

## [How to Save Your Pension by Wendell Steinhauer](#)

Here are several things you can do, starting today, to help build on our momentum to **save your pension**:

- Visit the new [FundNJPension](#) organizing website to learn more about pensions and how we can save them.
- While you are there, take a moment to [send a message](#) to your legislators.
- Talk to your colleagues who weren't at the meeting last night about what they can do, and sign up at least [five new pension activists](#). We have power in numbers!
- Hold a [10-minute meeting](#) for your colleagues so they can join you in this fight.
- Create a local Pension Action Team, then implement your own Action Plan using these [sample materials](#).
- Make sure that members of your local participate in the [Great Twitter Payday Campaign](#) next Thursday, April 30 and every payday after that.
- [Send us](#) your organizing success stories, so we can share them with others and help you multiply the impact of your hard work.

**Please note: A personal, hand written note/ letter to your legislators is a powerful tool that carries a lot of weight.**

## [Politics by Brian Adams](#)

# Hespe Taken to Task Over Failure to Fully Fund School Districts

John Mooney | April 29, 2015

**Commissioner says amount of aid reflects what state's able to afford in tough financial times**

New Jersey's school-funding law got lots of attention yesterday as the Christie administration went before the state Senate's budget committee – but the legislation remains basically an extinct species at this point.

**Questioning started right out of the gate with the committee's chairman, state **Sen. Paul Sarlo (D-Bergen)**, as he quizzed state Education Commissioner David Hespe on what has become the new reality in school funding: **little or no increase in state aid to New Jersey's public school districts, regardless of what the law says is required.****

**"In fiscal 2014 and 2015 and again fiscal 2016, we are not meeting the school funding formula, is that correct?" Sarlo asked Hespe.**

**The commissioner acknowledged that the Christie administration was falling well short**

**– by about \$1.1 billion this year -- of what is mandated under the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) of 2008.**

**He cited the state's financial crisis and said the amount of aid is what the state could afford.**

"That formula is underfunded to make ends meet," Hesper said.

The commissioner tried to put the best face on it, saying that the administration has increased its share to districts and is hitting a record high amount in overall state aid to schools – at least when pension contributions and school-building funding are included.

"My favorite number is what is percentage of the budget that goes to support education in New Jersey, and that has increased from 33 percent at the beginning of this administration to 38 percent now," Hesper said. "That is the number I'd like to focus on."

**That hardly allayed concerns from both sides of the political aisle, as Sarlo and other Democrats stressed the impact of the administration's decisions, and Republicans, too, questioned how and why their own school districts were being hurt.**

State Sen. Jennifer Beck (R-Monmouth) cited said scores of districts are falling short of the state's own calculations under SFRA of what is deemed to

be “adequacy” to meet educational needs. The hardest-hit were those with big enrollment gains, she said, but without seeing the state support needed to sustain them.

**“We have gone from 130 districts that are 10 percent below the adequacy standard to 173 districts,” she said. “They cross all of our legislative districts, and it is not tenable. Some of them are barely hanging on.”**

Beck said the funding formula has grown virtually defunct, and the Legislature will likely at some point need to craft a new one.

**“While we debate and figure out what we will do with the funding formula – clearly it’s not working and we’re not using it,” she said. “While we dicker, some of these districts are teaching kids in the hallways or on stages, 37 kids in the classroom.”**

Hespe stood firm and said that if the state ran the funding formula with existing resources, as many as 350 districts could have seen decreases next year. **But he agreed that the districts are dealing with financial strains.**

“It’s matter of what’s possible and what’s viable in these financial times,” he said. “But clearly it’s unsustainable. Districts can’t stay in this position for a long period of time.”

**By the administration's own calculations, if the state did meet its full-funding obligations as set under SFRA, just two dozen districts would be seeing decreases, and in fact, more than 400 would see double-digit increases in aid.**

The biggest winners would be the state's largest districts, including the state-run districts of Newark and Paterson. Newark alone would see a \$131 million increase, while Paterson would get \$68 million more in aid. Here is a [full breakdown of how the school districts would fare](#) under Christie administration's fiscal 2016 budget compared to what they're entitled under SFRA, according to the administration.

Star Ledger

**Senate president: Come home, Chris Christie. N.J. needs you**

By [Matt Friedman](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

April 29, 2015 at 4:49 AM

**TRENTON** – **State Senate President Stephen Sweeney has a message for Gov. Chris**

**Christie: Log off Twitter, come home and work to fix the state's economy.**

**"He actually needs to be back here meeting with the legislative leadership. He needs to be back here with a plan on what we're going to do to fix this place," Sweeney (D-Gloucester) said during a Statehouse news conference Tuesday.**

**"Because you can't fix it when you're not here. You don't fix anything when you can't look anybody in the eye."**

**Christie was at a fundraiser Tuesday for his leadership PAC in Washington.**

**The governor, who has said he'll make a decision on running for president in late spring or early summer, was in New Hampshire earlier this month, where he held two town hall meetings and promoted his plan to raise Social Security retirement age by two years and to cut off payments entirely for seniors with earnings of more than \$200,000 annually.**

**Sweeney said that if the governor has a plan for Social Security, he should have an economic recovery plan for his home state.**

At New Jersey town halls, Christie has pushed for further cuts to pensions and health care benefits for public workers. Sweeney said they are already paying more under the 2011 overhaul law he and Christie worked together on, and that the governor was wrongly blaming public workers for the system's dire fiscal condition.

**"What's bothering me is time is continuing to slide. And instead of focusing on solutions, we're looking for villains," Sweeney said.**

**"And there aren't any villains. There's victims. The victims are workers who are paying more and having their retirements in jeopardy. It's seniors, the working class in this state who are suffering.""**

Christie has also [taken to Twitter to criticize Sweeney](#) — with whom he worked so closely during his first two years in office that the two were jokingly said to have a "bromance" — as well as Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto (D-Hudson)

**"The nonsense tweets. The accusations that are false. Don't ever let the truth get in the way," Sweeney said. "It's enough now. He's**

**constantly looking to blame someone else. He's pointing fingers. He's trying to redirect."**

Democrats offered Christie a package of 30 bills they said were intended to create jobs in the Garden State in 2011, including several tax breaks. Christie vetoed the most far-reaching bills in the package, including restoring tax breaks for TV and film productions and tax credits for businesses that gave on-the-job training for the unemployed.

**Sweeney did not offer any specific ideas on growing jobs, but said that it could start with re-funding the broke Transportation Trust Fund. Talks to replenish the fund this year have failed, largely due to the political difficulty of raising the gas tax to pay for it.**

Sweeney also disputed Christie's claim at New Jersey town hall meetings that 10,000 millionaires fled the state in 2014. That claim was based on [a January study by Phoenix Marketing International](#). Sweeney countered with figures from a New Jersey Office of Legislative Services study, which found that the number of millionaires had increased by 38 percent since 2009.

The two studies use different methodologies. The Phoenix study measured millionaire households by net worth. The OLS study counted those whose income was more than \$1 million a year, according to Senate Democratic staffers.

**In the end, Sweeney said he'll ultimately sponsor a bill to raise taxes on millionaires, as Democrats have attempted four times**

**before. Each time, Christie has vetoed it. And he's vowed to again.**

Sweeney said. **"But we wouldn't be talking about a millionaires tax if we had our jobs back,"**

Christie spokesman Kevin Roberts responded that "increasing taxes on New Jersey families to pay for public employee entitlement programs is a very confused way to argue for strengthening the economy."

Sweeney said his call for Christie to come home should does not mean he is saying the governor's presidential ambitions are dead.

But, Sweeney said, **"I think his chances would be a hell of a lot better if he had a really good story to tell."**

**"I would love people to point to New Jersey as the leader in economic recovery and leading the nation in job growth," he said.**

**NJ Spotlight**

**Sweeney Chides Christie Over Absences, Announces New 'Millionaire's Tax' Bill**

John Reitmeyer |

April 29, 2015

## **Senate president says governor exaggerates supposed exodus from NJ by the wealthy and needs to stay home to address state's problems**

Democrats will soon try for the fifth time to get Gov. Chris Christie to agree to collect more money from the state's wealthiest residents -- but this latest effort seems to be turning more personal.

**Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) said during a news conference in the State House yesterday that he's drafting a bill that would again seek to increase the top-end income-tax rate paid by those earning more than \$1 million in New Jersey.**

**Sweeney also took on Christie personally for not being in New Jersey more regularly this year to work on the state's biggest problems, and he accused the governor of not telling the full truth during his regular town hall-style events. He also said Democrats are considering raising the tax on high-earners**

**only because Christie's own economic policies are not growing the state's tax base.**

**The tax-policy change would bring in more revenue for the chronically underfunded public-employee pension system, and it would also help Christie and lawmakers live up to promises they made to increase payments into the pension funds, Sweeney said.**

The bill expected to be introduced next week would follow four previous attempts since Christie, a Republican, took office in 2010. Although all of the previous proposals were rejected by the governor, **Sweeney said he's willing to work with Christie, including adding a sunset provision to the "millionaire's tax."**

But Sweeney – a private-sector labor official who has partnered in the past with Christie to enact several major initiatives, including a property tax cap, the pension reforms and a massive reorganization of higher education in New Jersey – didn't just talk about the budget and tax policy during the news conference yesterday.

Instead, he went on to sharply criticize Christie for devoting too much attention to his ongoing consideration of a 2016 presidential run. In fact, Christie spent part of his day yesterday in Washington, D.C., attending a fund-raiser for a political committee tied to his exploration of a presidential campaign.

"He actually needs to be back here meeting with the legislative leadership," Sweeney said. "He needs to be back here with a plan on what we are going to do to fix this place because you can't fix it when you're not here."

**“You don’t fix anything when you can’t look anybody in the eye. I get his ambitions, but he’s the governor of the state of New Jersey,” continued Sweeney,**

who is expected by many to run for governor when Christie’s term ends. Sweeney also forcefully challenged several comments Christie has made both on social media and at the weekly town hall-style events the governor has been holding since introducing a [\\$33.8 billion spending plan](#) on Feb. 24 for the fiscal year that begins July 1.

Christie, while trying to win support for the new round of employee-benefits reforms he proposed along with the new state budget, has been saying New Jersey taxpayers can simply no longer afford to fund workers’ pensions and healthcare benefits.

**The governor’s plan calls for freezing the current pension system and force employees to accept less-costly healthcare options.**

**But Sweeney said Christie is doing so to deflect attention away from the state’s stubbornly slow job recovery coming out of the last recession.**

“Last time I checked they’re paying more for their healthcare and more for their pensions than they did before,” he said. “This is about the economy.”

Sweeney said Christie’s regular criticism of the Democrats’ attempts to raise taxes on the roughly 17,000 state residents who are making more than \$1 million annually is misleading.

Christie frequently points to [a study](#) released earlier this year by Phoenix International Marketing that found New Jersey lost 10,000 millionaire households last year. But Sweeney said the study referred to those with a net worth of \$1 million, not those with annual earnings over \$1 million.

That population, he said citing data gathered by nonpartisan legislative analysts, has actually been growing by 38 percent since 2009.

Christie has also repeatedly said the state's top-end income-tax rate of 8.97 percent starts at \$400,000, but that rate has consistently been applied only to earnings over \$500,000 since 2004, with only one exception, when rates were temporarily increased for the 2009 tax year. Democrats have sought to up the top rate to 10.75 percent only on earnings over \$1 million.

**“We need to fix this state and instead of blaming and trying to redirect and distract people we need to focus on the economy,” Sweeney said.**

“This is a state where wealthy people can live,” he said. “The people who are leaving this state are the middle class and seniors and the working poor because they can’t afford it anymore.”

**Sweeney’s comments came less than 24 hours after Christie, during his monthly radio show Monday night, said he’s hoping this year to [cooperate with Democratic legislative leaders](#), including Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Vince Prieto (D-Hudson), and negotiate a budget deal.**

**Last year's messy budget season ended with Christie vetoing tax hikes, as well as a Democratic proposal for more funding for the pension system, which prompted public workers to sue the Christie administration in response. That litigation remains unsettled, with arguments before the state Supreme Court [scheduled for May 6](#).**

Christie suggested during the radio show that he's unlikely to go along with Democrats' wishes if they want to again draw more revenue from those earning more than \$1 million.

**"I've vetoed a millionaire's tax four times, so sometimes past is prologue, but we'll see what happens," Christie told radio-show host Eric Scott.**

It was just last week that Christie [criticized both Sweeney and Prieto for joining the ongoing litigation](#) filed by the unions in the wake of Christie's pension cuts.

Christie press secretary Kevin Roberts responded to Sweeney yesterday by saying it's Sweeney who is trying to mislead the public into thinking increasing taxes on just the state's highest earners will produce enough revenue for the larger pension contribution.

"Doing so would actually require a 29 percent income tax hike on every New Jersey family," Roberts said.

Roberts also responded directly to Sweeney's criticisms of Christie's handling of the state economy.

“Increasing taxes on New Jersey families to pay for public-employee entitlement programs is a very confused way to argue for strengthening the economy,” Roberts said.

## PARCC POOP

Star Ledger

### **Sweeney, Ruiz: Keep PARCC's impact on teacher evaluations low**

By [Adam Clark](#) | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com

April 29, 2015 at 4:47 AM

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**TRENTON** – **High ranking New Jersey Democrats are calling on the state to minimize the impact of PARCC exams on teacher evaluations again next school year.**

**State Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester) and state Sen/ Teresa Ruiz (D-Essex), chair of the Senate Education**

**Committee, wrote a letter to Education Commissioner David Hesse this week asking him to keep the weight of PARCC data at 10 percent of teachers' evaluations next year.**

The state previously said the weight could be increased from 10 to 20 percent for the teachers who have a student growth score generated from the [Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers](#) exams factored into their evaluations.

"We, as legislators, always want to take a measured approach to policy," the senators wrote. "Teachers are the most important individuals when it comes to a child's educational experience and we must ensure that we are taking a responsible approach."

Hesse told Ruiz during the Senate Budget Committee hearing on education Tuesday that the Department is in the process of talking to stakeholders and making a decision about next year's teacher evaluation matrix.

"I think our commitment remains that we should allow folks to get comfortable before we raise the stakes," Hesse said.

The use of PARCC data in teacher evaluations has [contributed to the controversy around the tests](#).

**The state's largest teachers union, which is campaigning against PARCC, objects to the state using a new test in educators in evaluations. But some skeptics have questioned whether the union is truly opposed to PARCC or simply fueling concern**

**about the tests to get them removed from performance reviews.**

**Wendell Steinhauer, president of the New Jersey Education Association, said he appreciates that Sweeney and Ruiz want to keep PARCC's impact low.**

**However, the NJEA would prefer that the senators instead endorse proposed legislation that would place a moratorium on using PARCC data in teacher evaluations for three years, he said. That bill already passed the state Assembly but has not yet been discussed by the Senate Education panel.**

**"Parents and educators alike are clearly very troubled by PARCC, and for good reason," Steinhauer said. "Parents, students and educators deserve to know that legislators have heard them and are willing to act on their behalf."**

Ruiz said that not using PARCC data to evaluate teachers could complicate the state's waiver from No Child Left Behind, which requires the state to use data from standardized tests in teacher evaluations. State law also requires the Department of Education to factor standardized test data into teacher evaluation, Hesse said.

**PARCC data was initially supposed to count as a 30 percent weight in teacher evaluations, but the NJEA negotiated a compromise with Gov. Chris Christie to lessen the importance of PARCC during the first year of its administration.**

The PARCC data used in a teacher's evaluation is the median student growth score from the classrooms of math and language arts teachers in grades 4-8. The score compares how much academic growth a student made compared to other students with similar academic histories across the state.

The NJEA has objected to comparing performance on PARCC with performance on last year's New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK) tests.