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March 24, 2010

Governor Chris Christie
State of New Jersey
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625-0001

Dear Governor Christie:

We recognize the difficult fiscal position that you inherited and appreciate that you have taken bold and resolute action in pursuing a righted ship for the State of New Jersey. However, the letter you sent yesterday to NJSBA and NJEA seems to under appreciate the impact of the state aid reductions on school district budgets.

As just one example, our school district Board of Education passed a budget that includes the items that you recommend in your letter. Our 2010-2011 budget includes no funds for wage increases, and incorporates 1.5% of salaries as employee contributions for health insurance premiums. These two items were included prior to your letter, but together they do not come close to offsetting the state aid reductions.

The South Orange Maplewood School District has, in prior years, already achieved a number of efficiencies. For example, we have outsourced custodians, lunch aides, food services, security and computer repair; reduced enrichment and instrumental music programs; trimmed elementary music and art staff; frozen spending on athletics and extra-curricular activities; reduced central leadership team and administrative staff; increased average class size to the maximum allowed by board policy (higher than what is deemed acceptable by the Adequacy Model adopted as part of the School Funding Reform Act of 2008); and entered into multiple shared service agreements with the municipalities and neighboring school districts.

Given that these efficiencies are already in place, and given that budgeting for zero increases and health insurance contributions still leaves a hole in our 2010-2011 budget, the State aid reductions forced the following additional action:

1. elimination of 6 high school teachers, 8 special education teachers, 6 prekindergarten aides, 2 instructional aides, a supervisor, a maintenance worker, a tech support aide, and a librarian;
2. elimination of three prekindergarten teachers, which means no pre-school for economically-disadvantaged regular education students and reduction of special education pre-school to the minimum mandated two hours per day; and
3. increase of local taxes by 3.48%, greater than the CPI, and greater than the 2.5% that you propose achieving through a constitutional amendment.

And that is not all: our budget replaces 76 instructional aides in our district workforce with lower-paid aides from the Essex Regional Educational Services Commission. The replacements will make substantially less and receive no health benefits.

Here, the outsourcing concept – which we have already employed in out of classroom positions – crosses the line of the classroom. These employees provide direct services to our most vulnerable special education students. They have worked hard and shown tremendous caring for our students. Many paraprofessionals have associate's degrees and are primary breadwinners for their families. Now, they will guide and support our special needs children while living with the fear of someone in their family getting sick and being unable to seek affordable medical attention.

The alternative, which we will have to enact when planning for the 2011-2012 fiscal year, is the firing of scores of teachers and the gutting of educational programs for our children. By going too far and too fast, you have forced districts to slash educational programs or make decisions like the one we did and put people who work directly with our kids into compensation structures that deprive them of access to health insurance.

Moreover, your suggested approaches, while helpful, are not sustainable. Because health insurance premiums escalate out of control, all that is accomplished by placing the contributions on salaries is a single year stepwise decrease in employee salaries. Without contributions on premiums, tiered fairly by employee earnings, the burden of skyrocketing health insurance costs will not be shared between taxpayers and employees but instead will continue to come out of education and programs for our children.

Lastly, while you have taken decisive short-term action, there needs to be a concerted long-term vision and accompanying action to change and improve public education in the State of New Jersey. By capitalizing on technology and blurring the lines between high school, college and highly skilled work, we can develop in New Jersey richer, more engaging and relevant learning opportunities for our young people while reducing the burden on our taxpayers. No district can do this alone. We need the creativity of an entire state galvanized by the vision of a forward thinking leader. Otherwise, I fear that despite rhetoric emphasizing the importance of education, the path we are on will inevitably lead to the dismantling of public education in our State.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Osborne". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Brian Osborne