



# KINGSWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

*Committed to Excellence*

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*Dr. James J. Lavender  
Superintendent of Schools*

**Testimony provided by Dr. James J. Lavender, Superintendent of the Kingsway Regional School District on Wednesday, April 3, 2018 before the Senate Budget & Appropriations Committee at Rowan Univ.**

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 continuous school funding fiasco, which consistently punishes the nearly 3,000 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> 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 again 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." The "Haves" representing just over one-third of school districts state-wide, while the "Have Nots" represent approximately 63 percent of all of New Jersey's Public School Districts.

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teachers to provide the classes you need; it means your athletic uniforms are worn and tattered; your books – old and outdated; it means our special education classrooms operate under multiple waivers because we cannot comply with state regulations due to understaffing; it means that today we are 44 teachers short of running a school district. 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; low to average student-teacher ratios, and dozens of elective options.

*Home of the Dragons*

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.

For eight years we endured Governor Christie’s draconian school funding policies that left school aid relatively flat, perpetuating the gap between the “Have” and “Have Not” Districts; we endured a state legislature who looked the other way, despite our cries for help; for eight years our student body grew; and for eight years our District – and the 370 other underfunded school districts like Kingsway, fell further behind.

One Year ago I testified before this Committee and the actions of the Legislature indicated that you heard me; you heard my colleagues; you heard our parents; you heard our taxpayers; and you heard our students advocate on behalf of our resource-starved schools and overtaxed communities. You took it so far as to shut State government down until you could strike a deal with former Governor Christie to finally put the school funding conundrum behind us and begin allocating school aid in conformance with the SFRA.

With the legislature’s bold action last summer, the subsequent change in Governor and Speaker of the Assembly, we believed a new chapter on school funding had begun. In fact, many of you told us that this was to be the case! We understood, in part, that Governor Murphy’s pledge, “A stronger, fairer New Jersey” spoke to the underfunded schools and that school aid would begin to be allocated in a fair and equitable way.

We also understood that as an elected official who has proudly pronounced himself as the “progressive governor,” Murphy would approach school funding intelligently, deliberately, and with the background knowledge necessary to discharge his responsibility in a stronger and fairer way. We believed, with this new budget, the 371 “Have Not” Districts, woefully underfunded, would have been a priority.

So, imagine our absolute disappointment and outrage when my colleagues in the 371 underfunded districts and our constituents learned that we were ignored – AGAIN!



Now, one month after the Governor delivered his State Budget Address, Kingsway finds itself in a familiar position: Employee Compensation, medical benefit premiums, which constitute 72% of my budget, and a modest 2 percent increase in discretionary spending will cost us an additional \$1.2 million in FY19.

Capped at 2 percent on the local levy, in a school community who is supporting its regional school at 104% of the local fair share, I can raise \$412,000 in local property taxes. Combined with the \$480,000 increase in State Aid, I still fall behind. Not because I am adding new line items to my budget but simply because this is our “cost of doing business.” Keep in mind that I am 44 teachers short of operating my school system... 20 teachers short in my core subjects and 13 teachers short in special education!

If funded at 100% of uncapped SFRA, Kingsway would receive an additional \$10.14 million of state aid in fiscal year 2019 alone. Accordingly, the district’s proposed budget for FY19 falls \$8.7 million below district adequacy as calculated by the Department of Education. Simply put, Kingsway will spend nearly \$9 million below the level the State of New Jersey has determined as providing a thorough and efficient education for our students. This fact, along with the constant demands placed on our programs as a result of continued enrollment growth, has made it nearly impossible to raise standards or maintain and expand opportunities for our students.

### Shortage Breakdown

State Aid Category	2018-19 Uncapped Aid	2018-19 Actual Aid	Shortage	%
Equalization Aid	\$16,323,171	\$6,867,815	\$9,455,356	42%
Special Education	\$2,148,364	\$1,460,211	\$688,153	67%
Security	\$232,812	\$232,812	\$0	100%
Transportation	\$1,518,262	\$1,518,262	\$0	100%
Total	\$20,222,609	\$10,079,100	\$10,143,509	49%



This year 219 school districts received more than 100% of their full, uncapped SFRA funding; Some as high as Lower Cape May Regional who receives 427% and Jersey City in Hudson County who receives 159%.

While 371 other districts received less than 100% of their state aid; 229 of them receiving less than 70% of full, uncapped SFRA funding. Some as low as Chesterfield in Burlington County who receives 19%; Woodbridge in Middlesex receives just 34%; and my District, Kingsway who receives just 49% of full, uncapped SFRA funding.

Compounding this problem, 100 school districts have experienced significant student enrollment growth since the adoption of SFRA. Monmouth County's Red Bank Borough and Freehold Borough have grown by 23% and 28% respectively. Kingsway has grown by 44% over this period. Despite having experienced this growth, these one hundred districts have not received 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.

Furthermore, 96 school districts are among a group of 96 school districts throughout the State that are both overtaxed and severely underfunded – defined as (a) receiving less than 70% of their state aid; and (b) taxing above 100% of their local fair share. This group of 96 districts is being shorted some \$739 million in state aid in FY18, and trying to make that up in part by taxing their residents more than \$475 million above the State-calculated local fair share. Some of these districts and their municipalities, including Kingsway, have formed a coalition and have intends to litigate this matter at present.

It is simply not fair by any measure to shortchange our students and overburden our faculty, staff and taxpayers and we are demanding better treatment. We are tired of being grossly underfunded, and our taxpayers are tired of being grossly overtaxed.

Our State Constitution commits New Jersey to provide each school child with a quality public education and specifically states that *“The fund for the support of free public schools ... shall be ... for the equal benefit of all the people of the State ...”* The School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) was meant to make New Jersey's distribution of state aid to our public school's fair, transparent, equitable and certain.

Members of the Committee, we know that – in this time of fiscal constraint – asking for full funding – in the full amounts mandated under the SFRA (School Funding Reform Act), may seem unreasonable. What does not seem to be unreasonable is for the State to meet its constitutional



obligation to the students of New Jersey because there is no justification for failing to distribute whatever school funding is provided in the same proportions required under SFRA. It is not only possible; it is the right of every student in New Jersey.

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

Very truly yours,



Dr. James J. Lavender  
Superintendent of Schools  
Kingsway Regional School District  
213 Kings Highway  
Woolwich Twp., NJ 08085  
P: (856) 467-4600, Ext. 4203  
Email: [lavender@krsd.org](mailto:lavender@krsd.org)

