

Board Structure/Board Goals

This year we have made tremendous progress toward making the Highland Park Board of Education more transparent and accountable to the public we serve. We implemented a structure with a Work Session preceding a Voting Session. This allows the public to have advance notice of and opportunity to comment on any item under discussion, well before the board votes. This has also served to end the dubious practice of voting on items on addendum, which provided no notice to the public prior to a board vote on several crucial items in past years.

Liaison positions have taken on new importance under this new structure as well, with board members regularly attending meetings, and reporting out to the board and the community on a monthly basis. This has provided increased opportunities for the board to strengthen our ties with the community, the borough, and organizations to which we belong, such as the Middlesex County School Boards Association and the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Board meetings are now livestreamed on the district website, and past recordings are archived for public view on the [district's YouTube channel](#).

While I believe the board as a whole is proud of the work we have done to make our process more open and transparent, we have also recognized some of the struggles we still face.

While some committees have met frequently around certain issues, such as the Finance Committee around the budget, or the Personnel Committee for Central Office level hires, as a board we have failed to set regular meeting times for committee work, and this has led to a lack of communication within committees and between committees and the full board on several important issues.

As we enjoy the summer break, and begin planning for a new school year in September it is a good time to continue to refine the board's process to remediate these issues.

To that end, each committee has either already scheduled, or is working to schedule standing monthly meetings. Of course more meetings can be scheduled as needed, but with standing monthly meetings we can ensure that committee work is being done regularly and faithfully.

There is one final piece that I think, once in place, will ensure that board members have all available information before sitting at the table to discuss or vote.

I would like to ask that prior to each committee meeting that an agenda is produced by the committee chair and the administrator assigned to the committee, and that minutes of the meeting be taken, and shared with the other board members as soon as possible after the meeting. Minutes should be shared with Dr. Taylor's secretary

Susan Odatu, and she will put them on the board's Google Drive so they are easily accessible to the full board.

With this final adjustment to the board's process, I am confident that before votes are cast board members will have been provided the opportunity to weigh in on and fully understand agenda items prior to voting. As individual board members and as a full board, we take our fiduciary responsibility to the Highland Park community very seriously. This board shares a commitment to open and transparent governance, and we welcome your feedback as to how we are doing in this area. If you have any comments or concerns, don't hesitate to reach out to me at boedcimarusti@hpschools.net.

State Education Funding Plans

A topic that has been discussed around this board table for many years is the funding the district receives - or more to the point, doesn't receive - from the state. According to state aid data compiled by the Education Law Center, since 2009 the Highland Park School District has been [underfunded by \\$6.74 million dollars](#).

This places an increased burden on the district to figure out how best to maintain the staff and programs necessary to provide our students with the thorough and efficient education guaranteed under our state's Constitution, while not overburdening Highland Park's taxpayers. Many of the struggles our community has endured in recent years have been clear indicators that at times this has been a difficult to strike a balance.

The board has attempted to be proactive on this issue. We have addressed the state's underfunding of our district in numerous resolutions to our legislators, and earlier this year members of the board, administration and borough officials met with our 18th district legislative team to address issues related to state funding and unfunded mandates. Board across the state have had similar conversations with their legislators, and finally, after close to a decade of declining state aid and rising property taxes, Trenton seems ready to act.

There are currently two proposals under discussion across the state. The first is from [Senate President Steve Sweeney and Senate Education Committee Chair Theresa Ruiz](#), and the second from [Governor Christie](#).

The two plans are radically different.

Senator Sweeney has introduced legislation that would establish a "State School Aid Funding Fairness Commission." This Commission would have 4 members, each required to have experience in school finance or State budgeting, and they would be tasked with finding a way for the current funding formula to be funded to adequacy levels within 5 school years. Senator Sweeney has been conducting meeting around the state to speak with stakeholders about his plan.

In fact, [Mayor Gayle Brill Mittler attended a roundtable discussion for Middlesex County mayors with Senator Sweeney](#) and our newly appointed Senator Diegnan just last week to discuss Sweeney's proposed legislation. Mayor Mittler and I had a phone conference prior to the meeting to help her prepare, and better understand the issues involved. I am confident that our concerns were well represented by the mayor.

Governor Christie unveiled a plan in late June he calls the [Fairness Formula](#). Under his plan every student in the state would be provided the same amount of funding, regardless of need. Christie's proposal to provide districts with \$6,599 per child has

almost universally been decried as unconstitutional. This would result in dramatic cuts in many districts across the state, and would have devastating impacts on some of the state's most vulnerable students. Governor Christie's plan is divisive, pitting suburban districts struggling with rising property taxes against urban districts struggling to meet the intense needs of many of their students.

This board, and this community have consistently stood for equity for students in our district. It is now time that we stand together and work towards equity for all children in the state. We must stand against the Governor's cynical, divisive plan, and work with our legislators and others in Trenton to provide full and equitable funding for all children.

It is my promise to this board, to this district, and to this community that I will continue to follow and study both of these plans. I will report significant updates, including any opportunities for us to engage in direct action of any kind.