

Christie Aims at Democrats Unhappy With Poor Schools

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER

He's white, he's conservative, and his support is strongest in New Jersey's suburbs, where the public schools include some of the nation's best.

Yet Christopher J. Christie, the Republican candidate for governor, is hunting for votes in cities like Newark, Camden and Trenton, where Democrats routinely pile up big margins, but where black and Hispanic parents are increasingly running out of patience with the public schools, among the nation's worst.

A battered economy, rising unemployment and tax increases are expected to be the major focus of this year's campaign for governor, as Mr. Christie seeks to oust Gov. Jon S. Corzine.

But what could emerge as the sleeper issue is Mr. Christie's push for education reform: merit pay for teachers, more charter schools, and above all, vouchers as a way to give poor and minority children better educational choices and create competition that would improve the public schools.

Fighting for education reform also allows Mr. Christie, whose party affiliation is a liability in blue-leaning New Jersey, to align himself with Democrats. In Washington, Education Secretary Arne Duncan is encouraging charter schools and merit pay, using federal stimulus money as a lever.

"It's an issue whose time has come," Mr. Christie said in an interview. "When a Republican candidate for governor is advocating the same thing as President Obama's secretary of education, who's out of step? I think Jon Corzine's out of step."

Mr. Christie said that he did not expect to carry any heavily Democratic cities. But he is gambling that school choice has become popular enough among urban blacks and Latinos that he can cut into their support for Mr. Corzine, who opposes it.

The strategy, not without risk, is inspired in part by history: In 1993, lackluster minority turnout helped Christie Whitman defeat Jim Florio, another unpopular Democratic incumbent.

Michael DuHaime, Mr. Christie's top strategist, said that merely holding down Mr. Corzine's margins in urban areas could be decisive. "You'll know if we won on election night not by how much we win Ocean and Sussex by," he said, naming

Republican strongholds in the outer suburbs, "but how much do we lose Hudson, Essex and Camden by?"

A rift within the Democratic Party has created the opening for Mr. Christie, with the powerful teachers' union, the New Jersey Education Association, and its allies — Mr. Corzine chief among them — arrayed against a small but potent cadre of urban lawmakers, ministers and community and tenant activists.

Democrats who have broken with the union include Mayor Cory A. Booker of Newark; Raymond J. Lesniak, an influential state senator from Elizabeth; Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, the party's state chairman; George E. Norcross III, a South Jersey power broker; the Rev. Reginald T. Jackson, longtime head of the Black Ministers' Council; and Martin Perez, founder of the Latino Leadership Alliance, an umbrella for dozens of groups and hundreds of churches.

They have joined with conservatives to push for a voucher program in the eight cities in the state that have the worst schools. Their pet bill would let businesses direct part of their state taxes to scholarships for needy students in those areas to attend private or parochial schools.

Allies of the teachers' union repeatedly blocked the bill from moving out of various committees. But last year, its proponents said, they won a promise from Barbara Buono, the chairwoman of the Senate Budget Committee, to allow a vote if they gathered support from a majority of the 15 members on her panel.

They eventually did. But on March 5, Ms. Buono — who is vying to be Governor Corzine's running mate as lieutenant governor — said things had changed and there would be no vote, according to several people who attended a testy meeting with her that day.

"Why do you want to do this to the governor?" she said, according to three people in the room. (Ms. Buono, in an interview, denied ever promising to let the bill come up for a vote, and called the voucher program too expensive.)

This week, Mr. Jackson and the Black Ministers' Council sent questionnaires to Mr. Corzine and Mr. Christie asking about school choice, the voucher bill and related issues. Mr. Jackson is scheduled to appear

with Mr. Christie at a Camden high school on Monday. And he has told people privately that if he does not endorse Mr. Christie outright, he might sit out the election and encourage others to do so.

Mr. Perez, of the Latino Leadership Alliance, is less coy. Four years ago, the alliance endorsed Mr. Corzine. But he called Mr. Christie, a former federal prosecutor, "probably the best United States attorney we've ever had," and described Governor Corzine as well-intentioned but "ineffective." He said education reform, including school choice, was his top concern.

"It's a tossup right now," he said of the alliance's endorsement.

Democrats in Mr. Corzine's corner scoffed at such talk, saying that voters do not choose a governor based only on school choice. Mr. Corzine is preferable on many other issues dear to minority voters, they said, and they questioned whether Mr. Jackson or Mr. Perez would actually abandon the Democratic candidate.

"I don't think any real leader tells anybody to sit out an election," said Bonnie Watson Coleman, the Senate majority leader, who represents Ewing, just outside Trenton. Of Mr. Jackson, she said, "At the end of the day, I think he stays where he is."

As he tries to exploit Democratic disunity, meanwhile, Mr. Christie faces risks, primarily in antagonizing the 200,000-strong teachers' union.

In the 2001 governor's race, the union helped the Democrat, James E. McGreevey, persuade voters that Bret D. Schundler, the Republican candidate, wanted to rob the public schools of some \$600 million. Bill Pascoe, who managed Mr. Schundler's campaign, said the union's phone banks and army of canvassers deeply wounded the Republican.

Still, Mr. Pascoe said, the gambit holds potential for Mr. Christie.

"If he takes Reginald Jackson or Cory Booker to the worst school in Newark, and they do a photo op and Chris Christie says, 'Fifty years ago, Democrats stood in the schoolhouse doors and told little black kids you can't go in; today Democrats tell little black kids you can't get out' — then, you've got an issue," he said.