



OPEN LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY REGARDING SCHOOL REGIONALIZATION – July 2020

Our goal every day as the Mayors of Atlantic Highlands, Highlands and Sea Bright is to serve the best interest of our communities. We see and interact with our families every day and understand their hopes and their struggles. They expect us to fight for them, to find ways to do things better and to reduce the financial burdens imposed by local government. For this reason, we read with dismay the joint statement of the Boards of Education for the Atlantic Highlands School District, Highlands School District, and the Henry Hudson Regional High School District regarding a proposal to allow for a vote on regionalizing local education. It would have been simpler if the boards were honest and indicated that they oppose our effort to allow voters to consider a better, less expensive education in order to save themselves from being disbanded and replaced with a more efficient structure.

We, the Mayors of these communities, have put forth a proposal that the voters of our three communities -- Atlantic Highlands, Highlands and Sea Bright -- be given the opportunity to decide at the ballot box what they believe is in the best interests of their families and communities. This is what democracy is all about. Unfortunately, the boards of education disagree and apparently believe that the voters should not be given this choice.

As a general rule, a change in school district structure is left to the discretion of the voters not the Mayors and not the boards of education. What is equally clear in the boards' joint statement is that the boards simply do not like the idea of providing the voters with a choice. Instead, they use half-truths to justify their actions such as the following:

1. The proposal is all about “an effort to accommodate Sea Bright’s approximately 60 students.” In this statement, the boards attempt to mischaracterize the motivations behind the proposal. The boards are correct that Sea Bright will bring very few students into the proposed combined districts. This means, however, that there will be a minimal impact on the classroom as these small numbers will be spread over 13 grade levels. The key here is that Sea Bright will also bring substantial ratables into the combined district which provides the undeniable opportunity to operate far more efficiently.

2. The boards then shift gears and argue that the savings will occur at the expense of “higher student/ teacher ratios, realignment of neighborhood schools, termination of staff members and increased transportation costs...” Unfortunately, the boards are engaging in simple fear mongering with these allegations. This is made clear by comparing the boards’ observation referenced above, regarding the very small number of Sea Bright students involved, with the assertion that this very small number of students spread over 13 grades will somehow lead to substantial operational disruptions. The fact is that these few students per grade level can be easily accommodated in the consolidated district operations.
3. The boards then cite to the “time and money related to litigation...” This again is a claim without any substance. Sea Bright has committed to defend and hold harmless the boards against any legal action and the enabling legislation (which would implement the proposal) would also embody this commitment.
4. In the final line of the statement, the boards indicate that “The public should rest assured in knowing that in due time and in accordance with its own schedule, the Boards will further review and consider this issue.” Who can tell what this means? We do know that there are families in our communities that are struggling to pay for housing and to put food on the table. From all reports, these financial struggles will deepen in the coming months. No worries, the boards will get to this issue at some indeterminate point in the future, in some indeterminate way, regardless of the emergent needs of the communities they serve.

The issue is fairly simple, your elected officials have been presented with an opportunity to do better and to reduce the costs that government passes on to our families. As your Mayors, we trust the voters to make the right decision, but they can only do so if they get the chance. We are working to get you that chance before the opportunity passes.