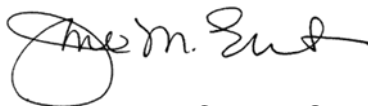





TO: P-12 Education Committee

FROM: Jhone M. Ebert 

SUBJECT: Update on the East Ramapo Central School District

DATE: February 8, 2017

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 Sipple.

Proposed Handling

This issue will come before the P-12 Education Committee for discussion at the February 2017 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 the Commissioner'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;
- Restoration of the arts, music, dance and theater programming in grades K-6;
- Formative assessments aligned with the New York tests administered once every six weeks;
- Formative assessment parent reports;
- Increases in professional development opportunities for teachers and principals;
- New collaborative planning time for elementary teachers;
- Return to high expectations for all students and educators;
- Continued support for enhanced course offerings;
- Fiscal improvement plan;
- Balanced budget;
- Strong desire by parents for their children to receive an excellent education;
- Passage of the school budget; and
- Passage of 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 and severe tax cap limitations;
- Increasing numbers of students requiring additional support (English Language Learners, special education and economically disadvantaged);
- High special education classification rates; and
- Rapidly changing demographics and concerns regarding the future sale of public school facilities.

Recommendations

In their report, the Monitors recommend:

- The continuation of the \$3 million legislative grant. Without continuation of the \$3 million grant, the District does not have the fiscal capacity to maintain both full-day kindergarten for all students and the recent partial

restoration of elementary arts programs. They also strongly recommend against using the District's current fund balance to fund these restorations because the fund balance is less than two percent of the general fund budget. Use of the fund balance in this way would exhaust the District's fund balance, leaving the district with very limited capacity to address unforeseen fiscal challenges.

- That the Commissioner continues to provide support of the District's \$59 million school facilities improvement program. Continued oversight and communication with the public on the progress of the work is critical to ensure all students are educated in safe, healthful learning environments and have access to safe, modern athletic facilities.
- That the Commissioner continues to use existing authority to ensure that the District has on-going, on-the-ground support to ensure that the District's recent gains are not lost and that progress continues to be made.