

Education discussion runs deeper than only financial

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer

The Rev. Reginald Jackson took another trip to Trenton to talk with state legislators about the future of education in the state, including Orange.

In addition to being pastor of St. Matthew AME Church in Orange, Jackson also serves as a member of the Orange Board of Education. His educational interest is extended through his work as executive director of the Black Ministers Council of New Jersey. The organization advocates school reform and choice.

On occasion, those beliefs have placed Jackson at odds with others who believe as strongly as he does in public education, but do not agree with his ideological positions. Jackson said his ideology has nothing to do with his "controversial" stances, it is the product of what he calls his "common sense" approach to education reform.

Jackson said he is a "practical" man when it comes to public schools and education.

"I'm meeting with Speaker Oliver and the Essex delegation on the whole education issue, including school choice," Jackson said Tuesday, referring to Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver, a former member of the East Orange Board of Education. "I see what's happening to our kids, in the schools, on the streets and at my church. I want to do something about it. I don't have a hidden agenda. Too many of our kids are in the prisons and in the cemeteries."

Those facts, Jackson said, are what lead him to embrace the cause of charter schools, school vouchers, and school choice as not only viable, but necessary, alternatives to the current public school system. Those beliefs, despite the fact that he ministers in an urban, predominantly minority city such as Orange, also put him in accord with Gov. Christopher Christie and his choice for state education commissioner, former Jersey City Mayor Brett Schundler.

So on the same day Schundler was undergoing a second round of questioning by the state Legislature, Jackson was in Trenton for many of the same reasons. Schundler is an outspoken proponent of school choice, vouchers and charter schools as viable alternatives to strictly public school education. To some people, that could not bode well for Orange's future.

"Our kids should not suffer for what the adults have done or have not done. Ronald Lee, the superintendent of the Orange public schools, said the achievement gap between urban areas and their suburban counterparts is an adult problem, not a children's problem," said Tom Puryear, president of the NAACP's Oranges and Maplewood Unit. "Too many adults don't expect enough from our children. The NAACP of the Oranges and Maplewood is watching what is happening and will be proactive if the funding formula is not funded in its entirety."

Nicole Williams-James, an Orange parent and former city Board of Education member, is treasurer of the Oranges and Maplewood Unit. She said she the only question about Christie's proposed 2011 budget, when he introduces it March 16, is if he will abide by a 2009 state Supreme Court ruling and "fully fund" the districts under the School Funding Reform Act.

"It's not a surprise that the new governor wants to make cuts in education spending. We pretty much saw this coming and Orange has had to do an extraordinary job preparing for this day without sacrificing staff and programs," said Williams-James. "The cuts are going to affect the support services and staff and may affect staffing levels."

Jackson said he believes the time is ripe for the changes that Christie, Schundler, he and others education advocates believe are needed within the state's public education system.

"The question is are people willing to have their taxes increased to pay for full funding. In Orange, the state pays almost 90 percent of our budget," said Jack son. "I'm not sure how much more you can demand that the state pay. For all of that money, what are we seeing for it?"