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Dr. Kwame R. Morton – Senate Budget & Appropriations Committee Testimony
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Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman, Mrs. Vice-Chair and honorable members of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of Cherry Hill Public Schools and the community I serve. It is both an honor and a responsibility that I approach with deep commitment. Today, I come before you to discuss the critical funding challenges our district faces and to urge you to consider the pressing need for a fair, sustainable, and predictable state aid allocation.

Cherry Hill Public Schools is one of the largest districts in New Jersey and undoubtedly the largest in South Jersey. We are home to approximately 11,000 students from PreK through 12th grade, representing a vibrant and diverse community reflecting 75 languages and cultures. In recent years, we've seen sharp increases in student needs, with our population of English Language Learners climbing, and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch continuing to rise as well. Unfortunately, the financial realities currently faced by our district undermine our ability to meet the needs of our students. This year, Cherry Hill suffered another painful reduction in state aid, a loss of nearly \$4 million or 9.9% when factoring in the absence of Stabilized School Aid. To put this into perspective, dramatic shifts in key aid categories reflect an uneven approach to funding. Equalization aid, for instance, has been entirely eliminated, falling by over \$15 million. Stabilized school aid, another critical source, also disappeared, leaving a gaping hole in our budget. Although we acknowledge increases in areas such as special education aid and security aid, the mathematical calculations used to determine this year's appropriation simply do not add up.

Our local taxpayers have demonstrated exceptional dedication by shouldering tax increases over the past two years and overwhelmingly approving a \$363 million bond referendum to address critical facility needs. The Cherry Hill community has consistently answered every call to support its schools, fulfilling its obligations with resounding commitment. Nonetheless, these commendable efforts are proving insufficient to offset the continued loss of state funding. This reality has brought us to a critical juncture, forcing us to make tough, far-reaching decisions. The necessity to bridge a multi-million-dollar deficit has resulted in the reduction of over three dozen positions, including a restructuring of our schools. These measures, which affect staffing, resources, and the very programs that define our district's strength and identity, highlight the need for equitable state support.



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The unpredictability of state aid allocations poses significant challenges for districts like Cherry Hill, making it nearly impossible to plan and implement responsible, long-term financial strategies. While districts were informed that total state aid losses would be capped at 3% this year, budget documents indicate that Cherry Hill's losses could have exceeded \$11 million under the current formula. Such a reduction would be catastrophic, intensifying the already troubling financial strain we face.

Equally concerning is the flawed reliance on district income and property valuations as measures of community wealth for aid calculations. These metrics paint a misleading picture, implying an equitable distribution of wealth among residents, which is far from the truth. Furthermore, using assessed property values as a wealth indicator overlooks the fundamental reality that equity in a home is inaccessible unless the property is sold. This flawed approach exacerbates inequities and creates an inaccurate representation of a community's ability to support its schools.

To fulfill our commitments to students, faculty, and the community, I respectfully present two requests for your consideration:

Ensure Predictable Funding Pathways

Implement measures to stabilize state aid allocations from year to year, reducing extreme fluctuations that make district budget planning unsustainable. This could include establishing minimum funding thresholds or providing districts with extended lead times to prepare for significant changes in aid levels.

Revise State Aid Formulas

Re-evaluate the use of district income and property valuations as the primary indicators of community wealth. These metrics should be replaced or supplemented with a more comprehensive and equitable formula that takes into account real, demonstrable student needs. Factors such as increases in low-SES populations, special education enrollments, and English Language Learner communities must carry greater weight in determining aid allocations.

Cherry Hill's financial struggles are not unique; they reflect broader systemic issues within our state's funding model. I firmly believe that New Jersey's public schools are at a critical crossroads, and it is essential that we take decisive action to ensure that all students and children have the opportunity to succeed. The children of New Jersey are relying on you to make decisions that are not only fair but also equitable.