



**TO:** P-12 Education Committee

**FROM:** Jhone M. Ebert 

**SUBJECT:** Update on the East Ramapo Central School District

**DATE:** March 1, 2018

**AUTHORIZATION(S):** 

## SUMMARY

### Issue for Discussion

The Board of Regents will be provided with an update on the East Ramapo Central School District (ERCSD) as it relates to the report issued by State Monitors Charles Szuberla, Jr. and John W. Sipple.

### Proposed Handling

This issue will come before the P-12 Education Committee for discussion at the March 2018 Regents meeting.

### Background Information

On June 10, 2014, Commissioner of Education John B. King, Jr., appointed Henry M. Greenberg as Fiscal Monitor for the East Ramapo Central School District (District). Mr. Greenberg was charged with reviewing the District's fiscal practices, conduct, and history and recommending ways in which the State can ensure that the District provides appropriate educational programs and services for all its students and properly manages and accounts for State and federal funds received. After a thorough and comprehensive five-month review, Mr. Greenberg delivered his findings and recommendations to the Board of Regents and the Department. He described a District in which tensions ran dangerously high between the public and nonpublic school communities and showed how the public-school community continued to suffer from the District's fiscal mismanagement, poor governance and lack of transparency. Mr. Greenberg recommended immediately implementing a multi-faceted approach, including State appointed monitors and legislative assistance for addressing the complex problems in the District.

From the findings reported by Mr. Greenberg in *East Ramapo: A School District In Crisis* in November 2014 and the extensive media coverage of the crisis in East Ramapo, to the findings detailed in the oversight reports issued by the New York State Education Department, there was clear evidence that the District had not supported the educational needs of its public school students. Addressing the situation in the District became one of Commissioner Elia's top priorities, reaffirming the Board of Regents' commitment to safeguarding the educational rights of the District's students.

On August 13, 2015, Commissioner MaryEllen Elia appointed a team of monitors to serve the District in an advisory capacity in order to ensure that the District was better able to provide an appropriate educational program and properly manage and account for State and federal funds received. The appointment came after the Commissioner recognized the critical situation facing the students in the District.

On August 12, 2016, Commissioner Elia appointed Charles Szuberla as monitor for the East Ramapo Central School District. Mr. Szuberla, a former Deputy Commissioner who served the Department for 29 years before his retirement in late 2015, was charged with leading the Department's continuing efforts to provide enhanced communication with the East Ramapo community through greater outreach to students, parents, and stakeholders. Dr. John W. Sipple, who was appointed as a monitor by Commissioner Elia in 2015, continues in his role as monitor, specializing in budgeting and fiscal matters.

Mr. Szuberla reports directly to Commissioner Elia and is a regular presence in the East Ramapo School District, in addition to fulfilling the duties and responsibilities specifically set forth in the legislation enacted in June 2016 (Chapter 89 of the Laws of 2016). Mr. Szuberla has the authority to monitor district operations, including fiscal and operational management and educational programming. He also provides guidance, makes recommendations, and proposes actions for improvement to the school district, as well as to the State Education Department, to ensure that students have access to appropriate programs and services and that the District is on a path to fiscal and programmatic stability.

Chapter 89 of the Laws of 2016 required the District to create three major plans in collaboration with community stakeholders and the state monitors. The plans are:

1. Long-term (2016-20) strategic academic plan;
2. Long-term fiscal improvement plan; and
3. Expenditure plan outlining the use of the \$3 million in legislative grants.

In August and September 2016, monitors Chuck Szuberla and John Sipple worked closely with Superintendent Deborah Wortham, Board of Education President Yehuda Weissmandl, district officials and the community to develop a fiscally responsible plan that meets the needs of the school community. In September 2016, Commissioner Elia announced her approval of the East Ramapo Central School District's Long-Term

Strategic Academic and Expenditure Plans. The initiatives addressed in the Long-Term Strategic Academic and Expenditure Plans include:

- Implemented full-day Kindergarten for all students;
- Hired both monolingual and bilingual Kindergarten teachers;
- Restored art, music, dance, and theater programming in grades K-6;
- Set clear performance objectives for students; and
- Increased professional development.

On January 24, 2017, the monitors issued *A New Beginning: A Report on the East Ramapo Central School District*. The report details progress and accomplishments in the District, which include, but are not limited to:

- Full-Day Kindergarten;
- Restored the arts, music, dance and theater programming in grades K-6;
- Aligned formative assessments with the New York tests administered once every six weeks;
- Developed formative assessment parent reports;
- Increased professional development opportunities for teachers and principals;
- Created collaborative planning time for elementary teachers;
- Returned to high expectations for all students and educators;
- Continued support for enhanced course offerings;
- Reinforced the fiscal improvement plan;
- Balanced the budget;
- Passed the school budget; and
- Passed a \$59 million school facilities bond act.

While the report noted accomplishments, it also noted that the district continues to face significant challenges, including:

- Restoration of the significant program cuts in secondary electives, reducing class sizes and severe tax cap limitations;
- Increasing numbers of students requiring additional support (English Language Learners, special education and economically disadvantaged);
- Excessive special education classification rates; and
- Rapidly changing demographics and concerns regarding the future sale of public school facilities.

In October 2017, the monitors issued year-end fiscal report on the 2016-17 school year entitled *A Balanced Budget: A Report on the East Ramapo Central School District*. The report details progress and accomplishments in the District, which include, but are not limited to:

- Ended the 2016-17 school year with an unassigned fund balance of \$8.49 million versus \$4.15 million a year earlier;

- New York State Comptroller fiscal stress upgrade from *Significant Fiscal Stress* to *Moderate Fiscal Stress* in January 2017;
- Moody's Investor Service upgraded the outlook for the District from negative to stable for general obligation bonds in July 2017<sup>1</sup>
- Commenced Phase I of a \$59 million school facilities bond act;
- Added four full-day kindergarten classes;
- Purchased Instrumental Music or Band or Chorus for Grade 6 Students;
- Created Visual Arts for Grade 5 Students;
- Increased After-School Music/Arts Enrichment Offerings;
- Enhanced professional development for staff;
- Developed Ninth Grade Academy;
- Created mentors for Senior High School Students; and
- Developed a "STEAM" Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math program at Kakiat School starting with the seventh grade.

While the report noted accomplishments, it also noted that the district continues to face significant fiscal challenges, including:

- Limited reserves;
- Reliance on state funding;
- Reliance on cash flow borrowing;
- Limited revenue raising ability; and
- Very large nonpublic school population.

The District implemented several of the report's recommendations:

- Created a Budget Advisory Committee.
- Hired BOCES to develop a regular form of communication to share the many improvements the school district is making to improve academic opportunities for its students.
- Reviewed the nonpublic student textbook loan program and worked with nonpublic school administrators to develop a list of pre-approved textbooks.
- Convened an internal work group, led by the Superintendent, to look at issues regarding nonpublic school transportation including options for better alignment of the public and nonpublic school calendars.
- Worked with the monitors to convene community meetings to gather input from the community to help inform them as to whether any changes to polling site locations were needed.

Chapter 59 of the Laws of 2017<sup>2</sup> enacted in April 2017 required the district to update the strategic academic plan and fiscal improvement plan in addition to providing an expenditure plan for the use of the \$3 million in legislative grants for the 2017-18

---

<sup>1</sup> Moody's Investor Services, Inc., July 2017

<sup>2</sup> Chapter 89 of the Laws of 2016 was amended by section 48 of Part YYY of Chapter 59 of the Laws of 2017.

school-year. Commissioner Elia announced her approval of the East Ramapo Central School District's updated Long-Term Strategic Academic and Expenditure Plans in October 2017.

The 2017-18 school budget projects revenues of \$231 million and expenses of \$231 million. General fund expenditures will increase by 2.99%. The budget continues the trend of adding and strengthening the academic program but does not include an allocation for transportation to nonpublic schools on days that public schools are closed.

Noteworthy budget additions for 2017-18 included:

- Programs for Strengthening Elementary Education Instruction:
  - Maintains full-day kindergarten;
  - Expands “The Arts” instruction (3 teachers);
  - Expands English as a New Language (ENL) and bilingual instruction (5 teachers); and
  - Provides new academic standards facilitators.
  
- Programs for Strengthening Middle Education Instruction:
  - Expands “Arts” instruction;
  - Provides additional ENL instruction (3 teachers);
  - Provides New Academic Standards Facilitators; and
  - Adds Grade 8 to the Kakiat STEAM program.
  
- Programs for Strengthening High School Graduation and Readiness for College and Careers:
  - Adds support for effective instruction (8 teachers);
  - Implements collaborative teacher model;
  - Provides new academic standards facilitators;
  - Expands ENL and Bilingual instruction (4 teachers); and
  - Develops new course schedule for all students freeing up more time for elective classes.
  
- Programs for Strengthening Special Education Instruction:
  - Creates 24 collaborative classes for Grades 3-12; and
  - Increases clinical services in the areas of speech and language, occupational, behavior specialists.
  
- Summer Academies (Summer 2017):
  - Instrumental music summer camp for 400 students in grades 4-8;
  - Computer sciences summer academy for 250 students in grades 2-8;
  - Health sciences summer academy for 250 students in grades 2-8;
  - Extended school year program for 266 students in grades K-8 Students; and with interrupted instruction program for 60 students in grades 9 and 10.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of the year, the monitors will provide the Board with an update which will include, but not be limited to:

- Budget improvements;
- Academic improvements;
- New and/or reinstated positions;
- New and/or reinstated programs;
- Needs of East Ramapo students;
- Opportunities;
- Challenges; and
- Next steps.

## **Related Regents Items**

March 2017: <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/317brd1.pdf>

March 2017 (presentation):

<https://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/Full%20Board%20Monday%20AM%20-%20East%20Ramapo%20Update.pdf>

February 2017: <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/217p12d1.pdf>

December 2015 (presentation):

<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/Monday%20East%20Ramapo%20Slide%20Deck.pdf>

September 2015 (presentation):

<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/meetings/Sep%202015/EastRamapoReportfromStateMonitors.pdf>

July 2015:

<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/meetings/Jul%202015/713p12d2.pdf>

July 2015 (presentation):

<http://www.regents.nysed.gov/common/regents/files/meetings/EastRamapoUpdate.pdf>