

East Ramapo Stakeholders

Preserving Public Education

3 Cooper Morris Drive
Pomona, New York 10970
845-354-5809

March 23, 2009

New York State Education Department
89 Washington Avenue
Albany, New York 12234

Attn: Commissioner Richard Mills

Dear Commissioner:

We are representatives of the Stakeholders of, and people of color, in the East Ramapo School District, located in Rockland County, New York. We are writing to request your advice and assistance in our efforts to protect and strengthen the public schools of the East Ramapo School District.

Over the past 25 years our district has gone from one of the best performing districts in the state to among the worst. This change in educational outcome has occurred concurrently with a change in the socioeconomic makeup of the community served by the schools. As can be expected, children of higher income and better educated parents tend to be able to utilize school system and other resources better, while families that are disadvantaged will not be able to take advantage of the same resources without some kind of accommodation.

The driving force behind the changes has been that a segregationist group which does not use the public schools has grown in numbers and influence in our area. Many middle class and highly educated residents have left and many lower class and desperately poor residents with little or no education have moved in, where they participate in the new local economy dominated by the segregationist community.

This has presented a whole new set of challenges for public education. The district has failed to meet the challenges and the result has been a high failure rate and poor testing results. The problem has become even worse now that the control of the public schools has been taken by members of the segregationist community, whose direct personal interests are in conflict with public schools. The resulting lack of trust in the schools by the community which uses the schools is exacerbating the feelings of disempowerment and alienation that are already paralyzing community and parent involvement.

As evidence of this threat to the integrity of our schools are such factors as:

1. The failure to pass of a seriously reduced school district budget;

2. The sale of public school district property over the objections of the public school users;
3. The proposal to divest ownership of additional public school properties and close entire school buildings, again over the objection of public school users;
4. The curtailment of public essential school programs, while maintaining supplements to private schools within the district;
5. The reversal of a decision to award tenure to a highly rated and well regarded High School principal of color;
6. De facto racial segregation as reflected in schools in which more than 80% of the participants are children of color;
7. Failure to implement programs thought to have reduced the gap in academic achievement between ethnic majority and ethnic minority students.
8. Insensitivity to the needs and multiple cultural identities of the populations that use the public schools.

It is our impression that while these actions may be primarily motivated by a concern for controlling the cost of public education, the effect of these actions is to weaken our public schools and reduce the effectiveness and quality of the education of our children. Also, they do not seem to take into account salient available empirical data which seem to support smaller schools and class size as an effective way to close the achievement gap.

The fact that the control of the education of our children is in the hands of persons who represent families that do not use the public schools violates the democratic principle of “governance with the consent of the governed.” It is inconsistent with the intent of the principle of “local control of education.” Given the associated fact of “white flight,” from these under resourced schools we have, in fact, a pattern of racial segregation in school attendance and race-based neglect of educational opportunities that are similar to the pattern that was declared unconstitutional in the *Brown vs. Topeka, Kansas* decision of 1954. We charge de facto segregation.

Commissioner Mills, we implore you to investigate this situation. We ask that you advise us with respect to the protection and strengthening of public education in our district. We ask for the assistance of the NY State Department of Education as we struggle to ensure the effective education of children of color in the East Ramapo School District.

Sincerely,

Steven White

For the East Ramapo School District Stakeholders