

New Jersey Senate Appropriations and Budget Committee
April 3, 2018
Testimony by Kathie Foster, Superintendent, Robbinsville Schools

Honorable Members of the Senate Budget Committee, I am grateful for the opportunity to testify once again on behalf of the tax payers and most importantly the students in Robbinsville Township. We are here to seek our fair share of state funding which has been promised time and again to our district and districts throughout the state we call home.

Now, it is good to be here but we really need to stop meeting like this!

According to the proposed state budget, Robbinsville has gained distinction as the 6th most underfunded district in New Jersey. Last year we were twelfth and at that time took comfort in the hope that our plight could only improve. We were wrong. And, ironically, at \$11,951 per student, we are the lowest spending school district in Mercer County.

Since 2004 when we first opened our high school and our total state aide began its rapid decline, we wasted no time beginning to seek alternative sources of revenue in order to counteract the effects of decreased funding on our programs, staff and, ultimately, on our students. As a result, Robbinsville has been a frontrunner in establishing alternative revenue streams - aside from state aid or tax increases - to fund our programs. Through this work we have accomplished the following:

- Elimination of numerous out-of-district tuition costs by building in-house programs for our special needs population;
- Outsourcing of custodial services at a savings of \$500,000 in additional health benefit costs;
- Reduction in the number of full time instructional aides, saving health benefit costs of \$390,000.

Additionally, we

- Charge activity fees for participation in sports and extracurricular activities;
- Rent out our facilities on a year round basis;
- Have a tuition-based preschool program;
- Have established a tuition-based kindergarten program for students residing in neighboring districts;
- Participate in numerous transportation jointures;
- Have entered into shared services agreements with the township and other districts;
- Maximize energy cost reduction through an ESIP project, Demand Response, and solar initiatives;
- Have created a premiere in-house before and after school program;
- Are researching the possibility of cell tower construction;
- Are seeking to generate additional revenue by advertising on a billboard located on district property.

Robbinsville has received multiple letters of commendation from the Mercer County Superintendent for fiscal efficiency, prudence, and discipline. We've accomplished these initiatives even as our

student population has grown at an annual rate of 4%. In fact, in the last five years our enrollment has increased by 304 students! In essence, we have built a high performing school district at a time in our state's history when taxes are on the rise and the financial burdens on members of our community continue to increase.

In 2009 our state aid totaled \$2.8M. At that time our student enrollment was 2697. Our current enrollment stands at 3223 and our projected aid for next year will be merely \$300,000 more than it was in 2009. This includes the small increase in state aid we received last year. Since that time Robbinsville residents have contributed an additional \$5,000,000 in local tax levy. Interesting to note, Sparta, a district which has similar enrollment to Robbinsville, has a state aid ratio of staggering 127% while Robbinsville's ratio is actually a measly 32%. Considering the state's legal obligation to educate all children in New Jersey, this inequitable disparity is not fair. Consider where would the students of Robbinsville be today without this community support.

This does not touch upon what happened in 2011 when our state aid, like many districts, was cut by over 50%. During that time we were forced to eliminate 26 full time employees and to significantly reduce programs that other like districts routinely provide. To the detriment of our students we have yet to recover all of those FTEs and programs. Since 2009, our total underfunding according to SFRA calculations equals over \$9M. And if we take into account uncapped aid our cumulative underfunding since 2009 would be nearly \$69M!

Despite our fiscal diligence, our latest budget cycle finds us with a gap of \$1M. With continued emphasis on staying within the mandated 2% cap, Robbinsville, once again, faces serious decisions regarding personnel and program reductions which will lead to increased class sizes, and the potential for a greater number of unhoused students than currently exist.

The consequence of being underfunded year after year is dire. In this critical time, when school districts must invest in security related infrastructure and personnel, we find ourselves in a financial position that is unsustainable. To make matters worse, we, in Mercer County, are in the middle of an alarming trend regarding teenage mental health concerns and opioid abuse. This requires us to expand our services and hire more mental health professionals to address the complex social and emotional needs of our students. In a year when our school district budget is decreasing and our enrollment is increasing by about 4%, it seems fundamentally unfair that the tax payers in Robbinsville should again have shoulder the burden of increased taxes while programs for their children continue to decrease. As it stands today Robbinsville residents fund 95% of their entire school budget through local taxes. Because our budget is already lean and efficient, we have exhausted any additional opportunities to reduce expenses without causing irreparable harm to students of Robbinsville.

With all due respect and great appreciation for the work that each of you must do to ensure that our state's financial situation improves, I am not here to ask you to fund our previous years of underfunding nor am I asking you to fund us our uncapped aid.

Instead, what I am asking you to do is:

- Fully fund Robbinsville Schools based on the School Funding Reform Act of 2008 less the annual limitations established at the onset of SFRA;
- Base this calculation on the original 2009 levels;
- Consider our enrollment growth since that time.

Robbinsville students deserve access to the same programs and opportunities as every other student in the State of New Jersey, on an equal and fair basis. Robbinsville tax payers have already funded more than their fair share and have done so for far too long. It's time to do the right thing and reward fiscal prudence with fiscal justice. Our School Board and administrative team are prepared to work through this very difficult budget cycle in a fashion that protects the interests of our students and our community, but it is unreasonable to ask our tax payers to pay more and get less. In your deliberations, I respectfully request that you reallocate these resources to support the members of our community.

Thank you for your kind consideration.