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Dr. Kwame R. Morton – Assembly Testimony

March 20, 2024

Good afternoon Madam Chair, Mr. Vice-Chairman, and honorable members of the Assembly Budget Committee,

My name is Kwame Morton, and I serve as the Acting Superintendent of Cherry Hill Public Schools. Today, I stand before you with ambivalent emotions. I am immensely proud to be accompanied by roughly 60 members of the Cherry Hill community, including our Board of Education, teachers, staff, parents, community leaders, and most importantly, our students. We are here today, united in our purpose, to express our concerns regarding the \$6.9 million cut in State Aid we have endured, and to request your support.

While the support of our community fills me with pride, I am equally disheartened that we find ourselves in this situation. These individuals have taken time out of their busy schedules, parents have taken days off work, and our students are missing valuable class time to be here. Yet, everyone present has willingly made these sacrifices, recognizing the critical importance of this issue to both the current and future well-being of the students of Cherry Hill Public Schools. As a district that has historically been underfunded, we had begun making strides in aligning our staffing with the needs of our students and we were on the cusp of addressing teacher recruitment and retention. The proposed budget cuts will halt our progress, severely hindering our ability to support our most vulnerable students.

For context, Cherry Hill is a very diverse community. Our students speak 72 different languages. The enrollment of English Language Learners (ELL) and students receiving special education services have steadily increased. Over the last three years, the number of students qualifying for Free and Reduced Lunch has risen from 14.5% to nearly 19% of our student body. Our students rely on us for support.

We now face an untenable situation. If these budget cuts persist, our community will see increased taxes, and these cuts will inevitably impact our students. Governor Murphy, in discussing this year's increase in public school funding, stated, "There is a simple reason we are keeping this promise. It's because we need to cultivate the potential of every student in any way we can — whether they live in Cranbury or Camden." As a district and as a community, we couldn't agree more with this sentiment, which is why we are seeking your support in providing supplemental aid to Cherry Hill Public Schools this year. Thank you for your time and consideration!