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# N.J. parent group petitions for equitable school funding PRO



David Hespe. (AP Photo/Mel Evans)



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At two legislative budget hearings this month focused on the Department of Education, members of the public donned orange, grey, yellow or brown T-shirts to represent their individual communities, as they sought equitable school funding.

Now, rather than keep up their piecemeal efforts, some parents want to harness the collective energy of taxpayers statewide. Two Delran parents recently founded a group, Our Fair Share, that they hope will spark a coordinated statewide movement.

“We’re really trying to get it to the point where it’s not just individual districts trying to plead their case,” co-founder Mike Piper said. “We want to make this a political issue for the elections next year.”

The group launched a [change.org petition](#) this week urging the state to restructure how it distributes education dollars. The petition had nearly 300 signatures by Friday afternoon.

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As it stands, some districts are receiving millions more in state aid than other similarly-sized school systems, forcing the latter to raise local school taxes.

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[Reform Act of 2008](#), districts that saw their allocated state funds plummet under the new funding formula were awarded “adjustment aid” to shield them from the impacts of a sudden sharp decline in revenue. That money was to be phased out gradually, giving districts time to adjust.

Eight years later, those districts are still receiving the adjustment aid. Other districts, meanwhile, have seen their overall pupil enrollment — or the number of English learners, special-needs or low-income students

they serve — grow. State aid has remained relatively flat for them.

Conversely, some districts have lost students over the years, but the amount of state aid they’re receiving still reflects a time when they had more students to educate.

Those disparities in funding have led increasingly to calls for change from parents and school officials from communities who feel they’re not getting their fair share.

For years, the state has failed to fully fund schools based on its funding formula, and many members of the public who testified before lawmakers in recent weeks said they’re realistic enough not to expect 100 percent funding.

But the parents and school officials say that if districts are to be shortchanged, they should all be underfunded at the same rate.

The overall amount of school aid budgeted for fiscal year 2017 is, at \$8.03 billion, 90 percent of what the funding formula calls for, a spokesman for the Department of Education said Friday. For individual districts, the portion of their operating budgets covered by state aid may be above or below 90 percent, however. In terms of adjustment aid, a total of \$571.6 million will go to the districts that qualify, the spokesman said.

Our Fair Share co-founder Lucy Horton said it’s time the state takes the adjustment aid and redistribute those funds equitably.

“Eight years is plenty of time to work out your numbers,” she said of the districts receiving adjustment aid. “We need to share the sacrifice equally. We are one state.”

Our Fair Share’s organizers said they have not reached out to legislators, but some officials in Trenton, including Gov. Chris Christie, have already expressed interest in changing how the state hands out school aid.

Christie in March said the [funding formula isn’t working](#) and blamed Democrats, who control the Legislature, for the lack of change, saying they represent districts that are receiving a disproportionate amount of funding.

State Sen. Jennifer Beck, a Republican, and Senate President Stephen Sweeney, a Democrat, are drafting legislation to change the funding formula. Beck said recently she hopes to introduce the bill in May.

State Education Commissioner [David Hespe has also indicated support](#) for overhauling the formula.

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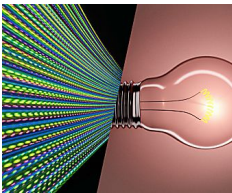
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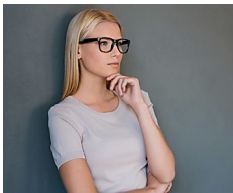
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