



KINGSWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

Committed to Excellence

*Dr. James J. Lavender
Superintendent of Schools*

**Testimony provided by Dr. James J. Lavender, Superintendent of the Kingsway Regional School District
on Wednesday, March 22, 2017 before the Assembly Budget Committee at Rowan University**

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Jim Lavender and I am the Superintendent of the Kingsway Regional School District, and my testimony today will focus on the State's school funding fiasco, which consistently punishes the nearly 3,000 7th through 12th grade students enrolled in my District; and, affects every taxpayer who make up Kingsway's 57-square mile border, encompassing the Townships of East Greenwich, South Harrison, Woolwich and the Borough of Swedesboro.

I come before you today to advocate for my students, who are the ultimate victims in a school-funding scheme that has created a statewide public school system of *Haves and Have-Nots*. My students attend an *underfunded* school district and year-after-year they are deprived of the resources their peers in *overfunded* school districts receive.

To attend Kingsway means that you most likely are in classes with thirty-two of your classmates; it means you don't have a track to run on because your school doesn't have the necessary funds to repair a twenty-year old plus dilapidated surface; It means you are denied elective requests in favor of being shuffled into study halls because your high school doesn't have enough teachers to provide the classes you need; it means your athletic uniforms are worn and tattered; your books – old and outdated; and I can go on.

To be a student at Kingsway means you can look out your window at schools not far from our campus and you see the resources your peers in *overfunded* schools enjoy; lower class sizes; laptops for every student; plenty of textbooks to go around; state-of-the-art technology and equipment; synthetic turf athletic fields; and dozens of elective options.

Yes, this is the tale of New Jersey's public school system; a system deliberately eroding many of the underfunded districts from the inside out.

Home of the Dragons

This year 212 school districts received more than 100% of their full, uncapped SFRA funding; Some as high as Jersey City in Hudson County who receives 141%; Eatontown in Monmouth County receives 209%; Brick Township in Ocean County receives 284%; and, Hoboken City in Hudson County who receives 335%.

While 379 other districts received less than 100% of their state aid; 239 of them receiving less than 70% of full, uncapped SFRA funding. Some as low as Chesterfield in Burlington County who receives just 10% of what they are entitled; East Greenwich, one of my sending elementary districts in Gloucester County receives 48%; and my District, Kingsway receives just 43% of full, uncapped SFRA funding.

You know how Kingsway uses fund balance? We have been forced to plug that number in to cover recurring expenses like teacher salaries, just to stay afloat. I don't generate fund balance to deposit into my capital reserves so that I can replace a track or expand my undersized transportation garage; I can't replace worn equipment and am forced to live with sporadic internet access because our wireless access points are outdated and incompatible with new technologies; and I am still short two dozen teachers today. I have a budget that is financially unstable and falls short of providing adequate resources for my students.

Compounding our problem, Kingsway's resident student body enrollment has grown by 44% since the adoption of SFRA, in 2008, and represents just one of 100 underfunded school districts that have experienced significant enrollment increases without proportional increases in state aid; While 200 school districts statewide are held harmless despite large decreases in student enrollment while receiving 110% or more of the state aid they are entitled to receive.

The question that has to be asked is "why?" Why do the districts that have been overfunded for years continue to be held harmless when Kingsway, and many other districts, continue to be shortchanged? How can a Governor of a State, a Commissioner of Education or any member of the legislature today, nine years after the implementation of the SFRA, reasonably say that some students in the State of New Jersey are entitled to 284% of their school funding while other students are entitled to only 43%?

At present, school districts throughout the state have adopted their tentative budgets for the 2017-18 school year, and, like many of the underfunded districts, another round of flat state aid forces me to again make difficult decisions. But let me illustrate for you how problematic this has become for Kingsway. Next year's budget presents me with a \$2.4 million deficit, even after increasing my local levy



to the maximum 2% cap, despite my tax payers paying more than 100% of their local fair share; and, mind you, Kingsway is a District that spends less per pupil than any other 7-12/9-12 school district throughout the state; is already two dozen teachers shy of what I need to meet the needs of my growing student body; and is almost \$8 million below adequacy or less than \$3,500 less per pupil than it should, to provide a thorough and efficient education as calculated by the State’s own formula.

So, instead of hiring, yesterday I executed my reduction plan by issuing almost thirty (30) layoff notices to administrators, teachers, school counselors, paraprofessionals, custodians and secretaries. By week’s end, I will send correspondence to my parents, informing them that in addition to layoffs, I have cut middle school and freshmen sports; eliminated our after-school late bus; reduced our co-curricular activity offerings; abolished our alternative high school program; suspended PSAT testing to all 9th – 11th grade students; and, terminated our contract with our local police department to provide a School Resource Officer; and more.

Our own internal budget forecasting predicted this would happen if the State continued to underfund us. But let me tell you where Kingsway is headed if this continues... Assuming we raise the local levy by the statutory cap of 2% each year; assuming flat state aid continues as it has over the past seven years; and, assuming my expenses climb annually by two percent, a conservative figure; my budget deficit will grow larger each year, despite reducing faculty and staff, and despite increasing local property taxes, to about \$3.6 million in FY22. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Kingsway’s budget deficit projection



The truth is that New Jersey's Legislature should be applauded for the work they did to rectify decades of underfunding the neediest students through the adoption of SFRA. However, the hold harmless provision implemented through the budget, arbitrarily disregarding SFRA, and the imposition of enrollment caps, has resulted in the disparate treatment of NJ students in underfunded districts.

Members of the Committee, the continued failure by the State of New Jersey to recognize our plight cannot be ignored and I implore you to address the inequity of funding throughout our State. I ask that the legislature reconfigure state funding amounts so that they conform to the SFRA and omit the "hold harmless" provision from the budget. This will ensure that every student receives their constitutionally guaranteed education funding. I am asking that you intervene now, and in time before we adopt our operating budgets for FY18, and protect every student in New Jersey and ensure that every student receives a thorough and efficient education. Our students, our faculty and our taxpayers cannot afford to be ignored another year.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony.

Very truly yours,



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