



Testimony

To: Members, Senate Budget Committee
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RE: ACNJ Testimony on the Proposed FY 2016 State Budget

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) appreciates the opportunity to provide the following comments on New Jersey's proposed FY 2016 State Budget.

My comments about the proposed budget and how it affects children will be brief. Unfortunately, there is not much to say. Once again, our state budget is in crisis. This year, the state pension system and the Transportation Trust Fund are again the focus. The result is that the needs of thousands of children are again placed on the budgetary back burner.

While roads and bridges are important to the economic health of state, so is the health and development of our children – a critical infrastructure that is also in disrepair. As more New Jersey families struggle to make ends meet, we continue to erode supports for parents and their children.

Over the past few years, we have cut tax credits for the working poor, reduced funding for nutritional supports and lead abatement, and have failed to adequately fund preschool – both existing classrooms and the expansion promised in 2008 school funding law. We also continue to shortchange those caring for children while their parents work – expecting child care providers to deliver this critical service at a rate that has not increased in eight years.

While preschool aid would increase \$2.7 million in the proposed budget, this less than 1% increase does not even begin to cover the rising costs that school districts face to provide quality early education for our young learners. This lack of adequate funding will likely translate to drastic cuts, including support staff, supplies, field trips and other necessities. This threatens the quality of these preschools.

Research demonstrates that New Jersey's nationally-recognized preschools improve children's chance for school success. Yet, the latest state emergency is again chipping away at a program we know levels the playing field for young children, regardless of where they live, and leverages the significant investment we make in K-12 education.

School breakfast is an area where we have made significant progress by bringing \$44 million more in federal funds into the state to feed about 75,000 additional hungry students every school day. Hungry children struggle to learn. Yet, several years ago the state eliminated fiscal incentives for districts to provide breakfast in a way that reaches more students. Thanks to a statewide movement to serving breakfast during the first few minutes of the school, most high-poverty districts are now feeding many more children. Still, roughly 300,000 low-income children are going without this important morning meal. An incentive fund is needed now to help the next tier of districts with high concentrations of poverty to move to this model. This investment would leverage millions more in federal dollars, while helping our children succeed in school.

ACNJ acknowledges the significance of the existing state issues. But these are adult problems that are having a tremendous impact on children. We have a choice. We can chip away at our model preschools, ignore the need to support quality child care and fail to address childhood hunger – or we can choose to make children a top priority. Families put their children first. So should our state.

We will pay one way or another -- through increased special education costs, lower high school graduation rates and increased youth involvement in the criminal justice system. There is just as much urgency for children as there is for pension reform and transportation issues. Our children are growing up. We won't have a second chance. It is time for children's issues to be the emergency.