

## **Twenty percent of little**

Last year, the Robbinsville Board of Education, joined by three members of the public, filed suit in federal district court against the New Jersey Department of Education, based upon its alleged unconstitutional application of the school funding formula to Robbinsville. While the case was removed from the federal court on procedural grounds, the formula as recently proposed by Gov. Jon S. Corzine arguably continues to violate the constitutional rights of the citizens of Robbinsville.

On Dec. 12, 2007, Gov. Corzine and Education Commissioner Lucille E. Davy announced a new school funding formula, which they have affectionately called "A Formula for Success: All Children, All Communities." According to the governor's plan, which must still be approved by the Legislature, approximately \$7.8 billion will be distributed to K-12 education for the 2008-2009 fiscal year, an increase of \$532.8 million. This is a welcome announcement, since school funding has been essentially frozen for the past three years.

As the plan is currently written, all school districts will receive a state aid increase of at least 2 percent during the first year and no school district will see a decrease in state aid during the first three years of the program. When the plan was announced, the local newspapers were quick to trumpet that Robbinsville is one of only two towns in Mercer County that would be experiencing a 20 percent increase in state aid over the previous year.

While the additional aid is certainly welcome, a hard look at the numbers reveals that even with a 20 percent increase in aid, Robbinsville remains dead last in per pupil funding in Mercer County. Lost in the sound bite of a "20 percent increase" is the fact that when the base funding is so low to begin with, 20 percent doesn't amount to much at all. Under the proposed formula, Robbinsville will receive an additional \$480,000 in state aid. Based on current reported enrollment figures, this additional aid will bring Robbinsville up to a paltry \$1,093 per student in state aid, the lowest in per-pupil aid in Mercer County. By comparison, the neighboring districts will receive the following amounts on a per-pupil basis: East Windsor Regional: \$3,947; Hamilton Township: \$5,492, and Upper Freehold Regional: \$3,165. Another district worth mentioning is Millstone, as Robbinsville is often compared to it in terms of wealth and student population, will receive approximately \$2,367 per student under the new formula.

This is not to begrudge the funding received by any district mentioned herein, as it is recognized that according to current studies, the base cost of educating a student in New Jersey was found to be approximately \$8,500. The comparison with other districts, however, is important to illustrate the large disparity that continues to exist in the state's funding plan. A formula that is based upon too many factors often leaves it open to conjecture and political favoritism, with many school districts such as Robbinsville falling short in receiving its fair share.

It's time for the Legislature to scrap the funding formula and simplify the doling out of aid by basing it upon the true cost of educating a child, instead of some virtual analysis of what a community as a whole can afford.

- Mark Setaro  
President of the Robbinsville Board of Education.