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**Dr. Kwame R. Morton – Senate Testimony
March 14, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Gopal and honorable members of the Senate Education Committee,

My name is Kwame Morton, and I am the Acting Superintendent for Cherry Hill Public Schools. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak before you this morning and I do not take this opportunity for granted. Cherry Hill is the 11th largest school district in New Jersey, and one of the largest employers in South Jersey with approximately 1,700 professional staff. We serve a diverse student body of 10,673 students in grades preK-12, who speak 72 different languages. Over a period of 5 years our English Language Learner (ELL) enrollment has increased 266% and nearly 2,000 (18.36%) of our students receive special education services.

The historical underfunding of Cherry Hill Public Schools has posed significant and enduring challenges for the district, with one of the most critical issues being the inability to adequately upgrade and maintain district facilities. This situation underscores a narrative of financial strain that impacts not only the physical infrastructure of our schools but also the broader educational experience we are able to offer our students.

In October 2022, the Cherry Hill community demonstrated its commitment to our children's future by passing a \$363 million dollar bond referendum to provide much needed facility repairs and improvements. This was the largest school bond referendum in the state's history and our taxpayers overwhelmingly passed the bond knowing that it would mean an \$386 tax increase on the average assessed home. After several years of increases to our State Aid, including an increase of \$6.7 million dollars last year, we were optimistic that our concerns about the years of underfunding had been heard and were being addressed. This year we were stunned to learn that we would be receiving a reduction in our State Aid in the amount of \$6.9 million dollars. There were no indications that Cherry Hill would have the second largest aid cut in the State.

Facing the financial challenges brought on by the deficit, we find ourselves in a difficult position. We must now approach the taxpayers of Cherry Hill once more, to request an increase in taxes beyond what has already been generously agreed upon via the bond referendum. Even with taxes raised to the maximum, a 2-million-dollar gap remains, forcing us to reduce positions. The potential loss of personnel is not merely a matter of balancing our budget; it directly affects the quality of education and support we



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can offer our students. Reductions in personnel will inevitably lead to increased class sizes, diminished resources for special education and ELL programs, and the possible elimination of valuable extracurricular activities and support services that contribute to the holistic development of our students.

Moving forward, I humbly submit a few requests to the Senate Education Committee.

- **Predictability**

To ensure effective budget planning, predictability is crucial. Cherry Hill Public Schools received an increase of \$6.7 million in State Aid last year, and we received a decrease of \$6.9 million in this year's projected State Aid. Drastic changes of this nature make it nearly impossible to effectively plan. Further, these cuts present unprecedented challenges to our district's operational and strategic goals, particularly in the area of teacher recruitment and retention. The cuts in our State Aid significantly jeopardize our efforts by the inability to enhance our salary guide. Therefore, I propose setting caps on potential budget losses to avoid yearly fluctuations in district budgets.

- **Fair Funding Assessment**

Reevaluate the criteria for determining State Aid, particularly the use of district income as a measure of community wealth. The State Aid Equalization report listed an increase in district income and property valuations for Cherry Hill. However, an audit conducted with local Cherry Hill Township officials reveals discrepancies in the valuation increases attributed to our district, indicating a need for a more accurate assessment method that truly reflects our community's financial landscape. In addition to growth in our ELL and special education student numbers, we've seen a rise in children qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The growth in Cherry Hill's low socioeconomic status (SES) population challenges the claim of overall increased wealth in the district. It suggests a potential uneven distribution of wealth among residents. Cuts in our State Aid will impact the district's ability to provide quality support for students in need. Therefore, we believe that the use of district income as an indicator of community wealth is flawed.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I appreciate the opportunity to address you today. Thank you for considering additional funding for Cherry Hill Public Schools and other institutions facing similar challenges. Your support will help us assist all students without overburdening our taxpayers excessively.