

TESTIMONY PRESENTED ON APRIL 19, 2010, TO THE ASSEMBLY BUDGET COMMITTEE DURING PUBLIC HEARINGS ON THE FY2011 STATE BUDGET

LueElla McFadden, President of Parents and Communities United for Education (PCUE), the Jersey City Chapter of the Statewide Education organizing Committee (SEOC):

I now have a great-granddaughter in the third grade and three great-nephews, and I've have been working towards empowering our parents to get involved in their children's schools and education for well over forty years, when my first child entered school.

My organization is working on a Graduation for All Campaign. Our students are failing, and we cannot continue to watch this happen. **WE WANT GRADUATION, NOT INCARCERATION.** We all need to do everything we can so that every New Jersey school can graduate all its students.

The state is moving towards new high school courses and graduation exams. Teachers need support to help students master the rigorous courses the state has initiated and meet high standards. Students need alternative assessment options.

But in order for our teachers and students to be successful and reach the level of graduating every student, we need resources. Governor Christie's proposed state aid cuts take away much-needed resources and make it much harder to reach our goals.

In addition to asking you to please restore the state aid that the governor has cut in his proposed budget, I want to talk about parents and education. N.J.A.C. 6A:13 REQUIRES THAT PARENTS BE ON ALL school-based committees regarding graduation and performance. Parents are often left out of the beginning stages of new graduation initiatives. We parents find out after all is said and done by the state and local district board of education.

Please don't say to me again that parents are not there when they are invited. Remember, we have one-parent families where they have to keep a roof over their children's head and food on the table. We will be there and talk for our absent parents. SEOC/PCUE is like the energizer bunny, we keep going and going and going.

Parents have rights. Our children have rights. My great-granddaughter has rights. SEOC/PCUE will make sure they get what is needed in order to graduate and become productive and educated citizens. What is unique about our organization is that we're all volunteers with a passion and drive for our children. Watch out for us!

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Rosie Grant, Project Director for the Paterson Education Fund, member of the NJ Education Organizing Collaborative (NJEOC) and the statewide coalition Our Children/Our Schools (OC/OS):

All of the organizations I work with have launched campaigns to restore adequate funding to our public schools in next year's state budget. Our goal is to urge you, our legislators, to reject Governor Christie's ill-conceived budget and fund our schools according to the school funding formula that you approved in 2008.

The Our Children/Our Schools campaign is called "Fund the Formula in FY2011." A highlight of the campaign is a petition we created against the governor's proposed massive state aid cuts to schools and in support of funding the SFRA. You'll each receive a copy of the petition along with my testimony.

The member organizations of Our Children/Our Schools have circulated hard copies of the petition, and it is also possible to sign it on-line. In less than a month, and without going door-to-door, we have collected over 2500 signatures. And signatures are still rolling in.

2500 is an enormous number of people, from all over the state, and all of them support the same thing: state aid to schools as promised by law in the SFRA and as sanctioned by the NJ Supreme Court last spring. All of them oppose the same thing: excessive cuts in education aid that will result in loss of programs, staff and services and will make it harder to keep kids in school through graduation and educate them to be productive members of society.

We have received a lot of feedback as we've worked on these campaigns. One mother wrote to us to say:

"I am the parent of an eight-year-old multiply disabled boy. My son has been given such a great gift from the special education department in our school district. My son could not do math, read, or even understand a lot of the school day activities when he started kindergarten. In three years he has learned to read on a second grade level by himself, complete addition and subtraction equations, and most of all understand the content of classroom instruction, in turn blossoming to be a very bright child. If there are to be funding cuts to his program, hindering his progress, I want to be the first in line to speak up."

In Paterson a good majority of our children will lose after-school programming, leaving more kids unattended between 3 and 6 p.m. Children who are already doing poorly will lose tutoring and extra support. With 775 job cuts, class sizes will be doubled, and these larger classes will be without the benefit of instructional aides. These are just a few examples. Our superintendent is working on increased efficiencies, but no amount of efficiency can counter the tremendous negative impact of this budget cut. This budget sets our children up for failure.

As you know, there is a lot at stake here – the future of our children, our economy and our state. I speak for over 2500 when I urge you to restore adequate funding to our schools. Please stand up to the Governor and his budget balanced on the backs of children. Please follow the law you passed. Please protect our children. They are counting on you. They need you.

Todd Stoner, volunteer community organizer with the Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC) and the Asbury Park Parent Listening Project (APPLP):

I work to get parents more involved with education reform. I would like to begin my testimony by briefly explaining some of the many barriers to education that the students of Asbury Park, Trenton, Camden, and other poor urban districts experience on a daily basis.

One of the many safety concerns of students going to and from school are gangs. With no bus system in Asbury Park and limited afterschool programs before the proposed cuts in aid, students are highly vulnerable – almost all have some connection to gang life or experience some form of gang violence. School security guards in Asbury Park have told me there is a fight every day.

Discipline consumes the time and energy of principals and administrators, leaving no time for staff development and curriculum oversight.

In Asbury Park there is currently no district-wide curriculum.

Parents' involvement is scarce as many are single parents and are forced to work long hours.

Students are given an immediate disadvantage with a lack of supplies and poor learning conditions – textbooks are out-of-date or there is a lack of them; there is a shortage of writing materials, paper, notebooks...etc. The schools have few or no computers or out-of-date and non-functioning computers; desks and chairs are falling apart, or even, in many cases, the actual building is falling apart.

Learning disability rates are obscenely high, which is correlated to the more polluted environment of NJ's urban areas, including the prevalence of lead paint.

And let us not forget that many of these students are living in poverty, coming to school hungry, homeless, and/or non-English speaking. In Asbury Park, 73% of students are considered "at-risk" as compared to 3.7% in high wealth areas (the state average is 27%).

And now with such high barriers to receiving an adequate education, Governor Christie proposes to cut \$3.4 million in aid to Asbury Park – equivalent to cutting \$1,600 per student. As a result, the Asbury Park Board of Education laid-off two of the district's 5 school nurses. This leaves 3 nurses to care for over two thousand students in 5 schools with levels of asthma and diabetes well above average.

Before these cuts teacher and administrator turnover rate was sky high, and now some of the youngest and best teachers who opted to teach in poor areas are being laid-off.

These cuts are unacceptable and will only further marginalize urban schools and help perpetuate an unjust and unequal education system within NJ's urban areas.

All of the barriers urban schools currently face will grow. With fewer security guards there will be more fights, with fewer administrators there will be less time for staff development, with

fewer guidance counselors there will be less college planning, with fewer afterschool programs there will be more gang violence, and with less funding for special education – a 42% cut – there will be even higher drop-out rates.

The proposed budget will devastate NJ's urban centers and will only cost taxpayers more money in the long run. Increases in crime, poverty, and unemployment will make NJ less safe, less educated, and even more in debt.

Luckily there are alternatives. While Governor Christie proposed the budget as if cutting funding for education is the only possible answer, there are many other more just solutions.

Simply reinstating the income tax on those making over \$400,000 a year would bring in enough income to avoid all cuts to education.

As my representatives, I implore you to say no to these cuts – reinstate the tax on the super-rich and follow New Jersey state law and adequately fund the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) as mandated by the NJ Supreme Court. Please, find a more just solution to balancing the budget.

Susan Curry, lead organizer for Parents and Communities United for Education (PCUE), the Jersey City branch of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC), and member of the NJ Education Organizing Collaborative (NJEOC) and the statewide campaign, Our Children/Our Schools (OC/OS):

I am here today as a mother to discuss the impact of the budget cuts that will affect my son. He is a 17-year-old junior who is in special education. In Jersey City, our superintendent, Dr. Charles Epps, is cutting \$10 million in aid to the special education department. My concerns are that my son will be entering his senior year without the resources he needs to succeed. What guarantees does he have to complete his senior year and receive a high school diploma?

He is not alone. There are many students in Jersey City who will not receive the education and services they need to eventually graduate from high school and be ready to go on to college or the workforce. There are many parents in Jersey City who are very worried about what will happen to our schools if the deep cuts in state aid are allowed to remain, and programs and staff are cut.

Today's students are our future. They need and deserve an appropriate education. Please do not let Governor Christie's budget cuts take that away from them. I urge you to restore state aid to education at the levels provided by the school funding formula.

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Elizabeth Smith, Treasurer of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC), and member of the NJ Education Organizing Collaborative and the Our Children/Our Schools Campaign.

I am here today to ask that you do the right thing and fund the school funding formula for the year 2011! The School Funding and Reform Act, which was passed by the legislature and supported by the New Jersey Supreme Court, has as its centerpiece a mechanism to provide education dollars to all children regardless of zip code.

The proposed budget is draconian. Every district will feel the effects, but it has a disproportionate effect on urban and rural districts. It will result in massive cuts of teachers, staff and vital programs, which will lead to overcrowded classrooms, and fewer resources. The ultimate result will be poor performance on standardized tests (more schools in need of improvement) and decreased graduation rates.

What will happen to the high school students who have not passed the ASHA recently administered? Because of the current year's budget cuts are there resources available to help them get over this last hurdle for graduation?

I will highlight a few issues from next year's budget that may seem minor but have a domino effect. The proposed budget will eliminate state funding for school breakfast programs. It cuts state funding for school lunch programs and eliminates entirely state funding for the NJ After 3 program. The effect of these, in addition to layoffs of teachers, etc., undermines the attempt at fair funding inherent in the SFRA.

I have one last question. Will these budget cuts affect New Jersey's application for "Race to the Top" federal funds?

The Statewide Education Organizing Committee implores you to take a stand for New Jersey School children. They are the future, and the education losses these budget cuts create will never be recuperated. Please fund the formula for 2011.

Carla Larsen, mother of children in the Asbury Park Public Schools, President of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee (SEOC), a leader of the Asbury Park Parent Listening Project (APPLP – a chapter of SEOC), and a member of the NJ Education Organizing Collaborative and Our Children/Our Schools.

On behalf of the thousands of school children in the five cities with SEOC chapters and all the other cities where large numbers of low-income families live in New Jersey, we are calling upon you to reject Governor Christie's proposed budget, which slashes state aid to education in a reckless way across the state. His budget particularly damages schools serving the children of Asbury Park and similar districts.

In 2008, the Legislature passed the School Funding Reform Act, or SFRA, and the State Supreme Court upheld it. We feel the Legislature must hold to its word and fully fund the SFRA. While our

organization and many, many others opposed the passage of the SFRA, we now know that if the SFRA is funded it will be far better for all our children than the budget the Governor has placed before you now.

Immediately following the passage of the SFRA, the NJ Department of Education proposed and ultimately pushed through a new set of tougher high school graduation requirements, including six new required courses and six new exit exams. We have proposed, instead, our Graduation For All Campaign, which accepts the need for higher standards but also calls for careful assessment of each district's current capacity to support students and teachers adequately so that the new higher standards do not produce new and higher failure and drop-out rates.

If you approve the Governor's terrible cuts to education, you will make a mockery out of the new, higher graduation standards. We found in a survey of 17 schools in four cities that there were not enough science labs, not enough science and math teachers, and inadequate student guidance and other supports needed for success. That was before Governor Christie came along with his enormous reductions in state aid. If you go along with his proposals, you will surely be setting up the students in Asbury and dozens of other districts for failure and higher drop-out rates.

Finally, we parents see at last some welcome signs of progress in Asbury Park under a new superintendent. Parents and community leaders are being listened to. A uniform curriculum is being developed. Discipline procedures are improving so as to reduce suspensions and increase students' time for real learning. If you adopt the Governor's budget as proposed, you will be undercutting the resources and the confidence of students, teachers and families. Don't do this. Do the right thing by rejecting Governor Christie's budget and finding resources elsewhere that don't target our children and youth.

Latino Action Network (LAN), from "The Myth of Shared Sacrifice: Report on the Christie Budget of 2010-2011:"

Disproportionate Cuts in School Aid:

As he has done with the rest of the budget, Governor Christie has shrouded the proposed \$819 million in state aid cuts to school districts in the language of mutual sacrifice. But here again, a closer look reveals that the cuts will disproportionately impact poor and urban school districts because they receive a greater percentage of their school budgets from the state.

In order to quantify the impact of the cuts, both those in the proposed spending plan and in the governor's earlier executive order, the Latino Action Network looked at the 45 school districts with the largest Latino enrollment. Those districts lost a total of \$304.8 million in state aid between the two cuts. Districts with heavy Latino enrollment, mostly poorer urban districts, lost \$562 per pupil under the executive order, while the other 533 districts lost \$311 per pupil. This trend continues in the spending plan for the coming year where districts with large numbers of Latino students lost \$846 per pupil, while other districts lost \$787 per pupil. Governor Christie's approach disproportionately punishes the poorer districts that have high concentrations of Latino children.

Governor Christie's plan to cut state aid to school budgets hits those who can least afford the cuts the hardest. As an example, Perth Amboy that can ill afford another property tax increase will lose \$5.7 million in state school aid, which is 3.7% of the total school budget. An affluent town, like Mendham, with three times the median income, will lose all its school aid, which amounts to 4% of its total budget. However, that loss comes to \$373,000, a figure which the municipality can readily make up because of its greater tax base.

If these trends are allowed to continue New Jersey will quickly return to a past of grossly unequal expenditures between school districts and, consequently, an ever growing achievement gap between rich and poor students.