



Christie tells teacher 'unions are the problem'

By Jenna Portnoy/The Star-Ledger

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BRANCHBURG — Gov. Chris Christie today continued his divide and conquer approach with public school teachers and their union.

At Raritan Valley Community College, he took a question from a woman who identified herself as a teacher and Rutgers University graduate frustrated by the bad rap he's given her profession.

"When did the rhetoric change that teachers are part of problem and not the solution?" she said, standing near the tippy top of bleachers in a gym decorated with flags and all the usual trappings of Christie's trademark town hall meetings. "You're in a building built with taxes."

As people streamed into the event an hour earlier, the college's Faculty Federation handed out a letter urging Christie to restore public funding to community colleges and chastising him for weakening tenure.

"We must remind you that institutions of public education, supported and enriched by strong public unions, do not harm the public but in fact represent an invaluable public good," the letter says.

The Republican governor has built a national brand in part on his epic battles with public school teachers, whose pension and benefits he cut after taking office three years ago. Yet he restrained himself.

"You may be surprised to know I agree with most of what you said," he told the teacher. Christie went on to tout a \$750 million higher education bond issue for infrastructure improvements before turning to the New Jersey Education Association, the state's largest teachers union.

"I don't think teachers are the problem. I think unions are the problem," he said, launching into a diatribe about "shared responsibility."

"We need to make sure everyone shares somewhat fairly in the costs associated with those types of benefits, which in the main are not offered anymore in the private sector," he said.

Then he gave the teacher a turn with the microphone. "The teachers are the unions. We are the same people," she said, explaining that part-timers at the college, like herself, are not eligible for pension and benefits.

The civil if blunt dialogue was a far cry from the teacher takedowns that made him a YouTube sensation and marked the first half of his term.

As he runs for re-election, Christie has tempered his temper. He even screened before the NJEA, though his Democratic challenger, state Sen. Barbara Buono of Middlesex, walked away with the endorsement. The goodwill didn't last long.

"I recognize that unions are made up of members," he said, his voice rising. "But there is an extraordinary divide in my experience between the majority of members and the leadership of unions."

Next he called on a 4-year-old boy for a softball about his television-watching habits. "I like to watch sports on TV," Christie said, grinning. "My favorite station is ESPN."