



# PORT WASHINGTON Union Free School District

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February 10, 2020

Dear Members of the State Legislature:

The Port Washington UFSD thanks the Legislature for its diligence in reviewing the Governor's proposed budget. We further acknowledge and are grateful for the help and support of our local legislators, Education Committee Member Assemblyman Anthony D'Urso, and Senator Anna Kaplan. They both well understand our district's "personality" and circumstances, and have been strong advocates for us.

Port Washington sits on the North Shore of Long Island, in Nassau County. Our area is sometimes referred to as the Gold Coast, and that is how you may think of us. However, that is an oversimplification of Port Washington, and of Long Island in general.

Over the past 15+ years, while student enrollment throughout the State has dropped, enrollment throughout Long Island has remained relatively steady, representing around 17% of the total students of New York State. By contrast, Port Washington has seen an overall 20% increase in student population, and a 10% increase since the Tax Cap was implemented. The amount of need on Long Island, and in Port Washington (for example, free and reduced lunch, ELL/ENL, Special Education), has grown in that time as well.

This growth, however, is not reflected in the Foundation Aid Formula, which uses 20-year-old poverty statistics. 46.8% of students on Long Island reside in districts that fall below the State's average in terms of income and property wealth. As a region, Long Island has one of the highest ratios of needy districts in the State, and yet Long Island receives only 12% of the State's funding.

And even these statistics are skewed, to Port Washington's disadvantage. Our Mean Wealth and Property Values are, according to the current formula, high, and fail to reflect the poverty in our district. Similarly, our Combined Wealth Ratio is over 2, also failing to take into account the wide economic diversity that we have. If the Legislature were to compute Port's wealth using median income – instead of mean income – Port Washington would be close to the Island average. A few billionaires can and do skew our results, creating an inaccurate picture of our district's economics. A family with \$100M income does not pay 1,000 times the school taxes of a family that makes \$100K. Property taxes are regressive and put the greatest burden on those with the least ability to invest in the futures of their children. This flawed formula has resulted in a real and negative impact to our students and our taxpayers.

In addition to the growing poverty, Long Island has welcomed many "unaccompanied minors" to our school districts. These students – who can range in age into their late teens – often have not received a robust education in their home countries, some having received little to no formal education in their home countries. It is our job to bring them up to their peers, and to ensure they pass specific Regents exams in order to graduate and receive a high school diploma. This requires vast resources, the majority of which is not reimbursed.

All this being said, Long Island historically has the best educational outcomes of any region in the State, and Port Washington is among the best on Long Island. We know how to educate all learners, but we need appropriate resources in order to ensure our continued success.

The Tax Cap fails to consider enrollment growth. As a result, the Tax Cap is hindering our ability to grow our programs along with our increasing student enrollment, and has hindered and continues to hinder our ability to improve our increasing need for mental health services, guidance counselors and additional security personnel – an unfortunate modern day necessity.

Port Washington is a microcosm of New York State. We speak 41 languages and provide ELL/ENL services to speakers of over 20 languages. We have a free and reduced lunch population of 15.8%. It is important to point out that our free and reduced lunch number is artificially low because it is based on statewide income figures. It also does not include families who do not want to self-report. In addition, our cost of living is higher than the statewide average.

As a microcosm of the State, we should receive the average amount of State Aid, but that is not the case. While the statewide average of funding that comes from the State is 36%, Port's figure is closer to 6%.

Another area of great concern and equally devastating to the children of Port Washington is the Governor's proposal to eliminate many categories of reimbursable expenses by rolling them into the underfunded Foundation Aid. This will harm districts, such as Port, in the more expensive regions of the State. In addition, it will make prudent fiscal planning at the district level almost impossible as the vast majority of our funding will not be based on reality or need.

In December 2019, our district submitted testimony to the Senate Education Committee regarding its review of the current Foundation Aid Formula. Rather than repeat our testimony here, we are attaching that testimony herein.

Our community, and others like ours, is being asked to shoulder an unacceptable share of the burden. We are being punished for living in a high cost area. We provide much more in State tax revenue than we receive back in State services. While we are happy to help support programs for the rest of the State, we are being taken advantage of by the State and that must stop.

Education is at a crossroads. We either maintain our high quality of education or we risk losing what makes New York (and Port Washington) a great place to live. When education needs grow, then support must grow to meet it. We are not asking for you to spend more on our children, we are asking you to invest in them and their futures. A good education has a great rate of return, both in lowering reliance on public assistance and increased earning and tax revenue.

Our dedicated staff and supportive community members have kept us afloat, but we are nearing our breaking point. Does the Governor's desire for equity mean that Port should do less and less for our students and regress to the State mean? That is awful public policy. Providing the necessary resources to the State's neediest schools should not come at the expense of the State's less needy schools that are deserving of their share of aid. It has been reported that even the Governor's Budget Director admitted that taking all the State Aid from the supposedly wealthy districts and giving it to the neediest would not be enough to make a difference in those districts. Draining aid from Port Washington, however, would definitely harm Port schools.

Thank you for all that you do for the people of New York. We are here and willing to help in any way that we can to achieve our common goal of providing every student in New York with a quality education.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Sincerely,



Nora H. Johnson  
Board of Education President



Michael J. Hynes  
Superintendent of Schools