

Burlington County Times

School districts continue battle over funding

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Officials from several Burlington County school districts pleaded on behalf of their districts during Wednesday's Assembly Budget Committee hearing. The marathon session lasted over seven hours and was the final opportunity for residents and stakeholders to weigh in on the proposed spending plan.

TRENTON — The issue of school funding continued to dominate the public hearings on Gov. Phil Murphy's proposed \$38.6 billion state budget this week, as district officials, parents and students argued for and against making changes to the state's school funding formula.

Officials from several Burlington County districts pleaded on behalf of their schools during Wednesday's Assembly Budget Committee hearing. The marathon session lasted over seven hours and was the final opportunity for residents and stakeholders to weigh in on the proposed spending plan.

School funding received the most attention. While Murphy's budget calls for direct formula aid for public schools to rise \$206 million to just shy of \$8.7 billion, the additional funding will not be distributed to every school district in the state. In fact, nearly a third of the state's 577 public districts will receive less aid under the governor's plan, including 18 in Burlington County.

The reduction for some districts is due to a new school funding law that seeks to correct funding shortfalls and discrepancies from the past decade. The law kept the state's basic school funding formula in place but began phasing out and redistributing adjustment aid, a special category of aid that was created so

districts with shrinking enrollment did not lose funding. The law phases out the extra aid over seven years and redistributes it to growing districts shortchanged for most of the last decade.

Officials from school districts slated to lose more aid this year have banded together to lobby against the additional cuts, arguing that they will force their districts to reduce staff, eliminate programs and raise taxes.

Lumberton Superintendent Joe Langowski told the budget panel that the K-8th grade district closed one school last year and reduced administration, teaching and support staff. He warned that additional aid cuts would force the district to take more drastic steps to reduce spending, which would lead to larger class sizes.

“I’m the first person today to not ask you for more money. I’m just asking you to pause the state aid cuts that are impacting over 800,000 students throughout New Jersey,” Langowski said, before calling on lawmakers to create a bipartisan committee of education stakeholders to revisit the current school funding law and address “flaws” in the formula.

Other Burlington County school officials called for the same action, among them Tabernacle Superintendent Glenn Robbins, who told the panel his district is expected to lose close to \$315,000 in aid this year and \$2.6 million over the next six years under the new law.

“Our district will be unrecognizable,” he said.

Pemberton Township Superintendent Tony Trongone argued the current funding formula fails to recognize the challenges and expenses the rural district has with large numbers of students from military families, as well as those considered homeless or from families with documented cases of domestic violence.

“Pemberton requires relief for the reduction of adjustment aid,” Trongone said. “Meeting the needs of high poverty and military students depends on this action.”

Officials from Chesterfield, one of the most severely underfunded in the state during the last decade but one of the biggest beneficiaries of the increased aid from the new funding law, urged lawmakers to continue to follow through with the phase-out and redistribution of funding.

Amy Jablonski, vice president of the Chesterfield school board, said the additional funding has allowed the district to update its curriculum, purchase new books and supplies and expand its programs.

“In the past, my child’s Social Studies textbook was so old it had Cory Booker as the mayor of Newark,” Jablonski said about New Jersey’s six-year U.S. senator and presidential candidate.

Chris Jones, of the New Jersey School Boards Association, said the increased funding for underfunded districts must be preserved, but he said lawmakers could look to make some changes to assist others slated to lose aid.

He suggested that boosting funding for extraordinary special education costs would help all districts and blunt some of the losses of adjustment aid. He also said the Department of Education could make more emergency aid available to districts experiencing the biggest cuts.

Julie Borst, executive director of the Save Our Schools NJ advocacy group, also suggested funding extraordinary special education costs, as well as lifting the state’s 2 percent cap on tax levy increases for districts losing state funding.

“It’s shameful the state has pitted districts against each other for funding. No one wins, least of all our students,” she said.

Assemblyman John Burzichelli, D-3rd of Paulsboro, told school officials at the hearing that their concerns about the funding formula were being heard and that discussions about funding would continue beyond the hearings.

“This discussion will be going on past today,” he said.