

OP-ED: School funding needs to be addressed now; can't wait for new governor

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

By:

Dr. James J. Lavender
Superintendent of Schools
Kingsway Regional School District
213 Kings Highway
Woolwich Twp., NJ 08085
Gloucester County
lavenderj@krsd.org
(O): 856-467-4600 ext. 4205

Dr. G. Kennedy Greene
Superintendent of Schools
Newton Public Schools
57 Trinity Street
Newton, NJ 07860
Sussex County
kgreene@newtonnj.org
(O): 973-383-7392

Dr. Rocco G. Tomazic
Superintendent of Schools
Freehold Public Schools
280 Park Ave.
Freehold, NJ 07728
Monmouth County
rtomazic@freeholdboro.k12.nj.us
(O): 732-761-2100

Woolwich Twp./Newton – When the School Funding Reform Act was passed in 2008, it instantly became a national model. It was designed as a weighted formula that would have money follow the child, with extra funding earmarked for learning disabled, economically disadvantaged and English Language Learner students. Funding levels increased from elementary to middle to high school and included vocational-technical schools to account for the differing costs in those school environments.

The genius of the SFRA was that it was designed to be a dynamic formula, one that would adjust to ensure that school districts would get more state aid as their overall enrollments or numbers of poor or non-English-speaking youngsters grew, and that districts with shrinking student populations would get proportional reductions. It was a matter of fairness – for both children and taxpayers.

The SFRA was unanimously held to be constitutional by the New Jersey Supreme Court, putting an end to over thirty years of lawsuits that required the state to treat the 31 urban districts in the *Abbott v. Burke* case differently from everyone else.

Today however – nine years after the SFRA's passage – school funding in New Jersey is both inadequate and unfair as a result of the failure of the Governor and Legislature to address three major deficiencies.

First, the Legislature never redistributed hundreds of millions of dollars in temporary “hold harmless” Adjustment Aid that it tacked onto the bill in 2008 to ensure that school districts would receive the same amount of money even if their student needs did not support it.

Second, the Legislature limited the amount of additional funding districts could receive each year for increased enrollment by imposing a “growth cap” that was also supposed to be temporary, but was never removed.

Then, to compound the problem further, the Governor’s budgets have severely underfunded the SFRA and failed to provide anything but modest increases in school funding for nine years.

Today, as a result, some growing districts get no extra aid for the new students they have added and are forced to raise property taxes or cut teachers, while others do not pay their fair share because they continue to receive state funding for students they no longer enroll.

Over 70% of schoolchildren live in towns that are not getting their fair share of state aid, while 29% live in districts that are receiving more than they should. As a result, over 200 school districts – urban, suburban and rural -- are taxing their residents more than their “local fair share” of property taxes under the school funding formula to make up for state aid they are not receiving.

The inequities are mind-boggling. How can we agree to send nearly \$600 million more in state aid to districts that are not entitled to that money, when other districts are underfunded by a total of \$2 billion?

This is why the argument made recently by New Jersey Education Association President Wendell Steinhauer that we should wait yet another year before fixing the inequities in the school funding formula makes no sense.

How can we justify forcing school districts like Paterson, Bayonne and Newton in the north, Freehold Borough and Red Bank in the central and Kingsway Regional, Chesterfield and Delran in the south to reduce staff when other districts are getting more than their fair share?

The Legislature and Governor need to act now. One reasonable idea put forth is the proposal by Senate President Steve Sweeney to reallocate over \$500 million in Adjustment Aid while adding \$500 million to the school funding formula over five years. This would go a long way to restore fairness and ensure that each child, no matter where he or she lives, receives the “thorough and efficient” education promised by the New Jersey Constitution.

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