

Advocating for Students with Exceptional Needs in Public Education

By: Cassandra Fenton

Project Description

When creating this project, my goal was to combine my knowledge and experiences from my major in political science and my participation in the teacher certification program. To that end, this project is a political activism campaign that seeks to empower those in the education field, specially advocates for students with exceptional needs, to exercise their political voice. I have too often felt the sentiment of disenfranchisement by those are not actively involved in politics. In order to address this negative perception of politics and government, my project strives to inform professionals in the education field of their ability and right to exercise their political voice. Those in the field are the most equipped to advise policy surrounding special education, and this expertise can be of great use for politicians.

The primary component of my project are two issue letters that can be sent to representatives to advocate for the rights of students with exceptional needs. The first letter tackles the issue of lack of adequate funding for special education by the state. The second letter addresses the general disrespect for the teaching profession as well many of the obstacles teachers must overcome to educate their students effectively. While these letters can be sent as is, they are meant to inspire professionals in the field to share their own expertise with their representatives.

I have also included a graph to demonstrate that a vote carries more weight at lower levels of government, for which less people come out to vote, as opposed to the highest offices, which attract the greatest voter turnout. Additionally, I have created a visual aide that compares the New Jersey legislature with the United States Congress, in order to highlight the similarities and

differences between the two for those who may be less familiar with our state government. For convenience and additional information, I have included information on voter registration, contact information for all of New Jersey's senators, and a reference guide for which towns are included in each of New Jersey's districts. My hope is that all of this material can be used to inform and empower education professionals to take action and make their voices heard.

Issue Letter One

Dear Senator _____:

In 1975, Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, guaranteeing for the first time that public schools could not discriminate against children on the basis of disability. The act promised ‘a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment’ to every child with a disability. This landmark legislation has guided the field of special education for the nearly 45 years since its passage.

While this act and its subsequent renewals and amendments in years since have been crucial to the expansion of special education programming, it cannot continue without financial support. Time and time again, public schools throughout the nation have struggled to effectively fund special education, often denying children with special needs their rights as a result.

Although it is the responsibility of the states to allocate funding for special education, the states have not always acted with the best interest of these students in mind. While states often make efforts to appropriately fund public education, they are not always successful. For example, in Mississippi, a new House bill promises to increase funding for public education. However, advocates for special education worry that this influx of money will not be spent appropriately on special education, as it is at the discretion of the districts. In Pennsylvania, a new budget proposal would allocate increases to education spending, including an 800,000 dollar increase to special education in the struggling county of York. However, this proposal comes amid a lawsuit against the state for improper education funding across the board, demonstrating that the state may not have acted in support of special education in the past.

While these are examples of the challenges and setbacks in the funding of special education, they also represent instances of states taking measures to fully comply with IDEA. New Jersey is also beginning to act on the promises of IDEA. Senate President Steve Sweeney has recently proposed a new education budget that would allocate \$431 million to special education across the state. He has promised that this reform will, “...fully fund the state share of Extraordinary Special Education Aid, we fully fund Special Education categorical aid, and we will be introducing legislation to shift responsibility and oversight of special education to the state level”. Although this plan is just one proposal, it is representative of the state’s responsibility to fully fund special education.

These kind of reforms are a step in the right direction for our state and for our students. As my representative, I urge you to fight for the rights of our students with special needs and to keep them in mind as you decide how to cast your vote on upcoming legislation. These students have the same right to an education as all of our children do. You have the responsibility and capability to be a force of change in the lives of these children. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Issue Letter Two

Dear Senator _____:

Today in the United States, there are over six million students with disabilities. As this number continues to rise, it is imperative that we, as a nation, work together to provide these students with the highest quality and standard of education.

As I am sure you are aware, in 2017, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in favor of higher standards for special education in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*. The majority opinion read, “It cannot be right that the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) generally contemplates grade-level advancement for children with disabilities who are fully integrated in the regular classroom, but is satisfied with barely more than *de minimis* progress for children who are not”. Based on the Court’s decision, every state must take measures to improve the quality of our special education programs in order to ensure success for all students.

As an elected official, you can make a difference for these students by proposing and voting in favor of legislation in support of teachers. Two of the greatest problems facing public education today are teacher shortages and poor teacher retention rates, especially in the field of special education. While this negatively impacts all students, students with disabilities are more likely to lack a qualified teacher. Teachers in public education are challenged by limited and outdated resources, overcrowded classrooms, low salaries, and demanding and convoluted expectations from the state. In addition to these challenges, teachers of special education are also tasked with extra paperwork in regards to their students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Navigating these procedures consumes extraordinary amounts of their time, detracting from their ability to plan and actually teach.

By passing legislation to simplify procedures for teachers of special education as well as to provide all teachers with more support, money, and resources, you can help to create a culture of respect for the education profession. This will have a direct impact on the quality of public education for our students, particularly those with disabilities. As the Supreme Court ruled, we must set higher expectations for all of our students with disabilities, in our quest to see all American students succeed.

Please consider how your actions as a Senator can and will impact the lives of millions of American children.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

New Jersey State Legislature

- Function is to enact laws
- Propose amendments with 3/5 vote
- Amendments must be put up to public vote
- Approval of judicial appointments
- Conduct impeachment proceedings
- Approve the annual budget
- 40 legislative districts
- Each district has about 210,000 people
- Each district has one Senator and two Reps.
- Elections held in November of odd years

Senate: 40 members

- Serve on a “2-4-4” cycle
- Must be at least 30 years old
- Must be a NJ resident for 4 years
- Must live in the district they represent

General Assembly: 80 members

- Serve 2 year terms
- Must be at least 21 years old
- Must be a NJ resident for 2 years
- Must live in the district they represent

U.S. Congress

- Create and vote on laws that are ‘necessary and proper’
- Override presidential vetoes with 2/3 majority
- Levy and collect taxes
- Regulate commerce
- Raise and maintain armed forces
- Declare war and approve treaties
- All explicit and implied powers

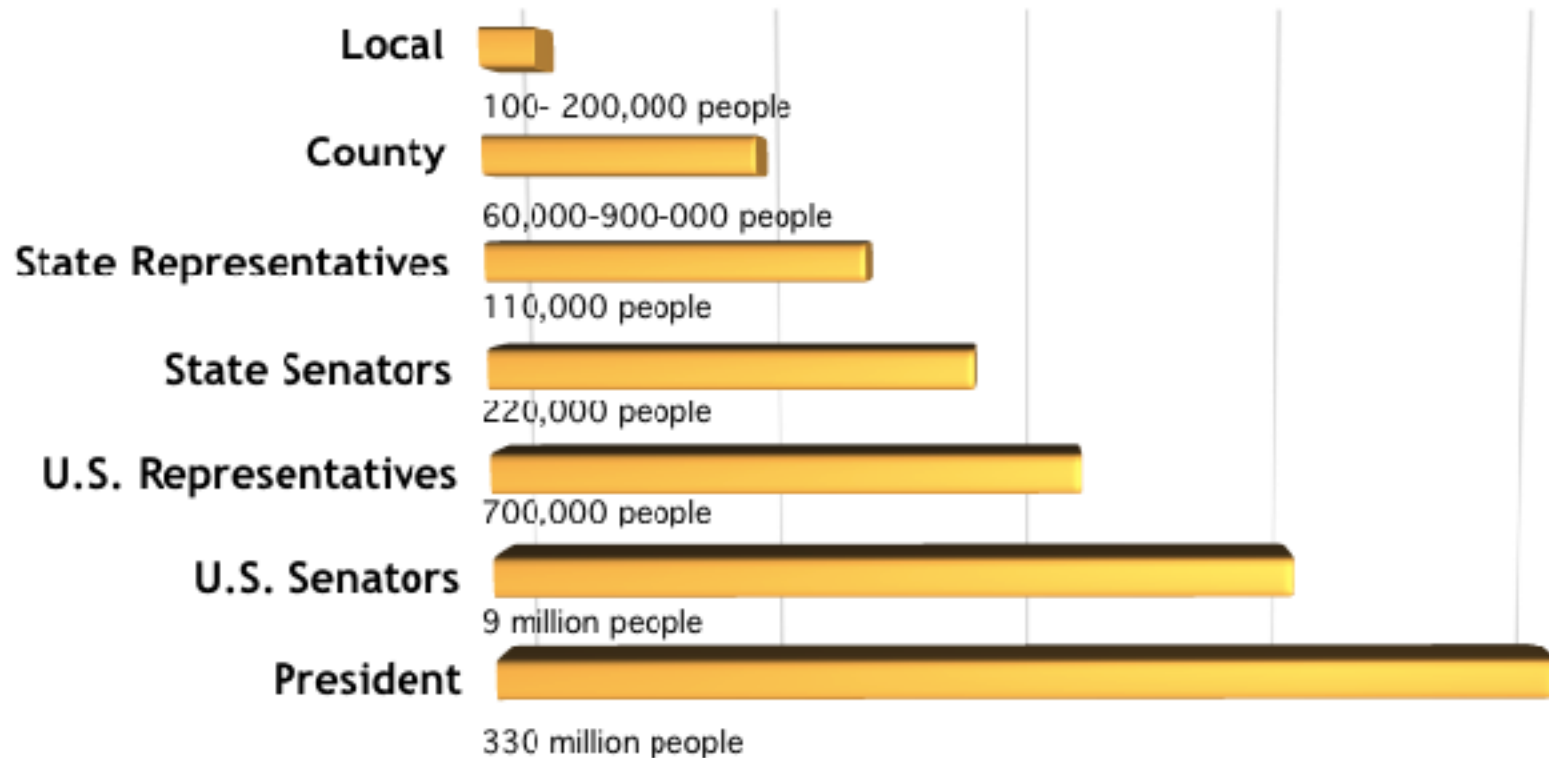
Senate: 100 members

- Serve 6 year terms
- Represent the entire state
- Must be at least 30 years old
- Must be a U.S. citizen (at least 9 years)
- Must be a resident in the state they represent
- Includes 20 committees

House of Representatives: 435 members

- Serve 2 year terms
- Represent about 700,000 people each
- Must be at least 25 years old
- Must be a U.S. citizen (at least 7 years)
- Must be a resident in the state they represent
- Includes 23 committees

The Value of a Vote



This graph represents the number of constituents represented by each level of government in New Jersey. It is meant to demonstrate that a voter's voice has more weight in lower levels of government, such as at the local and county level, than at federal level.

To register to vote in New Jersey, you must be:

- A United States citizen
- At least 17 years old
- A resident of the county for 30 days prior to the election
- NOT currently serving a sentence, on probation or on parole due to a felony conviction
- **Deadline**- 21 days before the election

NJ Senators' Contact Information

District	Senator	Party	Street Address	Town	Zip Code	Phone Number
New Jersey Senator	Robert Mendendez	Democrat	One Gateway Center, Suite 1100	Newark	07102	(973) 645-3030
New Jersey Senator	Cory Booker	Democrat	One Gateway Center, 23rd Floor	Newark	07102	(973) 639-8700
1	Jeff Van Drew	Democrat	211 S. Main St., Suite 104	Cape May Court House	08210	(609) 465-0700
2	Chris Brown	Republican	2021 New Rd. Suite 24	Linwood	08221	(609) 677-8266
3	Stephen Sweeney	Democrat	935 Kings Highway, Suite 400	West Deptford	08086	(856) 251-9801
4	Fred Madden	Democrat	129 Johnson Road, Suite 1	Turnersville	08012	(856) 232-6700
5	Nilsa Cruz-Perez	Democrat	231 Market Street	Camden	08102	(856) 541-1251
6	James Beach	Democrat	1309 Route 70 West	Cherry Hill	08002	(856) 429-1572
7	Troy Singleton	Democrat	400 North Church St. Suite 260	Moorestown	08057	(856) 234-2790
8	Dawn Addiego	Republican	176 Route 70, Suite 13	Medford	08055	(609) 654-1498
9	Christopher Connors	Republican	620 West Lacey Rd.	Forked River	08731	(609) 693-6700
10	James Holzapfel	Republican	852 Highway 70	Brick	08724	(732) 840-9028
11	Vin Gopal	Democrat	802 West Park Ave. Suite 221	Ocean Twp	07712	(732) 695-3371
12	Samuel Thompson	Republican	2501 Highway 516, Suite 101	Old Bridge	08857	(732) 607-7580
13	Declan O'Scanlon	Republican	32 Monmouth St. 3rd Floor	Red Bank	07701	(732) 933-1591
14	Linda Greenstein	Democrat	1249 South River Rd., Suite 105	Cranbury	08512	(609) 395-9911
15	Shirley Turner	Democrat	1230 Parkway Ave., Suite 103	Ewing Twp.	08628	(609) 323-7239
16	Christopher Bateman	Republican	36 East Main St.	Somerville	08876	(908) 526-3600
17	Bob Smith	Democrat	216 Stelton Rd., Suite E-5	Piscataway	08854	(732) 752-0770
18	Patrick Diegnan, Jr.	Democrat	908 Oak Tree Ave., Unit P	South Plainfield	07080	(908) 757-1677
19	Joseph Vitale	Democrat	569 Rahway Ave.	Woodbridge	07095	(732) 855-7441
20	Joseph Cryan	Democrat	985 Stuyvesant Ave.	Union	07083	(908) 624-0880
21	Thomas Kean	Republican	425 North Ave. East, Suite C	Westfield	07090	(908) 232-3673
22	Nicholas Scutari	Democrat	1514 E. Saint Georges Ave., 2nd Floor	Linden	07036	(908) 587-0404
23	Michael Doherty	Republican	127 Belvidere Ave., 2nd Floor	Washington	07882	(908) 835-0552
24	Steven Oroho	Republican	One Wilson Drive, Suite 2B	Sparta	07871	(973) 300-0200
25	Anthony Bucco	Republican	75 Bloomfield Ave., Suite 302, 3rd Floor	Denville	07834	(973) 627-9700
26	Joseph Pennacchio	Republican	170 Changebridge Rd., Unit A1	Montville	07045	(973) 227-4012
27	Richard Codey	Democrat	66 W. Mount Pleasant Ave.	Livingston	07039	(973) 535-5017
28	Ronald Rice	Democrat	1044 South Orange Ave.	Newark	07106	(973) 371-5665
29	Teresa Ruiz	Republican	166 Bloomfield Ave.	Newark	07104	(973) 484-1000
30	Robert Singer	Republican	1771 Madison Ave., Suite 202	Lakewood	08701	(732) 987-5669
31	Sandra Cunningham	Democrat	1738 Kennedy Blvd.	Jersey City	07305	(201) 451-5100
32	Nicholas Sacco	Democrat	9060 Palisade Ave.	North Bergen	07047	(201) 295-0200
33	Brian Stack	Democrat	411 Palisades Ave.	Jersey City	07307	(201) 721-5263
34	Nia Gill	Democrat	39 South Fullerton Ave., 2nd Fl., Suite 7	Montclair	07042	(973) 509-0388
35	Nellie Pou	Democrat	100 Hamilton Plaza, Suite 1405	Paterson	07505	(973) 247-1555
36	Paul Sarlo	Democrat	496 Columbia Blvd., 1st Floor	Woodridge	07075	(201) 804-8118
37	Loretta Weinberg	Democrat	545 Cedar Lane	Teaneck	07666	(201) 928-0100
38	Robert Gordon	Democrat	14-25 Plaza Rd., P.O. Box 398	Fair Lawn	07410	(201) 703-9779
39	Gerald Cardinale	Republican	350 Madison Ave.	Cresskill	07626	(201) 567-2324
40	Kristin Corrado	Republican	155 Route 46 West Suite 108	Wayne	07470	(973) 237-1360

New Jersey Legislative Districts by Town

District 1 - Avalon, Cape May, Cape May Point, Commercial, Corbin City, Dennis, Downe, Estell Manor, Fairfield (Cumberland), Greenwich (Cumberland), Hopewell (Cumberland), Lawrence (Cumberland), Lower, Maurice River, Middle, Millville, North Wildwood, Ocean City, Sea Isle City, Shiloh, Stone Harbor, Stow Creek, Upper, Vineland, West Cape May, West Wildwood, Weymouth, Wildwood, Wildwood Crest, Woodbine

District 2 - Absecon, Atlantic City, Brigantine, Buena, Buena Vista, Egg Harbor City, Egg Harbor Township, Folsom, Hamilton (Atlantic), Linwood, Longport, Margate City, Mullica, Northfield, Pleasantville, Somers Point, Ventnor City

District 3 - Alloway, Bridgeton, Carneys Point, Clayton, Deerfield, East Greenwich, Elk, Elmer, Elsinboro, Franklin (Gloucester), Glassboro, Greenwich (Gloucester), Logan, Lower Alloways Creek, Mannington, National Park, Newfield, Oldmans, Paulsboro, Penns Grove, Pennsville, Pilesgrove, Pittsgrove, Quinton, Salem, South Harrison, Swedesboro, Upper Deerfield, Upper Pittsgrove, West Deptford, Woodbury Heights, Woodstown, Woolwich

District 4 - Chesilhurst, Clementon, Gloucester Township, Laurel Springs, Lindenwold, Monroe (Gloucester), Pitman, Washington (Gloucester), Winslow

District 5 - Audubon, Audubon Park, Barrington, Bellmawr, Brooklawn, Camden, Deptford, Gloucester City, Haddon Heights, Harrison (Gloucester), Lawnside, Magnolia, Mantua, Mount Ephraim, Runnemede, Wenonah, Westville, Woodbury, Woodlynne

District 6 - Berlin Township, Cherry Hill, Collingswood, Gibbsboro, Haddon, Haddonfield, Hi-Nella, Maple Shade, Merchantville, Oaklyn, Pennsauken, Somerdale, Stratford, Tavistock, Voorhees

District 7 - Beverly, Bordentown, Bordentown Township, Burlington, Burlington Township, Cinnaminson, Delanco, Delran, Edgewater Park, Fieldsboro, Florence, Moorestown, Mount Laurel, Palmyra, Riverside, Riverton, Willingboro

District 8 - Berlin Borough, Eastampton, Evesham, Hainesport, Hammonton, Lumberton, Mansfield (Burlington), Medford, Medford Lakes, Mount Holly, Pemberton Borough, Pemberton Township, Pine Hill, Pine Valley, Shamong, Southampton, Springfield (Burlington), Waterford, Westampton, Woodland

District 9 - Barnegat, Barnegat Light, Bass River, Beach Haven, Beachwood, Berkeley, Eagleswood, Galloway, Harvey Cedars, Lacey, Little Egg Harbor, Long Beach, Ocean Gate, Ocean Township (Ocean), Pine Beach, Port Republic, Seaside Park, Ship Bottom, South Toms River, Stafford, Surf City, Tabernacle, Tuckerton, Washington (Burlington)

District 10 - Bay Head, Brick, Island Heights, Lakehurst, Lavallette, Manchester, Mantoloking, Point Pleasant Beach, Seaside Heights, Toms River

District 11 - Allenhurst, Asbury Park, Colts Neck, Deal, Eatontown, Freehold Borough, Freehold Township, Interlaken, Loch Arbour, Long Branch, Neptune, Neptune Township, Ocean Township (Monmouth), Red Bank, Shrewsbury Borough, Shrewsbury Township, Tinton Falls, West Long Branch

District 12 - Allentown, Chesterfield, Englishtown, Jackson, Manalapan, Matawan, Millstone (Monmouth), New Hanover, North Hanover, Old Bridge, Plumsted, Roosevelt, Upper Freehold, Wrightstown

District 13 - Aberdeen, Atlantic Highlands, Fair Haven, Hazlet, Highlands, Holmdel, Keansburg, Keyport, Little Silver, Marlboro, Middletown, Monmouth Beach, Oceanport, Rumson, Sea Bright, Union Beach

District 14 - Cranbury, East Windsor, Hamilton, Hightstown, Jamesburg, Monroe (Middlesex), Plainsboro, Robbinsville, Spotswood

District 15 - East Amwell, Ewing, Hopewell Borough (Mercer), Hopewell Township (Mercer), Lambertville, Lawrence (Mercer), Pennington, Trenton, West Amwell, West Windsor

District 16 - Branchburg, Delaware, Flemington, Hillsborough, Manville, Millstone (Somerset), Montgomery, Princeton, Raritan (Hunterdon), Readington, Rocky Hill, Somerville, South Brunswick, Stockton

District 17 - Franklin (Somerset), Milltown, New Brunswick, North Brunswick, Piscataway

District 18 - East Brunswick, Edison, Helmetta, Highland Park, Metuchen, South Plainfield, South River

District 19 - Carteret, Perth Amboy, Sayreville, South Amboy, Woodbridge

District 20 - Elizabeth, Hillside, Roselle, Union (Union)

District 21 - Berkeley Heights, Bernards, Chatham Borough, Cranford, Far Hills, Garwood, Kenilworth, Long Hill, Mountainside, New Providence, Roselle Park, Springfield (Union), Summit, Warren, Watchung, Westfield

District 22- Clark, Dunellen, Fanwood, Green Brook, Linden, Middlesex, North Plainfield, Plainfield, Rahway, Scotch Plains, Winfield

District 23 - Alexandria, Alpha, Bedminster, Bethlehem, Bloomsbury, Bound Brook, Bridgewater, Califon, Clinton, Clinton Township, Franklin (Hunterdon), Franklin (Warren), Frenchtown, Glen Gardner, Greenwich (Warren), Hackettstown, Hampton (Hunterdon), Harmony, High Bridge, Holland, Kingwood, Lebanon Borough, Lebanon Township, Lopatcong, Mansfield (Warren), Milford, Peapack-Gladstone, Phillipsburg, Pohatcong, Raritan (Somerset), South Bound Brook, Tewksbury, Union (Hunterdon), Washington Borough (Warren), Washington Township (Warren)

District 24 - Allamuchy, Andover Borough, Andover Township, Belvidere, Blairstown, Branchville, Byram, Frankford, Franklin (Sussex), Fredon, Frelinghuysen, Green, Hamburg, Hampton (Sussex), Hardwick, Hardyston, Hopatcong, Hope, Independence, Knowlton, Lafayette, Liberty, Montague, Mount Olive, Newton, Ogdensburg, Oxford, Sandyston, Sparta, Stanhope, Stillwater, Sussex, Vernon, Walpack, Wantage, White

District 25 - Bernardsville, Boonton, Boonton Township, Chester Borough, Chester Township, Denville, Dover, Mendham Borough, Mendham Township, Mine Hill, Morris, Morristown, Mount Arlington, Mountain Lakes, Netcong, Randolph, Rockaway Borough, Roxbury, Victory Gardens, Washington (Morris), Wharton

District 26 - Butler, Fairfield (Essex), Jefferson, Kinnelon, Lincoln Park, Montville, Morris Plains, North Caldwell, Parsippany-Troy Hills, Rockaway Township, Verona, West Caldwell, West Milford

District 27 - Caldwell, Chatham Township, East Hanover, Essex Fells, Florham Park, Hanover, Harding, Livingston, Madison, Maplewood, Millburn, Roseland, South Orange, West Orange

District 28 - Bloomfield, Glen Ridge, Irvington, Newark, Nutley

District 29 - Belleville, Newark

District 30 - Avon-by-the-Sea, Belmar, Bradley Beach, Brielle, Farmingdale, Howell, Lake Como, Lakewood, Manasquan, Point Pleasant, Sea Girt, Spring Lake, Spring Lake Heights, Wall

District 31 - Bayonne, Jersey City

District 32 - East Newark, Edgewater, Fairview, Guttenberg, Harrison (Hudson), Kearny, North Bergen, Secaucus, West New York

District 33 - Hoboken, Jersey City, Union City, Weehawken

District 34 - Clifton, East Orange, Montclair, Orange

District 35 - Elmwood Park, Garfield, Haledon, North Haledon, Paterson, Prospect Park

District 36 - Carlstadt, Cliffside Park, East Rutherford, Little Ferry, Lyndhurst, Moonachie, North Arlington, Passaic, Ridgefield, Ridgefield Park, Rutherford, South Hackensack, Teterboro, Wallington, Wood-Ridge

District 37 - Alpine, Bogota, Cresskill, Englewood, Englewood Cliffs, Fort Lee, Hackensack, Leonia, Northvale, Palisades Park, Rockleigh, Teaneck, Tenafly

District 38 - Bergenfield, Fair Lawn, Glen Rock, Hasbrouck Heights, Hawthorne, Lodi, Maywood, New Milford, Oradell, Paramus, River Edge, Rochelle Park, Saddle Brook

District 39 - Bloomingdale, Closter, Demarest, Dumont, Emerson, Harrington Park, Haworth, Hillsdale, Mahwah, Montvale, Norwood, Oakland, Old Tappan, Park Ridge, Ramsey, Ringwood, River Vale, Saddle River, Upper Saddle River, Wanaque, Washington (Bergen), Westwood, Woodcliff Lake

District 40 - Allendale, Cedar Grove, Franklin Lakes, Ho-Ho-Kus, Little Falls, Midland Park, Pequannock, Pompton Lakes, Ridgewood, Riverdale, Totowa, Waldwick, Wayne, Woodland Park, Wyckoff

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