

Please note that this report has been modified from its original version to be more accessible.

# **New Jersey Department of Education/Paterson Board of Education**

## **Transition to Local Control Report III**

### **Overview**

On October 7, 2020, the New Jersey Department of Education (DOE) presented the second of three transition reports to the New Jersey Board of Education (BOE) regarding Paterson Public Schools (PPS) implementation of the approved Transition Plan for the return of full local control under N.J.A.C 6A:30-7.2. The Report which was composed of two parts; a quantitative scorecard from the Comprehensive Accountability Office (CAO) for State Supervised School Districts and a qualitative report from the Highly Skilled Professionals (HSPs) with the authority under N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-14(e)(2) to provide oversight, guidance and technical support to PPS and the BOE in the implementation of the Plan demonstrated continued progress towards full implementation of the plan.

The concept of sustained progress forms the basis of the transition plan. The initial report documented roles, responsibilities, actions, and timelines used by the District to exhibit progress in the areas of transition. Of the 28 indicators on the Scorecard to measure progress in implementation of the District's transition plan to regain local control, the District fully implemented 17 of the indicators with a score of 4 and substantially met the remaining 11 indicators with a score of 3. There were no indicators with scores of 2 or below that denotes a partially implemented standard or standard that were not being met.

The second or "interim" CAO scorecard focused on indicators scored at 3 or 2 from the initial CAO scorecard and discussed programs, policies, and procedures that demonstrate the capacity or lack thereof from the District to sustain progress through the transition and beyond. This report continues to review documents and benchmarks that are outlined in the scorecard as "substantially met" but required additional observation and monitoring throughout the entire 24 month transition period. Finally, the HSP Report conceptualizes processes and actions overtime based on the HSP's observations and interactions with District staff, administration and the BOE that demonstrate the District's ability to self-govern.

This third and final HSP Report covers the timeframe between March and September 2020. This time period also happens to coincide with Governor Murphy's order to close schools



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indefinitely due to the Covid-19 Coronavirus Pandemic. It cannot be understated that this last monitoring process took place during unprecedented times and the District Administration and Board of Education's ability to meet all Transition Plan metrics is a testament to their capabilities. Their swift and comprehensive response to this crisis demonstrated the District's resiliency, and its ability to self-govern in the domains of Governance, Finance, Operations, Personnel, and Instruction and Program.

## **Governing in a Pandemic**

Paterson Public Schools has been providing remote instruction to all students since March 2020, when Governor Murphy ordered all New Jersey schools to close indefinitely. While many districts resumed some level of in-person instruction in September 2020, the District kept an all-remote schedule in place due to elevated rates of COVID-19 transmission in Paterson. Nonetheless, the Board reviewed and approved several iterations of a Reopening Plan, based on input from 18 committees that focused on different aspects of resuming in-person learning and extracurricular activities at school buildings. The HSP's observed and sat in on many of these meetings. The committees included parents, community leaders, and clergy, as well as teachers, administrators and other professionals from the District. The District has shown it is prepared to reopen schools safely once local pandemic conditions and staffing concerns subside.

In the domain of Governance, the District immediately drafted and adopted relevant policies, regulations, and procedures to guide day-to-day operations following the pandemic's onset. Board and Committee meetings are being conducted effectively through Zoom and Google Meet, in accordance with all applicable Board by-laws and State laws and regulations. Board members now use Google Drive to access resolutions and other board documents, and are successfully able to exercise their oversight functions remotely.

In the domain of Finance, the District successfully applied for and received federal disaster relief funding made available through the federal CARES Act. Additionally, the District secured grants from private charities such as the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund, and from the City of Paterson by way of the County of Passaic totaling close to \$5 million dollars of unanticipated revenue. Despite an all remote work environment, the pandemic did not cause significant disruption in payroll, accounting, purchasing, or other business functions because the District successfully implemented work schedules for Business Office employees at the outset of the pandemic. Although the pandemic put significant strain on the District's limited financial resources, the District's current financial position indicates it is prepared to develop another balanced budget for the coming fiscal year using the same policies and practices put in place during the transition.



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In the domain of Operations, the District quickly re-adapted its food distribution operations when schools closed in March 2020, immediately transforming from school-based dining program to meal distribution site program. Since then, the District has continued to provide tens of thousands of meals to students each day. In addition, new student registration resumed in June 2020 and transportation for charter and out-of-district students resumed in September. The District met all metrics for operational capacity and compliance.

In the domain of Instruction and Program, the District notably implemented a one-to-one laptop program at the start of the 2020-2021 school year despite substantial problems in the laptop supply chain. In addition to providing laptops and hotspots to every student, the District successfully adopted an all-online instructional delivery model utilizing the Google Classroom platform. Special education and related services are continuing to be provided remotely. The District met all metrics for academic programming and curriculum.

In the domain of Personnel, the District successfully implemented remote work schedules for employees whose jobs can be performed remotely. All personnel actions were vetted by the Board's Personnel Committee and voted upon by the full board. In this area and others the District continues to meet all metrics in spite of the pandemic.

## **Fundamental Considerations**

### **State Engagement with the District during the Transition:**

Even in light of the Covid-19 Pandemic, the HSPs, Superintendent, Leadership Team and BOE have continued to enjoy a cooperative, transparent and engaging relationship allowing for the ongoing monitoring of progress towards the implementation plan as well as the openness to receive technical assistance and constructive criticism when needed. Moving from a fully in-person work environment to first a hybrid and then fully remote environment had fewer than expected logistical and communication problems than expected. HSP's were not only included in all ongoing regularly scheduled administrative and BOE meetings but also played a part in offering advice in developing the plan to respond to Covid. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic a commitment to maintain consistent and collaborative relationships with the HSPs has proven invaluable in the HSPs effort to provide the adequate support for transitioning the District back to local control as outlined in the Plan.

### **Consequences for Not Meeting the Expectations of the Full Transition Plan**

The BOE has continued to fully embrace the stipulations under the Plan and persist to demonstrate their readiness for full local control.



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NJ law authorizes any individual to file formal ethics charges against a member of the BOE. In 2019, a former employee filed charges against a Board member. A final decision has been issued by the School Ethics Commission finding that member in violation of the School Ethics Law. An appeal was filed by the Respondent and the Commissioner of Education's decision was still pending at the time of the official end of the transition period (September, 2020). (Documents on file in the Superintendent's office)

As observed by the HSP from ongoing conversations with the Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, Labor Relations and Affirmative Action and attendance at regular board Personnel committee meetings, the BOE continues to maintain appropriate oversight, without inappropriate interference, into personnel decisions with no reported evidence that members engage in inappropriate interference with personnel decisions.

## **Governance**

### **Ethics Training for BOE and Senior Officials:**

It is observed that the BOE continues to be in full compliance with this Metric.

### **Professional Development for the BOE and District Leadership Regarding Governance Best Practices:**

It is observed that the BOE continues to be in full compliance with this Metric.

### **Search for Successor Superintendent:**

The District fully complied with this Metric.

### **Strategic Planning Expectations:**

The District fully complied with this Metric.

## **Instruction & Program**

The interim scorecard revealed that seven of the nine I&P metrics have been fully implemented. Two of the metrics were reported by the CAO as substantially met. The District has taken prompt action to provide additional evidence for metric values of substantially met, to raise the level of proficiency to fully implemented. The District's efforts are documented in this report.

### **Documentation for Verification for Metric #11**

Metric #11 requires the District to have a process in place for the ongoing review of curricula based on: 1) student performance data, 2) a monitoring process; and, 3) a system of continual feedback. In response to the metric it should be acknowledged that the PPS has processes in place for the selection, adoption, implementation, and



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evaluation of curricula in accordance with all the required elements in the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) and N.J.A.C. 6A:8-1.1.

The District's curricular processes are organized to respond to variations in the NJSLS, student performance data, feedback from stakeholders, modifications for Special Education (SPED) and English Language Learnings (ELL), and other related elements. There is a continuous examination by staff to determine how changes in these elements could impact pedagogical routines and instructional strategies, resources and materials, training, and teaching and learning. District Supervisors and curriculum writers examine those key issues and trends, and revise curricula to align with new standards, emerging data, curricular feedback, and changes to State and District policies. Supervisors also meet with the HSP to discuss the processes and format for curricular review and revisions; and any updates to pacing and curriculum guides. Final curricula revisions are submitted to Divisional Administrators for approval and placed on the Consent Agenda for consideration by the Board of Education (BOE) Curriculum Committee [a precursor to adoptions by the full Board] in compliance with N.J.A.C. 6A:13-2.1.

The BOE adopted four resolutions for content area curricula for SY 2020-21. The curricular revisions were based upon reviews of the NJSLS, Unit I and II formative assessments, cultural relevance, feedback from staff and stakeholders, specific accommodations and modifications for SPED and ELL, and other related elements. Pursuant to the adoptions guides were also revised in the areas of Science, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Physical Education, in accordance with established policies outlined in the Curriculum Standard Operation Procedure (SOP), previously forwarded to the CAO.

All adopted curriculum revisions were presented and reviewed with teachers at the opening day professional development. Supervisors continue to collaborate with staff to ensure that the curriculum is implemented with fidelity during Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), grade level meetings, and vertical articulation meetings. Observations and walk-throughs are also utilized as tools to ensure fidelity in curriculum.

(Comprehensive descriptions of the aforementioned activities were previously submitted to the CAO).

### **Initial Knowledge Checks**

The CAO noted in the interim report for Metric #11 that the District's Unit III and IV assessment data were unattainable due to the health related school closure on March 17, 2020. The same could be said for the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) for SY 2019-20, which was also postponed. It is the observation of the HSP that in the absence of these essential data, the District put forth maximum efforts to utilize the data available to arrive at informed decisions regarding curriculum. And, that the Board



continued in its curricular practices required by code...keeping students at the center of the process.

The District also exercised its responsibility to remediate the effects of any lost learning opportunities from SY 2019-20 through multiple actions. Curriculum pacing during the month of September was revised in mathematics and English Language Arts(ELA) to address prerequisite skills from the NJSL loss in the prior year. The "Unit Zero" initiative in mathematics and ELA, grades one through high school, was designed to focus on Unit IV standards from the previous grade level that may not have been fully addressed. The Unit IV standards were presented as prerequisites to the current grade level standards.

Digital benchmark assessments were also administered to students using multiple platforms to measure their mastery of skills from previous grade levels. The Initial Knowledge Check(IKC) was administered in ALEKS, Achieve 3000, Imagine Math, and school based platforms. Data from the digital platforms will be presented at upcoming Cabinet and Principals' meetings and will be used to inform instruction to support the needs of students.

### **Final Qualitative Observation for I&P**

The Paterson Public Schools Superintendent shared a common vision that the HSP should work within Divisions to acquire the knowledge necessary to fairly and accurately assess the District's performance in meeting the expectations of the Plan. As fundamental considerations the HSP was granted access to District emails, Cabinet meetings and retreats, Leadership and Principals meetings, interdivisional communications with Directors and Supervisors, school site visits with Assistant Superintendents, Board agendas, retreats, and committee meetings, and individual meetings with the Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendent. The HSP also participated in the development of two SOPs in Curriculum and school site visit protocols. Equally important was the capacity to access various operating systems within the Divisions that intersected with Instruction and Program.

The level of transparency throughout the District provided the HSP with a unique opportunity to observe guiding principles in policies, procedures, practices, and programs. The District consistently demonstrated a capacity for growth, as the systems embedded in these principles were effectively applied in emergent situations.

During the 20 months of engagement with the PPS, the HSP has accumulated sufficient knowledge and evidence to document the thorough, effective, and efficient manner in which the District managed the expectations of the transition plan. In sum, it is with the



utmost professional confidence that I recommend the reinstatement of local control over Instruction and Program to the Paterson BOE.

**Special Education and Student Support Services:**

The district continues to review and improve policies and procedures to ensure a seamless system of planning, delivery, measurement, communication, compliance, and modification of intervention and referral services. Scheduled professional development and electronic data and tracking systems focused on addressing learning concerns, behavioral issues, and the well-being of all students are maintained and monitored. Child Study Teams and Supervisors roles and responsibilities are regulated and tracked to maintain compliance of IEPs and student mandated supports. Professional development and staff support meetings are effectively implemented to ensure the district is consistently providing the required support to students with disabilities as required by their IEPs.

The District continues to maintain compliance for IEPs and related services at 90% even during the Pandemic. As the Special Education Department transitioned to a new IEP platform, EDPlan, the department engaged related services, child study teams, teachers, and administrators on detailed trainings to support the usage of EDPlan. EDPlan supports the Districts culturally linguistic diversity via translation services in Spanish, Bengali, and Arabic. During the continuance of remote instruction, teams have reported in-person to facilitate student evaluations to maintain compliance. The District has expanded its in-district Autism and ED/BD. There are mandated weekly Child study meetings to maintain compliance with regard to IEPs, placement, program supports, and job embedded professional development. Mandated Supervisor weekly meetings support review of compliance, trouble-shooting, collaboration across District support; jobs embedded professional development, enhances communication, and develops peer-to-peer relationships.

Supervisors, Director, and Assistant Superintendent are active participants in staff walk-throughs and observations to ensure that staff has allotted resources to maintain fidelity of student supports. All Special Education students are equipped with devices to ensure their ability to participate in instruction and related services through technology. The Department developed a task force to support student wellness. Teams were dispatched to contact parents of students who may have seemed to be at risk at the onset of the Pandemic. At the inception of the school year, the Department collaborated with the Attendance department to continue the task force and expand the support to home visits to identify families or students who may be in crisis.

A point person for the department works with Central Registration to ensure the transfer in process is seamless. The point person collaborates with Central Registration to ensure



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that students are placed according to their transfer in IEP, alerts receiving child study team members and building administration of the enrollment, and uploads all pertinent documentation and IEPs. The process was established to ensure that students are recognized from their date of enrollment as a student requiring special education services and supports are placed in a school with the most appropriate program aligned to their existing IEP.

The point person monitors the preschool referrals and consents to disseminate evaluation requests to maintain a timeline of referrals and related services. This supports the annual State Targeted Review for Indicator 11; Child Find Requirements (State Performance Plan Indicator). The department also has a process in place for the State Performance plan for Indicator 14 Post Secondary Transition, which identifies students who have graduated, dropped out, or aged out within a designated year. The students reported were reviewed and confirmed and submitted to the State within the required timeline needed to maintain compliance.

The department is responsible for tracking students currently in the Juvenile Justice System, Correctional Facilities, DCPD custody, out and in patient programs, and residentially placed for educational stability that previously was done ad hoc and not in a formal process. The department has now established a database and directory of contacts in each of the agencies to better coordinate and track students for re-entry to the district as well as monitoring instruction to capture outside grading.

The Special Education Department worked in collaboration with the Department of Instruction & Program on the Remote Learning Plan and Re-Entry Plan. Program expansion of the Behavioral Disabilities Program and Supports has allowed the district to meet the needs of these students in District, reducing the out of district referrals. A Clinical Social Worker was hired and assigned to support this population of students. The department has established a curriculum resource for students with Autism and Behavioral Disabilities. The partnership for Transition Supports for students ages 18-21, with Passaic County Community College, was board approved and will commence once the in-person instruction resumes. A partnership with Spectrum has also been established for students ages 18-21, in the virtual platform, that will begin in the early spring.

The Special Departments collaborated with the Guidance department in revising the District-Wide Crisis manual. Child study team members have clearly defined roles in crisis management. A Special Education District Representative, from the child study team, coordinates and collaborates with Early Intervention for incoming Pre-K students. Team members attend Transition Planning Conferences to provide parents/guardians with the





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process for Paterson Public registration and Special Education referral process and programs offered.

Special Education administration meets with the Human Resource Department, on a weekly basis, to maximize options in the hiring process to reduce the level of vacancies that exist or occur with special education. This layer of support allows the department to identify appropriate coverage during the vacancy until permanent staff is hired.

The numbers of Corrective Action Plans and mediation requests have been reduced in the Department. Delivery of compensatory services, based on the CAP, are reviewed and revised on a monthly basis based on the fulfillment of sessions. This data is cross-referenced with the NJDOE for confirmation of fulfillments.

The District has adopted *HIBsterVention*, an electronic student management system which provides a centralized system for management of the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) process and Section 504 Accommodations. Through *HIBsterVention*, pre-referral plans are created by the classroom teacher to assist in the process of identifying at-risk students by analyzing data and intervention outcomes. School-based teams will collectively access, evaluate, and verify referrals. The I&RS Teams, consisting of Administrators, Teachers, School Counselors, Case Managers, Student Assistance Coordinators and Nurses have been trained to effectively use the web-based platform in accordance with each of their unique roles. An action plan is being developed to ensure efficient monitoring, implementation and on-going professional development. The platform is scheduled for a January 2021 launch. Several measures are being taken to minimize technical difficulties, provide adequate training materials and clear and concise protocols.

## **Fiscal Management and Operations**

### **Overview:**

Of all area's in the Transition, the District has made the most improvement in Fiscal Management. After receiving a score of 2 in 4 of the 8 metrics under Fiscal Management as part of the initial CAO Scorecard the District improved those scores to a rating of 3 in the interim CAO Scorecard. Through the review of several draft budget documents and a series of in-person and virtual meetings with District leadership and Board members; the HSPs and staff at the DOE has been able to closely monitor the progress of the budget development process and certify the imbedded best practices used for two consecutive balanced budget under transition.

Although the historic underfunding in both state aid and local tax levy according to the SFRA continue to hamper the District's ability to provide all the resources and supports



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needed by a SDA district (former Abbott), the District has seen increased state aid as a result of Chapter 67 Phase-in and local aid from back to back double digit increases to the tax levy. While significant, these increases in revenue are still outpaced by cost drivers resulting in a structural deficit in the tens of millions. The additional costs associated due to the pandemic have been for the most part absorbed by federal, state and local grants. Despite the District's best efforts, they find themselves forced into making tough decisions annually such as laying off staff, closing schools and cutting programs. Encouraging conversations and some action continue in order to address the District's structural deficit but even more drastic measures must be taken in the short term to stabilize the District finances in the long run and maintain that the highest priority is placed on student achievement.

### **Basic Fiscal Obligations; Budget Requirements and Best Practices:**

For the second and final time under the Transition Plan, the District prepared, and the Board adopted a balanced budget certified for taxes based on the original state aid notice on time each year to ensure financial stability. However, in light of state aid reductions as a result of Covid-19, the Board had to readopt and submit an amended budget reflecting the changes. The task of revisiting line items with cuts in mind was no easy task but was handled professionally and with the interest of providing a thorough and efficient education at the forefront. There were semi-monthly meetings with the Board fiscal committee discussing budget projections and budget priorities. A budget calendar was reviewed with the Cabinet and the Board Fiscal Committee and then distributed to the full Board. The Board engages appropriately with the District in the development of the budget through budget hearings and special Board meetings designed to "close the structural budget gap." The community is engaged during the budget process with forums held in strategic locations to capture as much community input as possible. Focus groups consisting of collective bargaining units and key community stakeholder groups are also included in the process. Of special note is a focus group of students who added valuable input in the process. The Budget team meets no less than twice a month with different groups to further collaborate on budget issues and concerns. The minutes from the Fiscal Committee and Board meetings are evidenced of full engagement during the budget process. (See Metric #17)

The District Budget Team consisting of central office staff members meets jointly with all school principals in rolling out the annual budget. Schools individually requested budget priorities with school allocations based on projected enrollment by grade and student type; General Ed, SPED, and new for 2020-21 Bi-lingual to distribute funding equitably to the schools with transparency based on the non-salary needs of their student population. The Budget Team implements a weighted student funding formula with increased allocations to



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support the needs of schools with greater numbers of students who comprise special populations. For the remaining population, a per-pupil allocation was developed based on enrollment count by grade level as of the Oct. 15<sup>th</sup> ASSA report. The allocated amounts are determined, separated by grade levels K-8 and 9-12, and categorically allows for more equity with an increased amount provided at the high school level. (See Metric #18)

The monthly Board Secretary's Report / Treasurer's Report/ Transfer Report continues to be completed, reconciled and submitted to the Board with appropriate certification of adequate funds. This is done without exceptions and as required. The Fund Balance Review is performed in front of the full board during the months of November, February, and May. At the time of this report the HSP's can confirm that at least 3 times per year over the course of the last 2 years under the Transition Plan, the District presented a fiscal forecast for the remainder of the year to the Board as outlined in the plan. (See Metric #19)

The District continues to prepare a monthly cash flow analysis to monitor their cash versus payment obligations. The Business Services team meets monthly with the Federal Grants team to review reimbursement and actual spending. Grant requirements and available balances are discussed during these meetings as well. The services of the State Budget Monitor who had been embedded in the Business office was concluded due to the District's ability to sustain the progress they have made in this area. A monthly report is emailed to the state as evidence of our reimbursement requests and the timeliness of the request. The District has greatly improved their relationship with the County Business Administrator, and communicates regularly as a source of information and guidance to ensure progress. Requests are made monthly and the report is due each month on the 15th. (See Metric #20)

The District monitors the Board Secretary's Report, which reflects the current budget status of each line item, including the original budget, transfers, adjusted budget, expenditures, and available balance. Monthly transfer reports are provided as evidence of appropriated expenditures. As required by law, the District requests County approval for any transfer that exceeds 10% of the original budget. The District's Transfer Report for fiscal year 2019-2020, CAFR, AMR, and Certified Resolution stand as evidence in implementing this indicator. (See Metric #21)

### **Professional Development for the BOE and Senior Staff regarding Fiscal Management Best Practices:**

New Jersey state law requires school board members to attend training in the first, second and third years of a first term, and in the first year of re-elected or reappointed term. The HSP's can attest that all required trainings by both state law and as outlined in the



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Transition Plan have been fulfilled. Please see the year to date status of current Board Member. (Metric #22)

## **Personnel**

### **Expectations Regarding Additional Personnel Initiatives:**

It is observed that the BOE continues to be in full compliance with this Metric.

## **Conclusion**

After close to 30 years under some form of state intervention and 24 months in transition, the HSP's can attest that both the current district leadership and BOE have demonstrated their willingness to improve in every area for the purpose of increasing student outcomes and operational effectiveness by way of establishing policies and practices to sustain all gains. Even in the middle of a national crisis that hit hard locally, the District met and, in many cases, exceeded the measures that were put in front of them. It is the collective informed observation of the HSP's that Paterson has earned the right to self-govern under full local control free of state intervention.

### ***Report Collectively Submitted by:***

***Mr. Theodore Best, Jr. – Personnel, Operations, Fiscal Management, Governance***

***Dr. Stephen Cowan – Instruction and Program***

***Dr. Alexis Colander – Special Education/Support Services***