

Local News

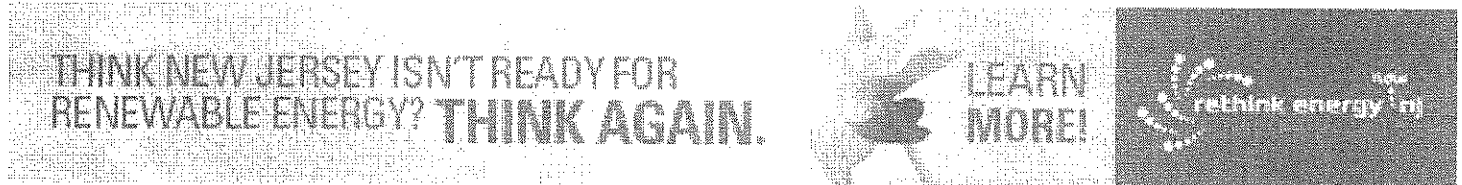
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http://www.burlingtoncountytimes.com/news/communities/bordertown/delran-parents-fighting-for-fair-share-if-nj-school-funding/article_61400478-13b9-11e6-8733-57ee36de3d31.html

HOT

Delran parents fighting for 'fair share' if NJ school funding

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer 3 hrs ago



DELRAN – School officials have claimed for the last few years that the district has been continually underfunded according to the state's 2008 school funding formula.

The district will receive about \$11.65 million in state aid for 2016-17, up slightly from the \$11.5 million it got in 2015-16. School officials claim that if the district was funded fully through the formula, it would receive an additional \$11 million annually.

A group of local parents is taking up the funding fight with a bigger goal in mind – to enact change statewide.

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Lucy Horton and Mike Piper, parents of district students, said they heard about the issue after a Board of Education meeting. They both decided they needed to do something.

"At first, it's shock," Horton said. "Then it's, 'Well, how can I help?' "

They started a group called Our Fair Share to raise awareness about the issue statewide and get more people involved.

"If we stand alone, it's not going to happen," Piper said.

The parents said they are not asking the state for extra funding, but for funding to be shared proportionally. For example, their petition on change.org says that if the state can fully fund Delran's formula at 85 percent, every district should receive that 85 percent.

"Students, taxpayers and school districts from all over the state have been the innocent victims of the state's inefficient and unlawful distribution of school funds," the petition reads.

The petition, which is how Our Fair Share got its start, now has over 400 signatures. Since then, the group has partnered with others to raise awareness for the cause.

Horton said in particular the group has worked with Chesterfield and Maple Shade in Burlington County. Chesterfield receives the smallest amount of state aid in the county at \$419,893 this year, up from \$403,538.

Andrea Katz, a parent and school board member in Chesterfield, said she and other parents and teachers from the district are piggybacking on Our Fair Share's efforts. Katz said Chesterfield members as well as representatives from six other school districts across the state joined the team at a state budget hearing last month to show legislators their support for the movement.

"We're trying to educate the public," she said. "This is such a complicated issue; people don't really understand it."

Katz emphasized Piper and Horton's statement that they are not asking the state to give their districts new money through raising taxes on residents, but to reallocate the education funding fairly across every district.

She said many people support their efforts. Assemblymen Ronald Dancer, R-12th of Cream Ridge, and Robert Clifton, R-12th of Matawan, have attended Chesterfield board meetings to share presentations on state education funding and hear residents' thoughts.

Katz is also starting a letter-writing campaign so people can let their legislators know about the issue, even as the budget season winds to a close.

"I don't want the conversation to die out," she said.

Piper and Horton sent a message out recently, asking those who signed the petition to share it with their local school boards, PTAs and other groups to help the campaign spread.

"Our petition is growing fast, but we need more signatures to make real waves," the message reads.

School funding debate

Lawmakers continue to debate school funding and distribution.

At issue is the state's 2008 school funding formula and how best to redistribute millions of dollars in school aid to public school districts that have been chronically underfunded during the last eight years despite large enrollment and demographic changes.

Among the state's some 580 school districts, more than half of them are underfunded.

The discrepancy is the result of the state's inability to provide enough money to fully fund the formula.

The formula was designed to provide school districts with aid based on their enrollment, wealth and populations of impoverished and other special needs students. But the state has never had enough money to provide every district with all the aid called for under the formula.

In recent years, no district has lost aid and most received small increases. However, those districts that experienced large enrollment increases did not receive the additional aid they may have needed, while others continued to receive large sums of extra money despite losing students.

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