

Testimony before the Assembly Education Committee  
Maureen Reusche, Ed.D., Superintendent, Cherry Hill Public Schools  
February 2, 2012

Good afternoon, Chairman Diegnan and members of the Assembly Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am Maureen Reusche, Superintendent of the Cherry Hill Public Schools in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

As my district began developing its budget for the 2012-2013 school year, we faced a new challenge – a requirement to set aside \$1.9 million to support a charter school that was approved to open in Cherry Hill in September 2012.

Cherry Hill is currently appealing the approval of the Regis Academy Charter School. Our brief will detail a variety of concerns related to this particular application. But the issue I'd like you to consider today is one that affects any school district in which a charter school is approved: the conflict that exists between the current charter approval process, which was established in 1995 and New Jersey's cap law, which went into effect in 2010.

The cap law, as you know, limits the annual growth of our school tax levy to 2%. Cherry Hill has been mindful of the impact of the recession on our local taxpayers. Our current budget included a \$500,000 tax levy decrease. In fact, the current levy is just 1.9% more than it was in 2008-2009 – less than half the Philadelphia-area inflation rate over the same period.

The \$1.9 million we are required to set aside for the charter school's projected enrollment of 169 Cherry Hill students represents 64% of the total amount our budget will be allowed to grow under the levy cap law. 64%. For Voorhees, Lawnside, and Somerdale, the other sending districts for Regis, the set-aside ranges from 90% to 166% of their cap! And this does not include any costs we might incur for transportation and residency investigations.

Our payments to the charter school will begin in July 2012 based on an unsubstantiated projection. If actual enrollments are below projected numbers – and we believe they will be – the payment schedule eventually will be adjusted, but by the time the enrollments are reconciled, we will be well into the 2012-2013 school year and the damage to our budget will have been done.

In Cherry Hill, as in many suburban school districts, funding for public education comes primarily from local property taxes. Yet our local taxpayers have had no say in whether a charter school can open in our district. The decision to approve the Regis application rested entirely with the Acting Commissioner of Education.

In attempting to determine why this charter was approved, we filed an OPRA request for the application review sheets; the DOE denied our OPRA request, but later released the review sheets to our solicitor as part of the official record on appeal. Here's what we found: Three reviewers reviewed the application, giving scores of "Meets the Standard," "Approaches the Standard," or "Does Not Meet the Standard" in 14 categories. Three reviewers, 14 categories, for a total of 42 indicators. Regis's application was deemed to meet the standard in just 20 of the 42 possible indicators. That's a score of 47.6%. Shouldn't a charter school application be subject to at least the 80% standard that school districts must achieve in the NJQSAC review?

In an era when school districts and municipalities are urged to share services and identify cost efficiencies, we have very serious concerns about a process that allows for the creation of a charter school that will duplicate services, increase costs, and divert resources from our successful public schools.

On behalf of my Board of Education and the taxpayers of Cherry Hill, I want to thank the Assembly for moving to reform the charter approval process during the last legislative session and for reintroducing the legislation in this session. Clearly, the landscape has changed since 1995 and reform is long overdue.