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**Gov. Chris Christie warns N.J. districts school aid could be cut 15 percent in next budget**

By [Statehouse Bureau Staff](#)

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BERKELEY HEIGHTS — With school districts still reeling from the [midyear budget cuts he announced last week](#), Gov. Chris Christie said today he has asked districts to prepare for a 15 percent reduction in state aid in the budget he will propose next month.

If enacted, it would be the largest-ever cut in state aid to schools, officials said. Frank Belluscio, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said it would be the first reduction in aid to schools of any kind in at least 30 years.

Christie and Acting Education Commissioner Bret Schundler said at a meeting with school officials in Union County that their goal is to keep K-12 education aid flat in the upcoming budget, which Christie will propose March 16 and must be signed into law by July 1. But they said, with an \$11 billion deficit looming, they wanted to give advance warning so school officials would not be caught off guard if steep cuts are necessary.

“This is about us telling the truth,” the Republican governor said. “I’m not going to spend this state further into debt and I’m not going to tell you a happy story on July 1st, only to come to you in February and say, ‘Well, more bad news.’ I think that’s much more unfair to school districts.”

Total formula aid to schools is currently about \$7.5 billion, according to a spokeswoman for the state Department of Education. A cut of 15 percent of that would be about \$1.1 billion.

“I don’t know how we would survive it,” said Perth Amboy Superintendent John Rodecker. “There would be massive layoffs. It would in turn mean that everything we’ve built up to this point, to make us what I consider to be an outstanding school district, would be lost.”

He said a 15 percent cut in aid for next year would amount to \$19 million, on top of the \$15 million cut his urban district was told to weather last week. Perth Amboy serves nearly 10,000 children, and has a budget of about \$184 million this year.

As part of widespread cuts that were criticized by dozens of people yesterday during a day-long Assembly Budget Committee hearing, Christie last week froze \$475 million in aid to schools this year, forcing districts to spend their surpluses instead.

Somerville School Superintendent Carolyn Leary said the governor “already killed us” with that cut. A further 15 percent reduction could mean a loss of about \$1 million more next year, district officials said. “We have a bare-bones budget, we have no frills,” Leary said.

Christie said the state will provide “tools” for school districts to control salary, pension and benefit costs — “whether it’s through regulatory relief, or additional legislation that gives you a more level playing field for negotiations.”

A 15 percent cut, if imposed across the board, would have a more dramatic impact on districts that receive a big share of their revenue from the state. Perth Amboy gets more than 70 percent of its revenue in state aid; in Chatham, about 85 percent comes from local property taxes.

Other midyear cuts — including to hospitals, colleges and NJ Transit — were highlighted at a marathon Assembly Budget Committee hearing. Christie acknowledged he will need legislative approval for some of the moves, but challenged ruling Democrats to pass their own alternatives to solve a \$2.2 billion deficit.

For nearly nine hours, lawmakers heard from caregivers, hospital officials, school administrators, environmental groups, social service agencies, and a blind 13-year-old boy who said that without state funding he may not be able to attend the local school where he is thriving. Under the wide-ranging cuts, aid to blind and visually impaired children would be reduced by \$152,000.

Rocco Fiorentino, a seventh-grader at Voorhees Middle School in Voorhees, said his Braille Note computer, textbooks and independent-living training will disappear with Christie’s cuts.

“You may not understand how difficult it is to walk in my shoes,” he said.

**By [Jeanette Rundquist](#) and [Claire Heininger](#)/Statehouse Bureau**

*Staff writers Kristen Alloway, Lisa Fleisher and Peggy Ackermann contributed to this report.*