

APPENDIX

Partnering the
Changing World
of Paterson Education
"Keeping Kids First!"



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Testimony to the Joint Committee of Public Schools: Data, Research and Evaluation Subcommittee

My name is Rosie Grant and I am Program Director of Paterson Education Fund.

Paterson has 6 priority schools and 18 focus schools. In Paterson, NCLB Waiver implementation is beginning with the hiring of a former district employee to head up the Bergen Passaic Sussex RAC which is in charge of Paterson. We're concerned that someone who has a history with the district may find it very difficult to be impartial. Additionally, 1 current employee and another former employee of Paterson Public Schools have been hired to staff the RAC. All have preexisting relationships with current district staff and will be hard pressed to make decisions impartially, without regard to how these decisions affects their former colleagues. We expect the RAC to make decisions that are in the best interest of the schools and children and we question their ability to do so, given these relationships.

Furthermore, the Commissioner requested that Paterson develop a Transformation Plan to improve academic outcomes for Paterson children. This Transformation Plan was agreed upon by the Commissioner, the Paterson Board of Education and the community. The plan outlines proven strategies and sets benchmarks toward a bold goal of 100% graduation. We are concerned the implementation of the Transformation Plan may be jeopardized by the RAC and these relationships.

The second issue I'd like you to consider is the Commissioner's proposed change to use average attendance instead of the ASSA count. Currently, schools are funded by the October 15th ASSA count as required by the NJ law (18A:7F-34.) The Commissioners proposal to fund schools based on average attendance instead of enrollment contradicts the law that you, our Legislature, passed in 1996 and restated in the SFRA in 2008. It is inequitable because when chronically absent children show up for school, the districts still have to educate them, even if their attendance is poor. In fact, chronically absent students need extra support, not less. We encourage you to support programs that are proactive about reducing chronic absenteeism rather than punish districts, and in effect punish kids, by giving them fewer resources thereby exacerbating the problem.

How does any of this lead to improved outcomes for our children? I ask you to put the child at the center and to seek an answer to this question for every education related policy that comes before you. Our children need you to be on their side. Please don't fail them.

Thank you.

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Public Schools

October 16, 2012

By Jonathan Hodges, MD
Member of The Paterson Board of Education

Since Aug 1991, the Paterson school district has been under the direct supervision of the NJ State DOE. That means that the board of education has advisory responsibilities only. They are expressly prohibited from being involved in Personnel, they do not hire their superintendent, do not have their superintendent directly report to them, but rather to the state DOE. They do not have final say on any resolution in terms of Curriculum and Instruction, Fiscal or Operations. Indeed, the state-appointed superintendent regularly reports to the state commissioner of education, receiving approval on his or her programmatic approaches as well as directives that the DOE wants followed.

Nevertheless, the QSAC process, as it is currently being implemented, ignores the preeminence of the state DOE's role and seems to focus the total responsibility for QSAC outcomes on the boards of education. Consequently, the agency that shoulders the blame for failed progress is the so-called advisory board, the very people who do not have the direct authority to shepherd their own city's school district. Meanwhile the true authority, the state DOE, is absolved of all blame. This has led to 21 yrs of state control in Paterson, with modest improvements in the educational system and few people demanding an explanation of the state as to why.

At the very least, the state DOE should be helping to build so-called "capacity" for the board to govern itself. It should be strengthening the weaknesses that it's QSAC process suggests prevents the local boards from making substantial progress. But no such efforts are in place. If the state DOE cannot, using all the tools of state control, manage to bring about substantive change in Paterson's school district in 21 yrs, then one has to wonder if they ever can or more worrisome, whether they want to? In fact, because of the readiness of the state to entertain a myriad of political solicitations, the Paterson school district has been racked with virtually unprecedented instability, political interference, and a proliferation of curricular initiatives that seem to change with each gubernatorial administration, if not each education commissioner. Few of the state appointed superintendents have been allowed the time to fully implement their programs, without either interference from Trenton, or being replaced outright, to the tune of 5 superintendent changes over the last 8 years. All of this, without the consent, request, or desire of the local stakeholders, especially the elected board of education.

Politicians and the politically connected feel free to weigh in on Personnel, school construction locations and other issues and when not satisfied, publically threaten (and carry out those threats) to take their demands to the state DOE. While no school board is totally immune from political manipulation, the local boards must face the verdict of their constituents when they allow such influences, while no such consequences confront the faceless controlling entities in Trenton.

Interestingly, even when the takeover districts achieve QSAC benchmarks, the state DOE, through its commissioner, has refused to recognize their achievement and release them as the law provides. And most peculiarly, the overwhelming majority of children who seem destined to languish from this seemingly imperialist / pseudo-colonialist repression, are children of color, especially those in large cities, places with large budgets and numerous physical assets. Other smaller districts that struggle, don't seem to generate the same kind of interest for intervention from the state DOE.

Almost as disturbing is the fact that the people who do the QSAC evaluation, work for this same state DOE with scoring peculiarities that suggest evaluation results are more than occasionally predetermined. Paterson's QSAC scores have been reduced in Trenton without explanation and in fact, withheld entirely from the Paterson school board, possibly as they reflected passing grades. And recently in Newark, a follow up evaluation of the Newark school system, whose school board sued the state when they were denied local control upon passing QSAC benchmarks, was subsequently reevaluated to levels below the QSAC benchmark for passing. The primary change in the Newark school district from when they passed QSAC, was a new state superintendent of schools that the state DOE put in place without the school board's input. The evaluation of practices of that new superintendent is what is reflected in the QSAC scores. Indeed, what measure can a takeover district's school board suggest that is ever superior to what the state DOE can impose through its state superintendent by edit? Nonetheless, it's the school board that receives the sanction and the blame.

I sincerely hope that you will move expeditiously to review this law, and especially its implementation. We understand the need to be held accountable and readily accept the responsibility to improve the educational system for our children. But we need to be allowed to. If in fact we lack the capacity to repair our system, help us build that capacity and then turn that the school district back to its people so that they can determine their children's future. Stop disenfranchising the people of Paterson. Allow them the right and the responsibility to educate their own children. Remove these vestigial trappings of second class citizenship in the state of NJ. Let my school district go.