

NJEA to Gov: Beyond a doubt you've lied

By Barbara Keshishian

New Jersey's teachers and school employees have come to an alarming, yet obvious conclusion.

Our governor — and there is no delicate way to put it — is a liar.

In a court of law, you stand convicted if the evidence points to your guilt "beyond all reasonable doubt." So it is with our governor's relationship with the truth.

The final straw came the day after 15,000 New Jersey students walked out to protest the governor's budget cuts. Despite news reports proving the walkout was organized by students on Facebook, and despite NJEA statements urging students to stay in school and conduct protests during non-school hours, Chris Christie told a whopper.

Without offering any evidence, he said: "There were many factions across New Jersey led by the teachers union who were encouraging this."

This was nothing new to pundits and political observers who have watched the governor's obsession with punishing NJEA metastasize into an unprecedented attack on public education. From the day he took office, Christie has attacked public education, NJEA, our members and even our students in a series of often incredible assaults. Every day, I hear from teachers who cannot believe the vitriol and mean-spiritedness of this governor as he launches yet another broadside against the people who educate New Jersey's children.

Teachers and school employees are justifiably outraged. Our public schools are, by any measure, at or near the top of all public schools in America. Yet Christie cut school aid by \$475 million last January, and he wants another \$1 billion in cuts this September. He has already signed legislation that cuts pension and health benefits for all future school employees and eliminates them entirely for many part-timers. Now he is proposing legislation that

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could force thousands of talented teachers to retire earlier than planned or lose a major portion of their pensions.

His context for these actions is to blame teachers and the NJEA for most of what is wrong in New Jersey.

While NJEA and its members find that patently unfair — and often absurd — we are outraged at the misinformation campaign the governor has conducted along the way.

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You be the judge:

■ During the campaign, candidate Christie, in "An Open Letter to the Teachers of N.J.," said: "I will make education funding a top priority." He has cut education by nearly \$1.5 billion, plunging districts into chaos.

■ He told teachers "your pension will be protected when I am governor." He then refused to put any state funding into the already-underfunded pension system, signed legislation cutting pensions for future retirees, and is now preparing legislation to cut pensions and benefits for current employees who retire after its passage.

■ He said that if teachers would accept a pay freeze next year, it would pay for the \$1 billion in cuts he was proposing. In April, the state's independent Office of Legislative Services reported that if every teacher in New Jersey took a pay freeze, school districts would still be \$849 million in the hole.

■ He deliberately misrepresented a respected school program called "Project Democracy," which encourages voter participation. A Monroe Township teacher — with prior approval from state election officials — simply asked her third-graders to ask their parents if they were going to vote in the school budget election, as part of a classroom discussion on why people choose to vote (or not). Christie then accused teachers of using their students like "drug mules" to tell parents how to vote.

This dishonesty and rancor from a governor is reprehensible. But there is a pattern here. Like the Wizard of Oz ("pay no attention to the man behind the curtain"), diverting the public's attention from what you're really doing just may cover up your misdeeds.

Christie told parents to vote "no" on school budgets if teachers did not accept a salary freeze. Then he accused teachers of telling parents how to vote.

His cuts are forcing districts to lay off thousands of school employees and raise property taxes. Then he blamed teachers, even though the OLS report clearly says that's wrong.

And when students protested his cuts by walking out of school, he blamed "the teachers union" for those walkouts, without a shred of evidence.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I rest my case.

Barbara Keshishian is president of the 200,000-member New Jersey Education Association. To comment, visit njvoices.com.