



TOMS RIVER REGIONAL SCHOOLS

MICHAEL CITTA

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The following is an official statement from Toms River Regional Schools Superintendent Michael Citta, issued verbally at the special public school board meeting July 3, 2024, and provided here as a release to local and state media outlets.

For the last seven years, Toms River Regional Schools has been decimated by the state's funding formula and the S2 legislation that created a \$137 million cumulative loss for our students, district, and taxpayers. All while this district has been mandated to tax our communities to the maximum of the allowable 2-percent cap annually. Toms River has already cut more than 250 jobs, including teachers and administrators, and has reduced its programming for students along the way. We have used all of our surplus and reserves and monetized our assets, rented facilities and even sold trees to make up the shortfall. Even with all of those actions, there was no way to make up the \$137 million cut with the allowable 2-percent tax levy increase over a seven-year period. We have worked with our Executive County Superintendent and Business Administrator and sought any suggestions they may have to address our crisis. The fallout has pushed the most cost-efficient district in the state of New Jersey to bankruptcy, as districts that spend far more and tax less have benefited with major aid increases to their budgets, leading to wasteful spending and ridiculous salary increases and non-essential pet projects.

I have been clear and transparent for the past year that because of these decisions by the DOE and the State of NJ, Toms River is \$26.5 million short on its budget to complete the 2024-2025 school year. My team and I, along with our school board, have been working nonstop to communicate, lobby, negotiate, testify, and pursue solutions to the shortfall and address the funding issues. Representatives at the county and state levels of the DOE who are experts in school finance have agreed with our number of negative \$26.5 million, and acknowledge that it is a revenue problem, not a spending problem.

We have continued to take the high road and work with local and state legislators and the Governor's office directly toward a solution to our problem, all the way up until this past Friday when the budget was signed and Toms River was left to deal with the financial cliff the State of NJ created. Let me reiterate, in no uncertain terms, that the State of New Jersey has knowingly created this problem for our district as well as our neighbors in Brick, Jackson, Lakewood, Lacey, Plumsted and Stafford, just to name a few. Why? How can you do that to the 15,000 Toms River students who deserve the same opportunities as every child in this great state? The removal of \$26.5 million from this budget would eliminate 368 more jobs, put class sizes in the hundreds, and eliminate all extra curricular and athletic programs from the district. It would also eliminate kindergarten completely. There is no way to even propose that.

What they have done is nothing short of legislative child abuse and neglect. I have done my job of presenting a balanced budget, but unfortunately it does not provide a structural revenue solution and only compounds the problems for our district moving forward. Because of the malfeasance of the Department of Education, we were already \$91.5 million under adequacy, which is the amount the state's constitutionally-approved formula tells us we should be spending to provide a thorough and efficient education. Being \$26.5 million short increases that number to \$118 million dollars under adequacy. The Commissioner now says that is just a suggestion.

Let's therefore discuss what should not and cannot happen.



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No.1, our kids should come first. Always. Our students deserve the programming they have, and much more that we wish we could provide.

No. 2, our community must retain its strength, resolve, trust, and commitment. The easiest thing to do in this untenable position is to panic, point fingers, and fight amongst ourselves, which is what cannot happen. The fight is with the DOE and the State of NJ, whose decision makers have created these policies to harm our students, teachers, staff and community. Already, however, we have witnessed local politics attempt to step into this crisis and cause division. This is no different than Governor Murphy, Commissioner Dehmer and the legislators that turned their backs on the 15,000 students and 50,000 plus families in our district when the budget was approved that provided over a billion dollars in extra spending in education and 700 million more in “Pork” or “Christmas Tree Money” for politicians’ pet projects while our students’ futures and opportunities are thrown away like yesterday's garbage.

Politics have no place in our schools or any school!

No. 3, let’s talk about salaries. Last month, this board made decisions on the agenda based on their beliefs that we did not have a balanced budget. This resulted in the approvals of some salaries but not others. Let me be clear: Nobody on this board or in this office thinks that certain members of our administrative team are more essential than others. Each of the assistant superintendents as well as our BA work their tails off for our students, staff, and this community. We are, together, focusing on our purpose, which is our students. As we fight for our funding, all of my team members including myself will freeze our salaries and work under last year's contractual agreements.

Our kids come first, and there will be no distraction.

What we need now is the Toms River Regional Schools community to do what we do best, which is come together, in this case to join this fight and sign onto our pursuit. This fight goes beyond our borders and affects our entire county and all of the children and future children who call this part of the Jersey Shore home. I call on all of you, our elected officials in our district and our county, to stand with us and join, because if we let this County Seat fail, we all fail.

We are not going to let that happen. Because together, WE- R- TR!

Michael Citta, Superintendent of Schools

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