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Testimony at NJ Assembly Budget Hearing
Public Hearing @ State House Annex – Trenton, NJ
Wednesday, March 27, 2019

By Dr. Justin Smith, Assistant Superintendent, Cherry Hill Public Schools

Members of the committee, colleagues, and community members, my name is Justin Smith, assistant superintendent of Cherry Hill Public Schools in Camden County. Thank you to the committee for allowing me time, especially to Assemblywoman Lampitt and Assemblyman Greenwald, for your continued voice and leadership in addressing the needs of children and schools – we are grateful for your advocacy and your representation. On behalf of our district’s 11,000 children and 1,600 employees, I offer the following testimony.

The safety of our children is our primary responsibility as educators. Moving into the finalization of our 2019-20 budget, we are at a crisis. We have explained to our parents that we have been focusing on instruction, relationships, and outcomes – which are critical and in which we are successful. Meanwhile, in ways we cannot afford due to underfunding, our facilities have worsened over decades across 19 schools, 1.7 million square feet of school space, and more than 350 acres of land—compromised roofs, cracking walls, weakening masonry, and more, because of lack of adequate funding from the state. In 2018, on top of an already crushing local tax burden, we asked our community to support a referendum to do substantive work on our schools focused on health, safety, and security. They voted the referendum down.

This puts us in a dire situation. With the initial state aid numbers released by the Department of Education, 91% of Cherry Hill's proposed budget will come from Cherry Hill – 91% for the third year in a row. Our district, with 11,000 students, is slated to receive 63% of what the School Funding Formula says we should receive.

Ensuring safety involves more than enhancing our schools' physical security, hampered by decades of severe underfunding. We have guidance counselors in all our schools and student assistance counselors at all six of our secondary schools. We offer a therapeutic support program at all three high schools, one middle school, and one elementary school. We contract with a psychiatrist one day a week. In 18-19, we increased our district campus police force from four unarmed officers to nine armed officers. We need to do more, and more funding in order to do it.

This is also about the long-term health of our great state. Research shows positive economic return from investing in education. A recent Brookings Institute study concluded it takes political courage to invest in education because its economic benefits are longer-term while the financial costs are immediate, that any business that operated this way would likely fail, and that a similarly dim prospect may await any state that fails to invest in education. (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-effects-of-investing-in-early-education-on-economic-growth/>).

As our legislators, you can make a powerful, positive difference in children's lives by giving us the means to provide secure facilities where our students will thrive. Please, help us improve our buildings so they facilitate and reflect the excellent learning experience inside them. Thank you for your time and willingness to listen. Our community is counting on you.