

New York State Conference NAACP
Hazel N. Dukes President
New York State Governor's Commission on Education Reform
The Education Crises for Children of Color Where Cultures and Values Conflict

On a hot night this past August, Emilia White, a parent, was videotaping the East Ramapo Central School District board meeting from the side of the room, a practice permitted by the NYS Open Meetings Law. About 50 members of the public were listening to a recent audit report when board President Daniel Schwartz interrupted and told Ms. White to move to the back of the room. (The board recently issued this new policy after first attempting to ban filming of public meetings of the board altogether.) Ms. White, a Haitian-American, refused, saying, "In the back of the room to me means the back of the bus." Mr. Schwartz warned her that if she didn't comply she'd be arrested. Ms. White stated, "When you're ready to arrest me, just drag me out."

This episode is emblematic of growing tension between the East Ramapo secular community and the East Ramapo Central School District board, which has a majority of members from the Orthodox and Ultraorthodox (Haredi) Jewish community. The priority of this bloc is not the education of public school students, ninety-percent of whom are children of color, but the education of the community's 18,000 orthodox children who attend Yeshivas: separate, segregated religious schools. The bloc's values and beliefs about public school education differ substantially from those of the secular community. For example,

- a. Jewish law and biblical commandments serve as the primary source of decision making
- b. Separation for the HAREDI and Orthodox communities is a fundamental goal
- c. Yeshivas represent the primary mechanism for ensuring separation of children from outside world
- d. Yeshivas represent a RED-LINE of the Haredi and Orthodox community
- e. Educational segregation from the secular community is therefore the foremost means of protecting its religious values

Little, if any, incentive exists for the bloc to support the public schools beyond the austerity budget. The problem is that public schools forced to operate at austerity generally fail. Student performance in East Ramapo public schools is the lowest in Rockland County; student, parent and staff morale have been devastated; and budgets and reserves have been depleted, with services reduced to bare bones. Student, parent and staff confidence in the superintendent and board are non-existent. East Ramapo's endemic dysfunction is fueled by the bloc's religious commitment to separate, segregated religious schools. Children of color attending East Ramapo schools suffer directly and unconscionably from the bloc's actions.

In summary, the bloc functions as if education in East Ramapo is a zero sum game. It exploits public funds for the benefit of the Orthodox and Haredi communities. It has hired an attorney (at double the cost of the district's previous attorney) who has a reputation for exploiting NY State regulations in order to publicly fund special education placements in private, segregated religious schools. Further, the bloc continually ignores NY State Education Department compliance directives concerning its improper practices in awarding contracts, disbursing text books to non-public schools, and placing white, Jewish children in non-public special education settings. In addition, against parent requests, the bloc flaunts its disregard for the safety of public school children by prohibiting the posting of no-trespassing signs on school grounds so that members of the Orthodox and Haredi community can use school property as

short cuts during school hours. The zero-sum algorithm, i.e. minimize public school funding by defeating proposed budgets for anything above mandated services, while maximizing the use of public school funds for segregated religious schools through the use of loopholes and bending of law and regulations, is antithetical to sound educational practices, as well as discriminatory and racist toward students attending public schools.

NAACP Recommendation

We believe the structure and governance of the East Ramapo school system are dysfunctional. While stricter monitoring by federal and state authorities may address symptoms of this dysfunction, it will not address its systemic cause. Newly elected board members from the bloc community and their appointed administrators and lawyers will simply become more savvy and adept at *gaming* the system. Their beliefs, values, motivations and intent will not likely change.

For this reason, the New York State Conference NAACP recommends Governor Cuomo create an executive/ legislative Task Force to explore the challenges faced by the East Ramapo public school district, and districts like it. The Task Force would be charged with revising the structure of governance and funding of public education in culturally and religiously diverse communities in ways that reflect the needs, values, cultures and resources of those communities.

The Governor is faced with acknowledging the systemic dysfunction of the East Ramapo School District and recommending appropriate action, or taking no action, which will have the effect of continuing the status quo in East Ramapo and similar communities and which will be a disservice to children of color. We respectfully request the Governor choose the former.

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