



NEW JERSEY SENATE

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June 21, 2021

The Honorable Phil Murphy, Governor
State of New Jersey
225 West State Street
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

The Honorable Stephen Sweeney, President
State of New Jersey Senate
125 West State Street
Trenton, NJ 08625

The Honorable Stephen Sweeney, President
State of New Jersey Senate
Kingsway Commons – Suite 400
West Deptford, NJ 08086

The Honorable Craig J. Coughlin, Speaker
New Jersey General Assembly
569 Rahway Avenue
Woodbridge, NJ 07095

Dear Governor Murphy, Senate President Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Coughlin:

As we deliberate the best use of funds available for the New Jersey 2021-2022 State Budget, I strenuously request that \$1 billion be set aside for urban playgrounds, recreational infrastructure and organized afterschool programs. With passion and conviction, I believe there is no better way to invest in our future success and in the peace, prosperity and progress of New Jersey long after we're gone.

In the words of men wiser than I:

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” – Fred Rogers, Television Personality

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children – Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa

I began my 35 years as a Senator sponsoring bills that would allow kids to have a safe place and the resources to enjoy a full range of supervised after-school activities and recreation. Somehow, all these years later, our urban youth still have no central hub that fosters free, leisurely development of their skills and talents. They have no school-based center for deepening friendships and relaxing, as kids, in a secure, stress-free environment.

We've passed a lot of important bills that have done much good for our urban communities, but as I travel around my home City of Newark, I see that we have failed to help our kids be kids and grow naturally into a state of pride and joyful confidence. Our cities' school playgrounds have been converted into parking lots for teachers afraid to leave their cars on the street. A net less hoop and decades-old chess table do not constitute the caliber of equipment that shows inner-city kids that they are as valuable to us as the ones who live in affluent suburban school districts.

It seems to me that New Jersey's unexpected \$11.4 billion surplus is our chance to demonstrate our reverence for our kids. This windfall is fortuitous fluke, a happy surprise that presents an obvious opportunity to address what we've neglected in the past for budgetary reasons. If we truly want to lead our state into a future of peace and prosperity *for all*, it is incumbent on us to invest in the proper development and well-being of urban kids as they form the foundation of their identity and worth. This is our chance to prove our faith in their ability to lead.

In this moment, I see our past and our future. I see a time from my youth, when parents admonished kids for hanging out on the corner and shooed them over to the school playground – a time when playgrounds still offered the activities and camaraderie kids need to thrive. I see our recent suffering through the double anguish of a devastating pandemic and a racial reckoning that each forced us to admit tragic flaws in our economy based on fundamental societal bias and discrimination. I can also look ahead into the future where so many of us have vowed to chart a course toward equality and sustainable society. We and our colleagues are the bridge between the problems and the solution. This is our God-given chance.

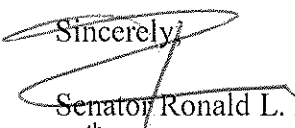
During recent weeks, I have spoken with the urban mayors in our state and requested an assessment of their needs in their endeavor to retrofit and rebuild playgrounds and procure equipment and programs for afterschool programs. We are in the process of formulating the necessary budget. In the meantime, *I am asking that our 2021-2022 State Budget set aside \$1 billion for urban playgrounds, recreational infrastructure and organized afterschool programs* that include computer science, home economics and a host of essential life-building tools.

This my heartfelt pleas on behalf of all the city kids in our state who have gone without for decades. As we stand at this pivotal crossroad, to ignore the needs of our youngest citizens would be a direct attack to sabotage our future. Moreover, considering the unexpected surge in state revenue, it would be an abhorrent affront to our children and their families, a hideous stain on our legacy as legislators and regrettable episode in our history.

It is my fervent hope that New Jersey will do all it can for the kids that have sat on the sidelines as our state invests in everything else. They may be a small part of our equation today, but they are the entirety of our future. As John F. Kennedy once said, "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see."

Let's send a living time capsule into the future by investing \$1 billion of this year's budget on tomorrow's leaders.

Sincerely,


Senator Ronald L. Rice
28th Legislative District

Cc: Members of the New Jersey Legislative Black Caucus Members
Members of the New Jersey Legislative Latino Caucus Members
NJLBC Civil Rights Coalition Partners
NJLBC Statewide Faith-based Partners
New Jersey Statewide Black Elected Officials Policy Alliance