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Testimony before the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee
Regarding the 2015 Fiscal Year State Budget
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Ridgewood Board of Education Member

Good afternoon. My name is Sheila Brogan and next month I will be starting my nineteenth year on the Ridgewood Board of Education.

As I start my comments today, let me provide you with some information about Ridgewood. We are the largest school district in Bergen County with an enrollment of 5,800 students. We are a J district. We are an efficient and effective district.

Last year our students had the second highest SAT scores (1779 for Reading, Math, and Writing) for public high schools in the county. We outscored many of the J districts on the NJASK for 3rd through 8 grades and on the HSPAs in 11 grade. Our cost per pupil is lower than the average state per pupil cost and lower than the other Bergen County K-12 and regional districts. Our administration costs are significantly lower than that allowed by the state and we maintain a higher ratio of students to administrators when compared to similar size districts. The QSAC monitoring deemed us a high performing district in each of its three evaluations.

Two weeks ago we received good news when it was announced that our state aid would increase by \$100,628 next year. We support this increase and are grateful.

However, I thought that it was important to put this \$100,000 increase in perspective. In fiscal year 2008 we received \$3,791,294 in state aid. In the intervening years we have steadily lost state aid. Next year our state aid with the \$100,000 increase will amount to \$2,603,284: a difference of \$1,188,010 from Fiscal year '08. Assuming flat state aid, if we were to add up the lost state aid since 2008, it would equal \$9,941,007.

While we were losing state aid, our ability to increase the property tax was capped at 2%. The property tax supports 92.6% of our budget. We are conscious of our taxpayer's burden and continually look for savings and efficiencies.

For the last two years we have not used our allowed banked cap and have controlled the growth of the property tax within the allowable 2%.

Our Board has worked hard to cut expenses. Before it was popular, we privatized our custodian and maintenance, transportation, fields and grounds, substitute teacher and food services to save money. We went paperless with communications. We have changed health insurance carriers to find savings. We actively seek to lower costs by joint bidding with other districts for supplies, transportation, and energy. We have developed in-district programs for special needs students to comply with the IDEA's requirement to educate our students in the least restrictive environment and reduce the need to place students out of district. We installed solar panels on our school roofs and initiated conservation programs working to change our staff's behavior to conserve energy.

We have done this in spite of the loss of state aid and the fact that the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) formula that has not been fully funded since 2010. We have followed the law and played by the rules. However the rules keep changing with new initiatives that are put into place to improve student outcomes in a one size fits all fashion.

In 2010 New Jersey adopted the Common Core State Standards; with this came three years of work to align our K-12 curriculum to the standards. We completed the work last summer. Our administrators and teachers worked hard to accomplish this. We used our curriculum improvement budget to fund this to the exclusion of other curriculum initiatives that were on our list.

Knowing that the PARCC tests would be instituted next year, we have focused our technology money on improving our Wi-Fi and updating computers at a faster pace than we might have done had it not been for the online nature of PARCC. We lease purchase our technology, stretching our dollars further than we could if we had purchased the hardware straight out. Given the freedom to choose we would have started a 1 to 1 computer program at our high school and middle school or invested in a virtual desktop system. But the PARCC tests require certain technology and operating systems, so we focused on that. Will this improve student outcomes; it is hard to know at this juncture

We have always evaluated our teachers and taken appropriate action when warranted to withhold increments or file tenure charges. We were proactive when the state required us to pick an evaluation system. We chose the Stronge evaluations and trained our administrators and teachers on the new evaluation system, SGPs and SGOs. However, the training required us to use our professional development days; the time we would have spent on curriculum related professional development. It required us to spend money on the purchase of the evaluation and to train our administrators and teachers.

What are thought to be good ideas in Trenton often end up costing districts money. The costs associated with the Trenton education programs derail local initiatives that would have more meaning for student outcomes in high performing districts like ours.

We have complied with the educational mandates and we will continue to do so, but the flexibility needed for districts like Ridgewood to appropriately address our students' needs, to ensure better outcomes, to prepare our students for college and career are being eroded by the one size fits all approach and a funding formula that is not fully funded. More and more of our budget is being consumed to fund mandates dictated by Trenton rather than on initiatives that would be beneficial to our students' educational needs and supporting the goal of college and career readiness.