I remember going back to school in Brooklyn at P.S. 179. September was an exciting time. (First of all, the Dodgers were probably in a pennant race.) During the summer we hadn't really left the school yard, because in Flatbush it also served as our back yard. With school in session our games would end at the sound of the school bell, rather than our mothers' calls for dinner.

A few things have changed about going back to school since that time. For example, we didn't have shiny new Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lunch boxes or Bart Simpson back packs to show off to our friends. But the essence of a good school remains the same today as it did forty years ago: it's a place where teachers and students constantly challenge each other as together they strive for knowledge.

That's the philosophy behind our new school initiatives. We're going to give more to our students and teachers, but we're going to ask more of them.

Some of our new programs go into effect this year, others won't be felt until a year from now. Whatever the case they add up to a fresh, new approach to education in New Jersey. This new approach is rooted in a basic value we all share: we must preserve the opportunity for our children which our parents built for us.

This approach also underscores another difference — much more significant than lunch boxes — between my school days and education today.

Our children need to be smarter and smarter if they are to compete in the international marketplace against their contemporaries in Japan and Germany — something we never worried about during the late 1940s and 1950s. And we have to do all we can to nurture our young minds, because in today's economies, brain power is the new, most important natural resource.

We are taking steps to make sure New Jersey doesn't waste a single young mind. This September will be the last time our children go back to schools run under an outdated, illegal funding system. This system was declared unconstitutional by the State Supreme Court at the end of June.
The problem with this old, unconstitutional funding method, is it punishes our children based on where they happen to live because it says the quality of their education depends on whether their community can pay a lot in property taxes. That's not fair to our kids, or to homeowners.

The court ruled that the state had to substantially increase funding for 30 urban school districts. But the school funding system we've developed as a replacement recognizes that there are hundreds of middle class suburban and rural school districts which also need help in raising enough money for good schools. So we plan to increase funding to them as well. All together, 80 percent of all New Jersey school children in 350 school districts will be able to get more state money come next September.

I wish the new funding system could be in place sooner. But as school budgets are approved in the Spring prior to the coming school year, the earliest possible date for implementing the new funding system is next year.

At the same time that we increase funding, we're going to increase our standards. You don't want your tax dollars to go to bloated bureaucracies or to line the pockets of school administrators. Neither do I. We pay our taxes to help our children. Our new Education Commissioner, Dr. John Ellis, will keep faith with taxpayers. He will take an especially active role in those school districts receiving the greatest increase in state money -- the 30 mandated by the Supreme Court -- making sure tax dollars are not wasted.

Dr. Ellis is also beginning to revamp the way we test our students. We need to make sure our tests are also challenges. He's going to move away from multiple-choice tests, which emphasize rote memory, towards subject-based tests, which judge how well our students think.

And we have other school initiatives underway. We will begin funding a $600 million "Three R's" bond issue to help school districts rebuild, refurbish and revitalize aging school facilities. That way our children will be able to keep their noses in their books, and not constantly look to the ceiling afraid of falling plaster. It also means that schools can once again serve as community centers as they did for my neighborhood in Brooklyn.

We've also started a public/private partnership to encourage local school districts to teach math and science subjects in innovative ways. The state has put up $1 million, which has already been matched by a grant from RJR Nabisco.
Another small program which will have big results is our plan to help more young children get into Head Start programs. We will direct $5 million more to this important early education effort. Almost all educators agree that the earlier children begin to learn, the more they'll be able to learn. We have to start early, so our investments yield big dividends.

So starting this year, school's going to be a little different in New Jersey. It's going to be a little more like it used to be. All these new initiatives will help us cut away the red tape, and get back to the basic student-teacher relationship which makes learning possible. Because without loving parents and concerned teachers all the money in the world won't make a difference.

I remember one of the reasons I was so excited to go back to school was my social studies teacher at P.S. 179, Mrs. Braverman. She made learning come alive for me, just as teachers do today for the latest generation of students. I guess, despite the lunch boxes, things aren't so different after all when kids go back to school.