

***Great Schools New Jersey: The Association of
High Need School Districts
Advancing Educational Opportunities for All Students***

April 23, 2015

Dear Legislator:

I serve as the President of Great Schools of New Jersey (GSNJ), an association of high need school district superintendents, and I am writing on the organization's behalf about Governor Chris Christie's proposed FY16 State Budget.

The Governor's budget proposal continues the administration's unfortunate and damaging pattern of underfunding the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), passed by the Legislature on a bipartisan basis in 2008 and fully funded only during the first year of its implementation. If the Governor's budget is allowed to stand, New Jersey public school children will be missing out on over \$7 billion in aid due under the formula since 2009.

GSNJ members --superintendents of districts with high percentages of at-risk students and English language learners, often in communities with considerable poverty and limited resources -- have firsthand experience with the results of this extreme underfunding. While we make every effort to do more with less and to ensure our students receive an excellent education, each year we have been forced to cut essential staff, programs and services. You can well imagine the difficulties we face as we cut reading specialists, counselors, support programs, much needed supplies and important initiatives that overwhelmingly benefit the neediest students. These are the exact types of added programming and support that the SFRA budget is supposed to provide our most needy students.

As a result of six years of underfunding, 129 GSNJ districts (79%) are now below adequacy under the SFRA. That means we are not receiving adequate resources, according to the formula, to provide our students with a thorough and efficient education. Nearly all GSNJ districts (94%) are owed additional state aid under the SFRA.

We have included with this letter a chart showing the high need districts' status relative to adequacy, the amount of state aid these districts are owed under full formula funding, and the total amount of state aid high need districts would receive before the annual growth caps are applied. On average, GSNJ districts are more than \$3,000 per pupil below adequacy; we are owed \$1,262 per pupil in state aid, and we would stand to gain \$1,753 per pupil if state aid were not subject to annual growth limitations.

Our districts, like all districts in New Jersey, have also been faced with unfunded mandates from the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) that have further eroded our budgets. The costs of implementing the new online PARCC tests (hardware, bandwidth and professional development), the Common Core State Standards (curriculum development and professional development), and the new teacher evaluation system (personnel for additional observations and professional development) have impacted all of us. In addition, many of us are also faced with costs related to interventions to improve priority and focus schools, including payments to the Regional Achievement Centers (RAC) created by the NJDOE.

Furthermore, our districts have been promised preschool expansion under the SFRA, but that promise has not been fulfilled. Our need for the state's high quality, full-day preschool program for 3- and 4-year-olds is enormous. The boost that effective early education provides for at-risk students has been thoroughly documented. In addition, the program would result in lower costs for our districts by decreasing special education placements and the need for remediation and support programs for these children as they progress through our elementary schools.

We are asking for no more than what the law provides us – the funding levels established in the SFRA and preschool expansion – so that we can be brought up to adequacy and provide all of our students with the opportunity to meet State standards.

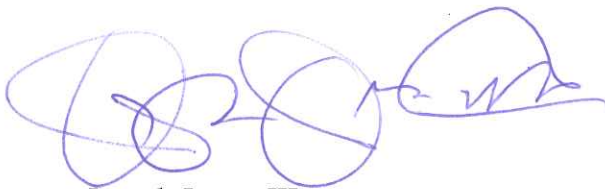
We are well aware of the precarious financial position of the State of New Jersey, and we know that when it comes to the state budget your job is not easy. But we urge you to consider our students – the neediest in the state – as you determine how state revenue is to be allocated. Please reject the Governor's proposal for school funding and begin making the down payments that will put us back on a path to full formula funding.

We stand ready to assist you in this regard in any way we can. Please do not hesitate to contact us for more information and for support as negotiations begin on the FY16 State Budget.

For more information about GSNJ, please visit: <http://njasa.net/Page/60>. A list of current and former GSNJ members is available here: <http://njasa.net/Page/48>.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Joseph Jones, III
President, Great Schools of NJ
Superintendent, Woodbury City Public Schools