

## **STATEMENT BY BOARD PRESIDENT AT APRIL 2020 BOARD MEETING**

As many members of the public are aware, Sea Bright is currently involved in a sending relationship with the Oceanport Board of Education and Shore Regional High School Board of Education. Under the sending relationship, Sea Bright sends approximately 60 school-aged children to Oceanport and Shore Regional and pays tuition costs to each Board. This is because Sea Bright does not operate its own school district. Due to the fact that Sea Bright is not satisfied with the student tuition costs for Oceanport and Shore Regional, Sea Bright approached the municipal governing bodies of Highlands and Atlantic Highlands, and the three municipalities agreed to fund – at taxpayer expense – a feasibility study to examine the possibility and impacts of the formation of a new regional school district, to be comprised of Highlands, Atlantic Highlands and Sea Bright. The municipalities’ proposal would create a new regional school district and see the elimination of the Atlantic Highlands, Highlands and Henry Hudson Boards of Education, which would be replaced by a new board. It may also lead to the possible elimination and/or realignment of our local schools.

While the Atlantic Highlands, Highlands and Henry Hudson Boards of Education remain interested in the possibility of regionalizing, the concept pressed by the municipalities’ tax-payer funded feasibility study was quite obviously designed to reach a politically expedient conclusion, rather than focusing on the most educationally appropriate option. Nevertheless, the Members of the Boards and their administrators met with representatives of the municipal governing bodies to discuss the situation in good faith. At this meeting, representatives for the municipalities advised the Boards that they would not move forward with their proposal for regionalization if the Boards were not also in favor of the plan. Since then, the Boards reviewed the proposal in detail, looking at both the fiscal and educational perspectives, and came to the conclusion, across three Boards, the Superintendent, and two Business Administrators, that this proposal was not viable, and as such, we rejected the proposal. We communicated our rejection of the proposal to the municipalities in our letter of January 29, 2020, and voted on a resolution at our three Board meetings in February, yet the municipalities continue to move forward with their campaign to dissolve the Boards – all in an effort to accommodate Sea Bright’s approximately 60 students.

Even today, in the midst of a global health crisis, when public officials and residents are mostly precluded from meeting with one another and Board officials are focused on the delivery of educational and related services to our students, the municipalities are continuing these efforts. The municipalities’ campaign has required the Boards to expend additional costs and legal fees, all of which could have been avoided entirely had the municipalities simply refrained from moving forward as their representatives said they would. Assuming the municipalities continue with this unilateral approach, the Boards will be forced to incur significant additional costs, as they will be required to hire educational and government finance experts who will evaluate the municipalities’ proposal. This money would quite obviously be better spent on educational materials and equipment for the benefit of our students, especially during an uncertain time like this.

To be clear, our Board supports the idea of shared services and actively seeks and engages in shared services arrangements whenever it makes fiscal and practical sense for the Board to do so. Our representatives have spoken with Governor Murphy's Co-Czar for Shared Services and State Senators in an effort to discuss and identify additional shared services measures that would benefit our Board. Additionally, the Board is not opposed to regionalization, as evidenced by the creation of the Henry Hudson Regional School District, the creation of the Tri-District committee, efforts in recent years to evaluate the feasibility of regionalization within the Tri-District, and our willingness to consider the proposal by the municipalities. The Board would not even be opposed to entering into a sending-receiving arrangement with Sea Bright – immediately – to the extent that such an arrangement would be beneficial to our students, staff and residents, under a different arrangement, in which Sea Bright would pay out-of-district tuition to our Board. Furthermore, the Board may be open to a discussion regarding regionalization with Sea Bright after it has had the opportunity to conduct its own due diligence review of the situation, assuming that such an arrangement would be beneficial to our students, staff, and residents, and fiscally beneficial to all of our stakeholders.

In closing, the Members of the Boards have been elected to ensure that our students receive the highest quality education possible, while at the same time, being good stewards of taxpayer funds. On its face, the municipalities' current proposal, appears to provide little, if any, meaningful benefits to the Boards' students and has major fiscal shortcomings. While the municipalities have speculated that there would be a savings to our taxpayers in the event that regionalization with Sea Bright occurs, as currently configured, the distribution of such savings are far from equitable. Furthermore, such alleged savings may be at the expense of many of the things that we now take for granted, including but not limited to higher student/teacher ratios, realignment of local schools, termination of staff members, increased transportation and special education costs, and potential implications on state funding – not to mention the expenditures of time and money related to litigation that would stem from the dissolution of our Board and the potential threat of litigation by Shore Regional and Oceanport related to Sea Bright's termination of its sending relationship. The public should rest assured in knowing that in due time and in accordance with its own schedule, the Board will further review and carefully consider this issue.