



NJDOE News

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Voters Approve Record Percentage of School Budgets But Participation Rate Still Lags

Voters throughout New Jersey yesterday gave their stamp of approval to a record percentage of local school budgets. This year's 88.1 percent pass rate surpasses the previous high of 86.5 percent of school budgets passed in 1985 and represents the highest pass rate since records were first kept in 1977. Voter turnout for the school election continued to lag, with only 12.5 percent going to the polls to select school board members and decide the fate of 553 school budgets that carry an estimated total value of \$14 billion.

The results reported today reflect preliminary figures. Final tallies will be available next week.

Commissioner of Education David Hespe attributed the success this year to the state's strong economy and to another record increase in state aid for New Jersey's public schools. Governor Whitman's budget for 2000-01 includes \$6.6 billion in state aid for education, surpassing last year's record amount by more than \$480 million.

"I am gratified by the approval rate in this year's election," Commissioner Hespe said. "Many students in New Jersey will benefit in the coming year from this significant investment in education.

"However," he continued, "I am discouraged by the voter turnout, which remains at an unacceptably low level. Too many citizens choose each year not to participate in the annual school elections. When more people vote, we have a sharper view on how they wish to spend local taxes on their schools."

The Commissioner renewed a call he has made in the past to consider moving the school board elections to November, at the same time as the general election, when they are likely to generate greater voter interest and participation. Both Hespe and Governor Whitman are strong supporters of moving the date of the annual school election to the fall.

Hespe noted that many local school budgets pass or fail largely as a result of individual local issues.

In addition to the base budgets, voters approved 74.3 percent, or 81, of 109 second ballot questions. The questions asked voters to approve appropriations for specific items whose costs exceed the current spending growth limitation of the school district.