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N.J. moves to protect the arts from school budget cutbacks

By Angela Delli Santi
Associated Press

TRENTON - New Jersey officials announced plans yesterday to take stock of arts programs at every public school in the state as a first step toward ensuring that instruction in music, drawing, theater and dance survives even lean budget years.

Schools must complete an online survey this month, and results - which could take months to tabulate and analyze - will be used to rectify inequities in arts programs, officials said.

"We all know that students will excel in languages, in math and science, reading and all those things in the curriculum when they have this type of enrichment in their daily program," said Secretary of State Nina Mitchell Wells, one of two cabinet members who announced the survey at Mott Elementary School in Trenton.

The other, acting Education Commissioner Lucille E. Davy, said officials hoped to get a better handle on how individual schools satisfied mandates in the visual and performance arts.

Davy and Wells said the state's dire fiscal picture would not necessarily deter efforts in districts that needed to strengthen arts education.

"It has to be about how we do things more efficiently, more effectively," Davy said.

Schools would be funded at last year's levels under the \$30.9 billion budget that Gov. Corzine proposed last month, leaving two possible scenarios: higher local property taxes or district spending cuts.

Wells said the administration would promote private investment in public schools and seek arts grants.

Mike Yaple, a spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said that because arts programs were often among the first to go when school budgets got trimmed, now might be a good time to take stock of arts curricula statewide.

Mott principal Elizabeth Ramirez already has learned to do more with less. She credited a dedicated and creative staff with crafting a vibrant music and arts program despite limited resources. The school's choir, dance team, drummers and hand-chime band performed during yesterday's event.

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