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N.J. adding \$351 million to schools, and 'moms' help make it happen

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Photo by AKIRA SUWA

Mothers Jennifer Cavallaro-Fromm (left) and Andrea Katz pushed for aid increases for schools that have been shorted by the state, including Kingsway Regional in Gloucester County.

Volunteering for her parent teacher organization in 2007, Jen Cavallaro-Fromm wondered why her school needed to collect Cheerios box tops to pay for books while a neighboring district was able to teach Italian to kindergartners.

“I thought, How is that possible? We pay so much in taxes,” said Cavallaro-Fromm, who now serves on the board of the Kingsway Regional School District. Owners of homes worth \$335,000 in her Gloucester County town were paying about \$4,500 annually in school taxes.

After more than a decade, Kingsway is slated to receive an infusion of state money — thanks in no small part to her efforts.

Cavallaro-Fromm, 41, of Swedesboro, is among a group of parents that have been campaigning to change how New Jersey pays for public schools, [after years of failure by the state to fulfill its formula](#) for distributing money to districts.

They scored a victory in the recently enacted state budget, which boosts state aid for schools by \$351 million, a 4 percent increase over last year. By contrast, the 2018-19 [Pennsylvania budget adds just \\$100 million](#) in primary subsidy money to schools statewide.

In New Jersey, nearly 400 districts will get more money from the state, according to state Department of Education figures.

But 172 other districts are going to lose aid — and that’s at the heart of [why changing state funding has been such a battle](#). The redistribution continues for an additional six years under a bill Gov. Murphy plans to sign later this month that may force some districts to raise taxes.

New Jersey’s formula, passed in 2008, calculates how much state aid each school district should receive, providing more money for students with special needs and districts with weak tax bases.

But what many get has been vastly different. Some districts haven’t received nearly what their current enrollments would warrant, in part because the state hasn’t spent the money the formula dictates. The formula also limits how much additional money can go each year to growing districts.

The problem, however, isn’t just how much the state has been spending. The 2008 law included a provision ensuring no district lost money, regardless of what the formula said. As a result, some districts have continued to receive aid based on what they got 10 years ago — whether their enrollments have shrank or their tax bases have grown.

“That’s a really hard thing to accept when you live in a district that has a condemned track, there are no middle-school sports, our kids have to share books,” said Cavallaro-Fromm, who works for a financial company and has a 15-year-old daughter in the Kingsway Regional School District. Her 10-year-old son, now in the Swedesboro-Woolwich District, will move on to Kingsway in two years.



TOM GRALISH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The deteriorated Kingsway Regional High School track in a January 17, 2017 file photo.

In 2009, then a Swedesboro-Woolwich board member, Cavallaro-Fromm started the Fair Funding Action Committee, a regional organization that [pressed Gov. Chris Christie](#) for help.

It got extra money for some fast-growing school districts — but it wasn't a complete fix.

Meanwhile, parents like Andrea Katz were also noticing a problem. At a 2014 school board meeting in Chesterfield, Katz was struck by differences in state aid between her district, which was raising taxes, and others that also sent their children to the same regional school district for grades 7 through 12.

“It was a tiny piece of information” that was brushed by during a presentation, Katz said. “I went, ‘Huh, that doesn't sound right.’ I jumped down the rabbit hole.”

She started learning as much as she could about how the state funds schools, which wasn't easy — “The SFRA [School Funding Reform Act]’s what, 113 pages?” At a meeting at Kingsway, she met Cavallaro-Fromm, who was looking to expand her group's reach.

“We're not paid lobbyists, we're just moms,” said Katz, a stay-at-home mother of three and a township committeewoman.

Backed by Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D., Gloucester), the parents' position gained ground in Trenton last year, as lawmakers and Christie agreed to redirect some aid to school districts owed the most by the state.

But [they were disappointed when Murphy](#), who took office this year, announced his budget in March. Rather than reducing aid to some districts, Murphy proposed increasing funding to the vast majority — an approach that was favored by groups like the New Jersey Education Association and the Education Law Center, which brought the landmark *Abbott vs. Burke* cases that secured more money for poorer urban districts.

The parents took action, requesting meetings with lawmakers and registering to speak at legislative hearings. They reached out to other groups — the New Jersey School Boards Association, the Gloucester County Mayors Association — and grew the number of school communities involved to 100. They repeatedly called Murphy's office.

“We would flood their phones,” Cavallaro-Fromm said. “They would answer, ‘Oh, hi, Jen.’ ”

They also showed up at Murphy's events — [commanding attention at a town-hall meeting](#) in Willingboro, where they pressed the new governor to address inequity in the funding system.

“They put him on the spot,” said Sweeney, who had been pushing for funding changes. While he supported their efforts, “I told the governor, I didn't send them. They're going whether I want them to or not.”

“They just did not let up,” Sweeney said.

In June, Sweeney and lawmakers passed a budget that added money for schools, but cut aid to some districts and shifted it to others. They also approved a bill that would revamp the system going forward, continuing the pattern of cuts and increases for an additional six years.

For Kingsway, which expects to get an additional \$2.1 million this year — a better than 5 percent increase over its total budget the year prior — “I’m really elated that we are at the finish line,” said Superintendent Jim Lavender. While the district will still be getting only 58 percent of what it’s owed by the state, Lavender said, the new money will allow it to hire two dozen employees, including special-education, math, and English teachers.



JEN CAVALLARO-FROMM

Jen Cavallaro-Fromm and children Olivia and Jackson celebrate Kingsway’s \$2,129,970 state aid increase while at the Shore Friday.

For districts losing money, lawmakers had another consideration. New Jersey’s formula calculates what each district must spend to provide students an adequate education — a product of the *Abbott* funding cases. With the cuts prescribed by lawmakers, some districts won’t be spending at that threshold.

To avoid that prospect, the bill includes a provision that could force certain districts that don’t raise their fair share to increase taxes to make up for the state’s cuts.

Among the local districts that could be affected are Collingswood and Haddon Heights, according to Sweeney’s office. School officials in both districts said they had already been raising taxes at the state’s 2 percent cap in recent years.

“I would think that anybody who saw the size cuts some of our districts are seeing would have no choice but to” raise taxes at the cap, said Scott Oswald, the superintendent in Collingswood.

While the mandate to compensate for state cuts will lessen their impact, “the concern is that a number of districts ... will have to reduce teachers, staff, programs, and services, in budgets that are already below what their students need,” said David Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center.

If districts fall below what the formula requires, “we’re going to be on the front lines of advocating this be changed next year,” Sciarra said. He urged lawmakers to prevent districts that aren’t spending enough from using any added state aid on lowering taxes.

Parents like Cavallaro-Fromm and Katz — who were at the Statehouse the day the budget was signed — aren’t going away, either. They know that the legislation Murphy plans to sign won’t be enough: Even if it redistributes \$600 million, the state has to spend an additional \$1.2 billion to pay districts what they’re owed.

“I’ve got the budget hearings still marked on my calendar for next year,” Katz said.