

Opinion: School Construction Waiting on Gov. Christie

The governor has forced communities with the oldest, most dilapidated schools to wait years for emergency repairs.

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By Elizabeth Smith and Mo Kinberg

New Jersey school children who want safe, productive learning environments got a useful civics lesson this month from Gov. Chris Christie: “Watch out for politicians who say one thing but do another.”

Christie appeared at recently built Colin Powell Elementary School in Union City to take credit for the new construction.

He said that, when it comes to modernizing the state’s schools, he is proud to be delivering “results and not just talk.”

Here are the “results” Christie has delivered:

Before he took office, the Legislature made \$3.9 billion available for school construction and repairs in low-income districts where the need was greatest. This funding was mandated by the courts because teaching and learning conditions were completely substandard in those districts — problems that included hazardous electrical systems, leaking roofs and pipes, and air contaminated with deadly asbestos, lead, mold or other toxins.

Moving forward with school modernization would have not only protected school children and improved education, it also would have supported thousands of jobs during the worst recession in decades.

But Christie had other priorities. He stopped action on all 52 approved school construction projects in the state. At the same time, he gave more than \$1 billion in new tax loopholes to corporations.

Since then, the Christie administration has released lists of projects with only vague timelines and completion dates. Only one of the schools on Christie’s list has had a groundbreaking. No new or renovated schools have been completed. Districts with previously approved projects, some with a ready site, did not make it to Christie’s list. Since 2010, when Christie took office, the New Jersey Schools

Development Authority has spent millions of dollars on its own operating costs with almost nothing to show in better building conditions for our school children.

Christie has also forced those communities with the oldest, most dilapidated schools to wait years for “emergent” repairs — defined as conditions that, “if not corrected on an expedited basis,” are “so potentially hazardous” as to cause “an imminent peril to the health and safety of students or staff.”

In June 2011, the state Department of Education asked districts to submit lists of all backlogged emergent repairs. A year later, the Christie administration finally responded to these urgent requests by rejecting more than 90 percent of them without further investigation. After nearly another year, the state has begun work on only a handful of the 68 approved projects.

As for Colin Powell Elementary School, where Christie held his photo op, construction of that new facility was first proposed more than a decade ago. It finally got started under former Gov. Jon Corzine in 2009 as a result of a court order in the case known as Abbott vs. Burke. If the project hadn’t already been under way, the new school would have been one of the dozens blocked by Christie when he took office. Across the state, the Healthy Schools Now campaign, coordinated by the New Jersey Work Environment Council, is working to push the governor to release the money already appropriated by the Legislature for school construction and repairs.

Parents, teachers and other school staff and community residents want to ensure that every student has a safe, modern place to learn. As the governor likes to say, it’s time for results for our state’s children, not just politicians’ talk.

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