

## **Assembly Budget Committee Testimony - March 19, 2025**

**Prepared by: Kate Rattner**

Good afternoon, my name is Kate Rattner and I am a member of the board of education in Monroe Township School District, located in Middlesex County. Last year I came before this committee to express concern regarding the unfair way schools are funded in New Jersey, and the heavy burden this has placed on taxpayers in Monroe Township. The need to revise the school funding formula remains a statewide concern, despite multiple bills proposed to create a school funding formula task force (A1280, A3597, A4003, A3578, A5721) and hearings held by the Department of Education regarding school funding. I hope swift action is taken on this to ensure funding is equitable across all school districts, taking into account districts like Monroe Township which are unfairly treated by the formula due to our unique demographics that include a high percentage of senior citizens, resulting in ZERO equalization aid in the last 17 years.

Sadly, this is just one of many challenges that Monroe Township has been facing. Various state housing mandates have caused student enrollment to grow from 3,100 students in 2003 to 7,000 students this year. This has created a large strain on our infrastructure, and taxpayers have been forced to pay for a new elementary school and a new high school because impact fees can not be utilized for educational infrastructure. Despite all of this, our school buildings remain overcrowded and our district is unable to provide vital programs offered by many other districts.

Today I wish to speak to you about one of those programs, which is full-day kindergarten. Monroe Township is one of a few districts left in New Jersey unable to offer this essential program. I was glad Governor Murphy said he would mandate full-day kindergarten during his State of the State address, and even more excited when his budget proposal included legislation to ensure that every school district would offer full-day kindergarten. Yet when reviewing the budget, I learned that while there are millions of dollars budgeted for universal preschool, no money was allotted to support the proposed full-day kindergarten mandate.

Many legislators have insisted that they will never support unfunded mandates, but that is exactly what is currently happening in the proposed budget. Here is one solution to fix this. In the last two years, \$75-\$100 million in appropriations were added to the budget to address capital needs in a few school districts. If the goal of this legislature and the governor is to ensure that every district has full-day kindergarten, I urge you to appropriate similar funds to the remaining districts that want to offer full-day kindergarten but don't have the space or the fair funding to address the lack of space. Let's ensure that this program (one that almost every legislator on both sides of the aisle believes is important to families living in New Jersey) does not become an unfunded mandate, but rather an investment in our children and our future.

Thank you for taking the time to listen.

Sincerely,

Kate Rattner