIAK

**S**ummer 2006 in Trenton promises to be unlike any other — with property-tax reform, school finance and consolidation of government services heading the agenda of the current special legislative session.

The New Jersey School Boards Association is committed to positive change that will enable our state to provide high standards of education without overburdening local property taxpayers. It's a goal that can be achieved. What stands in our way, however, is finger-pointing, inaccurate statements and negative rhetoric. Unfortunately, too much of that is emanating from Trenton. We've heard unfounded statements that local school boards are not interested in sharing services, that they have overloaded schools with administration and that they have little interest in controlling employment costs.

Let's consider the facts.

**FACT:** School boards have championed shared services for decades. Twenty-five years ago, research by the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) found that nearly 60 percent of responding school boards shared services with neighbors. Shared transportation, business operations and child-study teams are common. Over the years, interest in shared services continued. In 2001, the state's Regionalization Efficiency Aid Program recognized an additional 352 new shared-service arrangements involving school districts. Just last year, one countywide effort, the Somerset County Business Partnership, coordinated shared services among schools and municipalities that saved taxpayers \$13.6 million. Today, at least 20 districts even share superintendents.

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New Jersey schools spend less on administration today than they did more than a decade ago. The most recent federal statistics show that New Jersey schools spend 8.02 percent on administration, placing the state 22nd in the nation. (In 1992-1993, the state's schools ranked third, with 10.42 percent of expenditures going toward administration.) Between 1989 and 2004, the actual number of administrators employed in New Jersey public schools decreased by 0.14 percent. At the same time, the student enrollment jumped by 29 percent and the number of teachers in our classrooms grew 34 percent.

**FACT:** School boards are negotiating cost savings into employment contracts. Each year since 2000, nearly 45 percent of all teacher contracts have included provisions to control the skyrocketing costs of health insurance coverage and other benefits. Close to 40 percent of the contracts also increased instructional time or the length of the school day or school year.

**FACT:** New Jersey public schools are strong academic performers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (the "nation's report card," which compares test results among states) rates New Jersey among the top five states for our students' reading and math scores. We're also among the top five states in the proportion of

public high schools (96 percent) offering Advanced Placement (AP) courses through which students can earn college credit.

Our students place third in the nation in AP test results.

Clearly, local school boards — whose members devote enormous time and effort to their communities at no pay — are placing limited resources in the classroom and getting results. They are doing more with less. That's critical in light of the fact that New Jersey state government provides slightly more than 38 percent of the total cost of public schools, compared with the nationwide average state contribution of 50 percent.

Effective discussion of property-tax reform must focus on a variety of possible solutions, including balancing state and local revenues, sharing services and encouraging consolidation. But to get to that level of discussion, public discourse must be positive and accurate.

*Kevin Ciak is president of the New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of district boards of education that advocates the interests of school districts, trains local school board members and provides resources for the advancement of public education.*