[Date]

[Legislator's Name]
[Title: New Jersey State Senator or Assemblymember]
[Office Address]

Dear [Senator / Assemblymember Last Name],

I am writing to you not with a complaint, but with a warning. What is happening to Tabernacle Township School District is not a budget line item. It is the slow, steady dismantling of a community's future, and it is happening because of a state funding formula that has been bleeding small rural districts dry for years while handing substantial increases to others. I am asking you to see what is really at stake here, and to act before the damage becomes irreversible.

The Bleeding Has Been Steady

This is not a sudden crisis. It has been building for years, cut by cut, year by year, since the S2 amendment to the School Funding Reform Act began reshuffling state aid in 2018. Tabernacle Township is a small, rural community embedded in the Pinelands, a place where development is tightly restricted, the population is modest, and there is no large commercial tax base to fall back on. We cannot simply "grow our way" out of a funding shortfall. What the State takes away, local homeowners must make up, and they have been doing so at a rate that now exceeds the 2% property tax cap.

The numbers tell a stark story. When the S2 formula delivered its calculations for the 2020 to 2021 school year, Tabernacle received a **$605,000 cut in state aid**, which was worse than the district had budgeted for, worse than the worst case scenario administrators had projected. The district was forced to sell a historic landmark (the old Tabernacle Schoolhouse) simply to keep the lights on. Experienced technology staff resigned. Services were hollowed out. And through all of it, the State's position was that Tabernacle had simply been "overfunded" and needed to adjust.

We have been adjusting ever since. Staff have been cut. Class sizes have grown. Programs have been trimmed to the bone. And still, the formula keeps coming. Across New Jersey, the pattern has been undeniable: **140 districts faced nearly $106 million in combined state aid cuts** in the most recent fiscal year alone, with small districts disproportionately bearing the weight. The Lumberton superintendent, our neighbor in Burlington County, put it plainly when she told legislators her district had "routed out every efficiency" only to still hit the fiscal cliff. That is exactly where Tabernacle stands.

Meanwhile, other districts have received significant percentage increases in state aid, with some more than doubling their funding in a single year. Tabernacle's families are not asking for a windfall. They are asking for fairness. And right now, they are not getting it.

Teachers Are Suffering. Students Are Suffering.

Behind every budget cut is a human being. The teachers of Tabernacle Township came to this profession to serve children, not to watch their colleagues receive layoff notices, not to absorb the workload of three positions into two, not to face classrooms packed far beyond what any educator can reasonably manage. Across the state, the consequences of these funding cuts have become visible and alarming. In Toms River, one of New Jersey's largest districts, the proposed elimination of 368 staff positions threatened to push class sizes to 60 or more students. Sixty children, in one room, with one teacher. That is not education. That is warehousing.

Tabernacle is smaller, but the proportional damage is just as severe. Fewer teachers means more students per teacher. More students per teacher means less individualized attention. Less individualized attention means struggling students go unnoticed, advanced students go unchallenged, and every student loses something they deserved. The teachers who remain are burning out, stretched thin, demoralized, and watching their profession diminished by decisions made far from the classroom. When communities lose good teachers, they rarely get them back. The damage compounds quietly, year after year, until one day families look up and realize the school they once trusted is no longer the school it used to be.

Now They Are Talking About Art and Sports. This Is a Mental Health Crisis.

I want to make sure you understand what it means when a district like Tabernacle faces the elimination of arts and athletics programs. This is not about extracurriculars. This is about the psychological survival of our children.

Our children are already living through one of the most difficult periods in the history of American youth mental health. The CDC has documented that nearly three in five teenage girls report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. More than 40% of all students say they have felt so overwhelmed they could not perform basic daily activities. This is the landscape our children are navigating every single day, and it is into this landscape that budget cuts are now threatening to eliminate the very programs that research has shown protect young people from these exact outcomes.

The evidence on sports is clear and consistent. Studies using data from more than 11,000 children found that participation in team sports was directly associated with lower rates of anxiety, depression, social difficulties, and attention problems. Sports teach children how to lose, how to persist, how to be part of something larger than themselves. They build resilience, foster belonging, and give students a reason to show up, not just physically but emotionally. When a child has a practice to get to, a team counting on them, a coach who knows their name, they are connected to their school and their community in ways that protect them. When you take that away, you do not just cancel a season. You sever a lifeline.

The research on arts education is equally powerful. Arts programs provide students, particularly adolescents who are still learning to understand and express their emotions, with a structured, safe outlet for inner experience. Students involved in music and visual arts demonstrate higher academic performance, stronger social skills, and greater school engagement. They are less likely to disengage, less likely to be absent, and more likely to stay connected through high school and beyond. For many students, especially those from rural or financially constrained communities like the families of Tabernacle, the school arts program is the only access they will

ever have to music, theater, or visual art. Remove it, and you have not just cut a budget line. You have closed a door that may never open for them again.

And for the most vulnerable students, those already struggling, those who have found their identity in a band, a team, a canvas or a stage, losing these programs is not merely disappointing. It is destabilizing. These are the students most at risk of anxiety, depression, and disconnection. These are the students for whom the arts and athletics are not hobbies but anchors. When funding cuts force schools to choose between keeping the lights on and keeping the choir, the most fragile children pay the price.

This Is the State's Constitutional Obligation, Not a Favor

New Jersey's Constitution does not promise a good education to students in wealthy districts. It promises a *thorough and efficient* education to every child in this state. That promise belongs to the children of Tabernacle Township as much as it belongs to anyone else. When a funding formula systematically defunds small rural districts while rewarding others, it is not just bad policy. It is a failure of constitutional obligation.

The stopgap measures that have been passed in recent years, including supplemental stabilization aid and temporary tax levy flexibility, have been exactly that: temporary. They have softened individual blows without addressing the structural wound. The Education Law Center has made clear that the formula requires fundamental revision, and that without it, districts will continue to face "unexpected and unmanageable cuts" that no amount of one year relief can prevent. Even legislators who supported the S2 formula have acknowledged that the cuts turned out to be "far steeper than anticipated." At what point does anticipation become accountability?

I am not asking you to give Tabernacle special treatment. I am asking you to ensure that Tabernacle is not punished for being small, rural, and Pinelands constrained. I am asking you to fix a formula that, by its own authors' admission, has produced consequences no one intended, and that is now threatening the mental health, academic futures, and community fabric of children who have done nothing wrong.

What I Am Asking You to Do

1. **Champion a permanent, structural revision of the S2 funding formula** not another one year patch, but a durable fix that accounts for the unique disadvantages faced by small, rural Pinelands districts like Tabernacle.
2. **Protect arts and athletics programs** by ensuring that any district facing state aid reductions is given specific relief to preserve enrichment programming, the programs that research has proven are critical to student mental health and school connectedness.
3. **Mandate an updated Educational Adequacy Report** that reflects the actual, current costs of delivering a thorough and efficient education, including special education, transportation and enrichment programs, so that no district is funded on outdated assumptions.

4. **Protect local taxpayers** from being forced to breach reasonable tax caps simply to compensate for state aid that should never have been cut in the first place.
5. **Visit Tabernacle.** Come see our school. Talk to our teachers. Talk to our kids. No spreadsheet can communicate what these cuts look like in a real hallway, a real classroom, a real community that is fighting to hold itself together.

The children of Tabernacle Township are watching what the adults in charge of this state decide to do. They are watching to see whether the promise of a fair education means something, or whether it only applies to the children lucky enough to live in the right zip code.

I respectfully and urgently ask for your leadership. Please do not let them down.

Respectfully,

[Your Name]
Tabernacle Township, NJ 08088
[Phone / Email]