



MAYORS JOINT PRESS RELEASE

We write as we await the feasibility study promised by our local school districts, in the hope of putting the current discussion of school regionalization in context.

As elected leaders, we have an obligation to ensure our students are provided the highest quality education. To achieve this goal and ensure our schools remain competitive, we must continue to be creative in order to optimize use of tax dollars. Educational literature is replete with examples of how smaller school districts provide their students with fewer educational opportunities and are costlier to operate. That is why recent State legislation unanimously approved the creation of K-12 regional school districts to improve "educational quality, equality, and efficiency." In authorizing legislation that encourages the study of regionalization, former Senate President Sweeney wrote that "we believe all students would benefit from the curriculum coordination and enhanced learning opportunities that comes from attending a K-12 or countywide district. But regionalization is particularly important for small districts with declining enrollments that are having an increasingly hard time providing a quality educational experience and making their budgets work."

In response to a tightening budget and the reality that our school districts represent among the smallest in the State, our municipal governing bodies took the proactive step to retain the State's top experts to determine whether we could educate our students in a more efficient and effective manner. The experts were:

- (1) *Former Commissioner of Education David Hespe.* Commissioner Hespe served twice as New Jersey's Commissioner of Education, first under Governor Whitman from 1999 to 2001 and then under Governor Christie from 2014 to 2016. Commissioner Hespe also has served as the President and Chief Executive Officer for Burlington County College, the Chief of Staff for the Department of Education, an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership at Rowan University, and as an Assistant Council for Education and Higher Education in the Governor's Office.
- (2) *Steven Cea, MBA.* Mr. Cea holds a Bachelor of Arts in Computer Science from Columbia University and a Masters of Business Administration from the University of California at Berkeley. He serves as a public education financial consultant for public schools. Previously, he served as a Deputy Director in the New York City Mayor's Office for

Economic Development, the Business Administrator/Board Secretary for the Ho-Ho-Kus School District, the Business Administrator/Board Secretary for the West Milford School District, and the School Business Administrator/Board Secretary for the Paramus Public School District. He has served as the President of the Bergen County Association of School Business Officials, the President of the Passaic County Association of School Business Officials, and the Treasurer of the Educational Council of Passaic County. He has been awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the New Jersey Association of School Business Officials.

- (3) *Dr. Richard Grip.* Dr. Grip presently serves as the Executive Director for Statistical Forecasting LLC. He has performed demographic studies projecting student enrollment for over 17 years.¹ He received his Doctor of Education in Educational Statistics and Measurements from Rutgers University in 1998, during which he authored his dissertation titled Prediction of Student Enrollments Using The Modified Regression Technique. He also received his Master of Education in Science and his Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering from Rutgers University. Prior to his employment at Statistical Forecasting, Dr. Grip served as an Adjunct Professor at Marlboro College and Rutgers University.

These three professionals are renowned throughout the State in this particular field, having worked on a significant number of school reconfiguration projects. As a result, we appreciate and respect their findings and recommendations.

The experts found that all three communities – Sea Bright, Atlantic Highlands and Highlands – would greatly benefit from the creation of a new PK-12 community. Sea Bright would benefit from leaving a presently unfair cost allocation (it pays over \$142,000 per student, as compared to the Statewide average of under \$19,000 per student) and moving to a more traditional financial arrangement. Atlantic Highlands and Highlands also would benefit greatly. The new regional school district would see an influx of new tax revenue (over \$1.3 million in tax revenue from Sea Bright), without a substantial increase in costs (Sea Bright averages around 3-5 students per grade). The experts found that given the small number of Sea Bright students in each grade level, the new regional school district likely will not need to hire new teachers or staff. This would generate over \$1.5 million in savings each year for the Atlantic Highlands and Highlands communities (under one proposed model, \$520,000 in savings for Atlantic Highlands and \$1,077,000 in savings for Highlands). The result is our communities experiencing substantial savings, while also providing a superior education to our students.

We understand that some have argued that these highly trained and experienced experts failed to take into account some potential hidden costs and liability that could reduce the proposed

¹ He has served as the demographic expert for Somers Point, Bedford Central School District, Matawan-Aberdeen Regional School District, Edgewater Park, North Haledon, Oaklyn Public Schools, Arlington Public Schools, Seaside Park, East Newark, Cape May, West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, Merchantville Borough, Woodbridge School District, South Hunterdon Regional School District, Yonkers Public Schools, New York City School Construction Authority, Hackensack Public Schools, North Hanover Township School District, Black Horse Pike Regional School District, Robbinsville Township School District, Montvale Borough, Woodcliff Lake Borough, Carlstadt Borough, Watchung Borough, Park Ridge Borough, Merchantville Board of Education, Vineland Board of Education, Oradell Borough, Liberty Township, Newfield Board of Education, Elk Township, Franklin Township, and Delsea Regional High School District.

benefits. As discussed above, the three experts are well-respected and renowned around the State for their work in this area. We are unaware of any other professionals in the State more qualified in the area of school reconfiguration than this group. If there are any such hidden costs, we are confident that they would be aware of their existence.

While there are savings associated with reconfiguration without Sea Bright, we understand that such savings would be minimal. In fact, Dr. Tara Beams, who was appointed last April to serve as the shared Superintendent for Atlantic Highlands, Highlands, and Henry Hudson Regional (the Tri-District), recently made clear, the Tri-District proposal without Sea Bright is not expected to see "giant cost savings, because we share so much as it is." Instead, the only way for all three of our communities to receive cost-savings, while improving the educational output, is to receive the influx of tax revenue from Sea Bright through the proposed school reconfiguration. This is why the three municipal governing bodies first began to collaborate on this important issue. Indeed, the school boards also were invited to participate in the original feasibility study and their administrators were consulted and provided helpful information. We should note that the consultants retained by the Tri-District have made no effort to speak with the mayors of any of our communities. The only communications came by way of OPRA requests.

As we understand from Dr. Beams, the Tri-District study will not specifically include an analysis on the inclusion of Sea Bright and the benefits of the over \$1 million dollars in additional revenue that would be provided to the school district by including such few Sea Bright students per grade (3-5 students per grade). The Tri-District study will not challenge the educational benefits of adding Sea Bright children to the student bodies of the Atlantic Highlands or Highlands elementary schools or Henry Hudson. Therefore, we do not expect these studies to conflict in that regard and we are comfortable that municipal and school officials will be able to reach agreement on a proposal to present to the voters in our three communities.

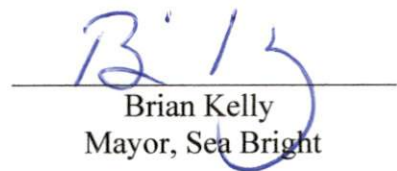
An issue as large and important as this one -- that will decide the future of how our tax dollars are spent and how our communities educate our children -- should not be decided by a few elected officials. Instead, such a critical issue should be decided by the voters after being provided with all of the facts. We are confident that the elected officials in our three communities can and will work cooperatively to present the question of regionalization to our collective voters in November.



Loretta Gluckstein
Mayor, Atlantic Highlands



Carolyn Broullon
Mayor, Highlands



Brian Kelly
Mayor, Sea Bright