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**Testimony before the Assembly Education Committee  
Re: School Funding Reform Act of 2008  
February 1, 2017 in Hackensack, NJ**

Submitted by: Sheila Brogan  
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Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to Bergen County and allowing testimony on the School Funding Reform Act of 2008.

My name is Sheila Brogan; I am in my twenty-first year on the Ridgewood Board of Education. Ridgewood is a high performing, K-12 district and the largest school district in Bergen County with an enrollment of 5,754 students. Many in our community find the property tax, which supports 90% of the district's school budget, burdensome.

How to equitably fund education in New Jersey has been debated for the past 47 years, starting in 1970 with the Robinson v. Cahill court case. Once this case made it to the Supreme Court of New Jersey, the court ruled, "that the state's system of financing elementary and secondary schools failed to meet the state constitution's requirement of a 'thorough and efficient' system of education, because of discrepancies in per-pupil spending among the state's school districts." (Rutgers' Institute on Education Law and Policy) With this ruling, the court ordered that the legislature take action to create a school funding formula and that the formula be implemented by July 1, 1975.

Here we are in 2017 and we continue to discuss the state's obligation to fairly fund the education of close to 1.4 million students in 2,522 schools across 599 school districts. Since 1975 we witnessed the income tax instituted to provide property tax relief, five funding formulas, over 20 court cases, and multiple legislative reviews and hearings.

In 2008, the School Funding Reform Act was passed shortly after the 2008-09 school year state aid amounts were announced with 10% to 20% increases in state aid for districts that had struggled through five years of flat state aid under the CEIFA formula. There was some rejoicing amid high skepticism that the School Funding Reform Act would be the formula that would finally solve New Jersey's education funding quandary.

Ridgewood's state aid in school year 2008-09 was \$3.4 million. With the economic downturn, Governor Christie ordered aid cuts in 2010 and our aid was reduced to \$2.7 million. In Fiscal year 2011, aid was further reduced to \$587,777 and the 2% property tax cap was imposed. This year our

state aid is \$2.6 million; \$750,937 less than it was when the School Funding Reform Act was implemented.

Overall, Ridgewood's state aid is down a total of \$8.7 million since the inception of the School Funding Reform Act. As our state aid decreased, we were required to absorb the costs for implementing new mandates such as HIB, Teach NJ with a new teacher evaluation system, Dyslexia Screening, and PARCC testing to name a few.

In addition, Extraordinary Aid earmarked to help districts with high special education expenses was to be funded at 75% of the district's cost. Since 2012 there has been a steady decline in funding these expenses. Last year, the percentage was 58% of the actual cost.

I ask that you consider the following:

- Review the State Auditor's 2016 report and consider the recommendations that call for the state to use current enrollment and demographic data to adjust state aid amounts, change the way special education funding is being distributed, review pre-school enrollment and program offerings and based on this information adjust the aid amounts.
- Talk with districts like Ridgewood that operate effectively and efficiently with high student performance outcomes. There are many such districts throughout New Jersey. Understand the challenges and the true cost for providing students an educational program that prepares them for college and career.
- Discard the School Funding Reform Act's census model that was implemented to control Special Education costs. The census model has failed to reduce the overall cost for special education and simply led to a decrease in the state's share of funding special education for our school districts. We are mandated and morally obligated to provide the needed services identified in our student's IEPs. The state aid Ridgewood receives for special education, categorical and extraordinary, equals about 12% of our actual special education costs. The result is that budgeted money is being taken from general education to fund special education expenses.
- Eliminate the practice of wealth-equalizing special education categorical aid.
- Fund Special Education based on the number of children receiving special education services and on their specific classifications. Children classified with autism are more expensive to educate than children with a speech impairment, but both require the educational services that meet their unique needs.
- Evaluate and review private special education school tuition rates and their annual increases.
- Establish grants for start-up and construction costs to help districts establish more in-district special education placements.
- Design incentives for small school districts to partner with other districts to develop special education placement options. Keeping students in-district saves money.
- Recognize the fact that as districts improve services for special education students, there will be better student outcomes. State funding to support mainstreaming opportunities, collaborative teaching, training for instructional aides, ABA training for staff working

with autistic children, Orton-Gillingham training for teachers working with dyslexic students would be a great start.

- Allow funding for in-district therapeutic counseling for at-risk students.
- Establish better and timelier procedures and systems to resolve special education disputes and reduce costly litigation.
- Talk with our legislators in Washington and advocate for changes to ESSA with the goal of reducing the amount of state testing. Return to the model that requires high quality state assessments aligned with the standards in grades 4, 8, and 11 only. This would save money and allow for this savings to be used to fund other educational needs.

For 21 years I have watched the state struggle with school funding and how to provide property tax relief to the overburdened citizens of New Jersey. It is time for the state to find a solution and improve our current school funding formula, to stop pitting general education and special education against each other by covering a higher percentage of the costs of special education, and to look to designing and allocating funds for innovations that will make a real difference for all of our students.

Thank you.