

Dear Legislator

According to the annual survey of all fifty states by Education Week's Quality Counts, New Jersey rates very high in their evaluation of a good education, 6<sup>th</sup> overall for all fifty states and even higher than that when measuring Chance of Success and K-12 achievement. We should be proud, but not satisfied with that recognition. Public education is the very basis of our democracy, and it is the state's responsibility to provide it for all our children. We need to continue to try to make our education better. There are proven ways of improving education for all, including free education for three and four year olds, school access to basic health needs, and facilities that are conducive to learning. In addition it is well known that children with special needs cost more than regular education and need extra state aid. What we don't think will help is state aid to private schools. It sidesteps the goal of quality education for all and makes it more difficult to achieve. We oppose it.

Our immediate concern is the Governor's recommendation for the state budget. The upcoming budget includes an income tax reduction of 10% across the board. But since the income tax is used specifically for state aid to education, surely that means a continued underfunding of our public schools. This comes on top of drastic cuts in the last few years, reducing full funding of the current formula for aid provided in the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) still further. Districts will never catch up with what the law provides.

The budget also includes reduction in the formulas for state aid for children at risk, for English Language Learners and for children who fall within both categories. These changes seem to be an attempt to save money rather than reflect the actual cost of educating these children. Southern New Jersey towns have some of the highest unemployment and poverty rates in the state and will be some of the hardest hit along with other poor districts. Moreover, changes in the formula mean decreases in aid year after year.

The new proposal to change the way the number of students in a district is determined moves away from the proven method of enrollment on October 15 to average daily attendance, a method that will adversely affect children in the poorer districts and again mean less state aid.

We urge you to put the education of our children and the future of our state first. Do not reduce the income tax and do not change the weights for determining state aid. Instead we ask that you fully fund SFRA and provide fair and adequate school funding for all New Jersey children.