

## Montclair Wants Changes in State School Aid Formula

By George Wirt  
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Montclair Mayor Jerry Fried will join fellow mayors in a lobbying effort to change the state's aid formula for New Jersey's public schools.

Fried said the timing was right for a coordinated campaign by mayors of municipalities such as Montclair to seek out their state Senate and Assembly representatives and enlist their support for legislative changes that, in their view, would distribute school aid more equitably.

"This has to change," Fried said of the current system, "It's the 'number one issue' in New Jersey and it was the 'number one issue' in the recent Governors race. There aren't any silver bullets. There is no easy way to solve the problem.

"It's going to take leadership on the part of the Legislature to do something on a state level," Fried said. "Without that, all the towns just wind up competing against each other and it becomes a race to the bottom."

Fried said the effort is part of a campaign organized by the NJ League of Municipalities and will feature mayors making personal visits to their local legislators' offices in Trenton.

The Legislature is scheduled to review the controversial school funding formula that dictates how aid will be distributed to the state's 605 school districts.

Meanwhile, the Board of Education announced that it is forming a citizens committee to help press its case for a formula that will recognize some of the unique challenges that districts such as Montclair confront.

Board President John Carlton said the current scheme rewards some urban districts with large annual grants while penalizing suburban districts like Montclair that have many high-end residential properties in their tax base.

Carlton said the current system fails to recognize the significant number of economically disadvantaged students in Montclair and underfunds its special education programs, which account for more than \$24 million of the district's \$113 million annual operating budget.

Seeking the support of the region's lawmakers was the main recommendation that emerged from the panel members who appeared at a forum last Thursday sponsored by the school district.

The event, held in the atrium of the George Inness Annex of Montclair High School, brought together dozens of parents, educators, community leaders and elected officials for a public discussion on "Understanding State Funding and Implications for the Montclair Public Schools."

Fronted by moderator Harvey Susswein, the panel included: John Carlton, president of the Montclair Board of Education; Jessica deKoninck, legal counsel for the South Orange/Maplewood Board of Education; Stan Karp, director, Secondary Reform Project-Education Law Center in Newark; and Dana Sullivan, business administrator for the Montclair Board of Education.

Both deKoninck and Karp urged local residents and elected officials to press their cases for changes in the funding protocols with legislators. They noted that several members of the Essex County delegation will be playing more prominent roles in Trenton after the recent changes in the leadership in the Senate and Assembly, making their voices even more influential on policy issues.

The Board of Education operates 11 magnet public schools that serve more than 6,500 kindergarten-through-12th grade students. The district employs a staff of nearly 1,100 teachers, aides, administrators and other support personnel.

The board's \$113 million operating budget includes more than \$9 million in state aid, but district officials argue the state underfunds special education programs.

Earlier this week, Carlton warned that the district may have to reduce its projected school budget for 2010-2011 by as much as \$3.5 million to achieve its goal of a one percent budget increase in the new school year that will begin on July 1.

Schools Superintendent Frank Alvarez said district officials are anticipating flat funding, at best, from Trenton this year, but are also bracing for cutbacks in the \$9 million in state funding they have received during the past several years.

As the new administration of Gov. Chris Christie struggles to close a nearly \$2 billion budget gap this year, and an anticipated \$10 billion shortfall in the state's upcoming fiscal year, Alvarez expressed fears that the reduction in state school aid could be substantial, forcing even deeper cuts at the local level.

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