

October 28, 2009

Testimony: Senate Appropriations Committee
RE: School funding and 20j
Susan H. Zurvalec, superintendent
Farmington Public Schools

Good afternoon, Senators. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the importance of 20j and school funding. My name is Sue Zurvalec. I am the superintendent of Farmington Public Schools. Our school district is a "Hold Harmless", 20j district. We serve the communities of Farmington and Farmington Hills, with a combined population of more than 80,000 residents. Farmington Hills is the largest city in Oakland County. Our school system has an enrollment of just under 12,000 students. We are a community that truly values a quality public school system with outstanding fine arts programs, academics and athletics. We also celebrate a rich diversity of cultures. Over 95 different languages are spoken by the families in our school district and we are nationally recognized for our newcomer centers that serve students with zero English. Our three comprehensive high schools graduate more than 95% of our students and 95% of those go onto college.

We have a long tradition of excellence in education since our first school was founded in Farmington Township in 1835. Because of the tremendous support from our community, this has continued, but now is seriously threatened by the recent cuts in school aid, including 20j. As a 20j school district, our residents pay higher school taxes, and thus expect us to continue to provide this quality education for their children. While the majority of the school districts in Michigan levy only the statewide 6 mill school tax, our residents pay more than double that, or a total of 14.3442 mills. Our residents have consistently renewed this additional millage since the passage of Proposal A in 1994.

Before Proposal A we were an out of formula district. When Proposal A was passed, we were assured that our schools would be "held harmless". 20J was adopted a few years later, when the legislature realized that there was an error in the way hold harmless districts were being reimbursed and thus, 20j was enacted to correct this error. Also, as part of the Proposal A deal, school districts gave up the right to ask their residents for increased millage for operational cost increases. Unlike our cities, who can ask for local support for public safety operations, we must and do put our faith in this legislature and the Governor to fully fund our operational needs; so that our students receive the quality education they deserve.

I am here today on behalf of these 12,000 students and their families to share our deep disappointment with the actions of our Governor and legislature who have failed to resolve this funding crisis. When taken all together, the Governors' veto of 20j, which is \$199 per pupil for Farmington, the proration of \$127 per pupil and the \$165 per pupil reduction in the foundation allowance, our district has lost \$493 per pupil, or almost \$6 million dollars, in the school year we are already more than well into. This lost revenue was not anticipated when our school board adopted its balanced budget on June 30th, as required by law. All our teachers are in classrooms and all our contracts are already in place for the school year.

This means that with the \$6 million reduction in state aid, coupled with projected further reductions in state aid for 2010-11, increases in the retirement payroll costs, and declining enrollment, Farmington has projected a deficit by almost \$12 million dollars at the end of 2011.

If nothing is done to provide an adequate, reliable and sustainable funding source, we will have to make deep and painful cuts that will affect our programs and services. We have projected that it will take \$20 to \$27 million dollars in reductions, which is the equivalent of more than 240 teaching positions out of 900 teachers, just to get out of the deficit and have a little money left over to cover emergencies and any further prorations during the upcoming school year. This will be devastating for our schools.

Lest you think our district has been doing nothing to conserve and reduce expenditures, I want to make it very clear, that over the past 5 years, we have reduced costs and eliminated well over 100 staff positions, to equal \$33 million in reductions. Over the same time period, our energy conservation programs have saved \$5.2 million of this \$33 million. We now have a community led committee that is meeting to examine closing schools. Additionally, we are sharing services where possible and will continue to find efficiencies and reduce expenditures outside the classroom. The Oakland County Superintendents Association developed a plan well before the recent legislation for the consolidation of services, and districts have been sharing services in a variety of ways. Besides sharing services with other public schools, our district also provides bus maintenance services on a fee for service basis to nearby private and parochial schools.

In closing, the Promise of Proposal A is broken. We urge you to support overturning the governor's veto of 20j and do whatever you can to fix this funding crisis. We need for everyone to stop playing politics over who's to blame for this crisis and fix it. We need a stable and reliable funding source if we are to continue to provide a public education to all of Michigan's children so that they can graduate well prepared with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the 21st century global economy.

Thank you for listening and providing me the time to make these comments.