

SWEDESBORO-WOOLWICH SCHOOL DISTRICT

ADMINISTRATION OFFICES

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Kristin P. O'Neil, Ed. D
Superintendent of Schools

Christopher J. DeStratis
School Business Administrator

January 27, 2017

Dear Honorable Members of the Senate Select Committee on School Funding Fairness,

My name is Dr. Kristin O'Neil, and I am the Superintendent of the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District. Joining me this morning is Mr. Christopher DeStratis, the Business Administrator, Mr. Scott Hogan, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Mr. Craig Frederick, the Board of Education President. The testimony that I am about to give is on behalf of the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District.

By now you are familiar with the history of underfunding for both Swedesboro and Woolwich as well as the significant tax burden placed on both communities. You are also familiar with the fact that the Swedesboro-Woolwich School District was known just a few years ago as the fastest growing school district in the entire Northeast.

As of today's date, our school district educationally supports 1,732 students. Currently, Swedesboro-Woolwich receives 55% of the full, uncapped SFRA funding, and we are currently underfunded a total of \$3,221 per child or a total of 5.6 million dollars. We are also 2.3 million dollars below adequacy.

However, I must note that I am extremely proud of our school district because even faced with these challenges we have managed to continue to provide a good educational program to all. Most recently, the District was commended by Ms. Avé Altersitz, the Gloucester County Executive Superintendent, for exceeding efficiency standards in many areas as compared to the state median:

- Support Service Costs
- Administrative Costs
- Operation and Maintenance of Plant Costs
- Students to Educational Support Personnel
- Students to Administrative Personnel
- Faculty to Administrative Personnel

However, due to the decreased streams of funding and the increasing expenditures, it has been recommended by the Gloucester County Educational Office that the District continue to increase the local tax levy by 2% and utilize all cap adjustments.

But - now is the time when we must ask - where does this end? Since 2001, the local school taxes have increased an overwhelming 270%, which doesn't even include Kingsway's similar increase. At the same time, state aid per pupil to Swedesboro-Woolwich is down by 19% in just 15 years.

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While financially doing our job and continuing to maintain a very low total budgetary cost per pupil, my greatest concern for our children focuses on the future. Based on communications with our local municipalities, we are preparing to face another wave of significant growth within the next few years. We are anticipating as many as 3,000 new homes. What concerns me most is that even today, with a relatively stabilized enrollment, and while maintaining the 7th lowest out of 56 (K - 6) school districts in total cost per pupil, we were faced with the decision to lay off four teachers this year to balance our district budget. This resulted in kindergarten class sizes increasing between 5 and 6 students per class.

Our District is beyond fortunate to have very dedicated and supportive teachers, administrators, and support staff members who find creative ways to make things work. We have found ways to offer the arts at the kindergarten level even though we do not have enough staff to offer formal music or art instruction to our 3, 4, 5, and 6 year olds.

We have found ways to offer gifted and talented, STEAM, and enrichment services to students beyond the school day and over the summer through parent funding. But again, with our local tax burden continuing to compound each year, our children and our families deserve better. We should be able to expand and fund these opportunities for our children without imposing an additional financial burden onto our families.

Although we are very grateful to the State of New Jersey for committing Supplemental Enrollment Growth Aid to our district several years ago, we implore you, the Legislators, to prioritize fair funding for all school districts throughout the state. We also urge you to impose no new legislation that would cost school districts additional monies until this problem is resolved. We just don't have it. The children of New Jersey didn't create this problem, but now you have an opportunity to correct it.

I sincerely thank you for your time, and I thank you for listening to our concerns this morning.