

Great Schools New Jersey – The Association of High Need School Districts

Wednesday, January 10, 2024, on Zoom

I. **Welcome: Kenyon Kummings, GSNJ President, Superintendent, Wildwood City School District**

Superintendent Kummings welcomed participants to the meeting and encouraged members to write any questions they have in the chat. He informed the group that Senator Vin Gopal would be joining the meeting later. He then introduced the first presenter, Larry Lustberg, Lead Counsel for *LAN v. State of NJ*.

II. **Presentation: Larry Lustberg on *Latino Action Network v. State School Desegregation Lawsuit***

Mr. Lustberg thanked the group for having him and said he would try his best to disclose as much information as he could regarding the LAN school desegregation case. He said that he is very concerned about transparency and keeping people informed and engaged.

He explained that despite finding evidence of school segregation, the judge did not grant a judgment for the LAN plaintiffs. Mr. Lustberg said the plaintiffs may file an appeal in the case, but in the meantime they have been engaged in mediation with the State since November. The mediation is led by former NJ Supreme Court Justice Barry Albin. The two mediation sessions so far have focused on expanding New Jersey's interdistrict school choice program and magnet schools.

Mr. Lustberg emphasized the importance of various stakeholders being heard in this process. He and the other attorneys are sensitive to concerns and want to speak to people who know the landscape. He added that they know great leaders are necessary for a successful school district and program.

He also noted there are some concerns regarding possible remedies in this case. A more robust interdistrict choice program and strong magnet school program could cause schools to be more segregated. Some solutions could drain students from high need districts and have negative funding repercussions, but he noted that hold harmless provisions will be included.

Manville Superintendent Jamil Maroun asked about the resources that are being discussed for their districts. He emphasized that high-performing students might move to other districts and widen segregation as a result of choice schools.

Mr. Lustberg said the case will not be settled if the result is less funding for high need districts. The plan is that magnet schools would be situated in districts that are segregated. He said the plan that's in the LAN complaint situates magnet schools in high need districts, and resources would accompany that. He added that additional support services, community schools and other opportunities are being discussed. He said much more systematic review of options still needs to occur.

He also agreed that there may be some adverse effects but said that input from educators and school representatives would help everyone come to the best resolution.

Superintendent Kummings asked about the opportunity for high need superintendents to weigh in. Mr. Lustberg said the mediator and the Attorney General are extremely aware of the need for that. Superintendent Kummings then said superintendents can be useful in terms of what their districts are capable of, how not to cause harm, and what parameters and evaluations are needed.

Superintendent Maroun emphasized the issue of students leaving for other districts. He said the data that is being looked at is very important, and he brought up the example of the votechs taking district students. Mr. Lustberg said metrics are very important, and they need to rely on administrators for that.

Mr. Lustberg said he would be happy to continue communication, and he wants to hear from superintendents. He can be reached at llustberg@gibbonslaw.com.

III. Legislative Update: Melanie Schulz, NJASA Director of Government Relations

Ms. Schulz said a new group of legislators was sworn in the day before for the new Legislative session, and she is excited to meet the new members.

She said during the lame duck session they were able to have the virtual instruction bill taken off the agenda. Instead, a concurrent resolution passed asking the Department of Education to collect data on virtual instruction. She also said the teacher evaluation bill was rewritten in the Assembly, and she looks forward to seeing how that will reshape evaluations.

Ms. Schulz said that in the Governor's State of the State speech he mentioned literacy, and she is curious what the literacy initiative will look like. She said the Governor also talked a lot about AI during his speech. Ms. Schulz noted that the Techspo Conference would be held on January 24, 25, and 26 in Atlantic City.

Ms. Schulz said she had a discussion with Hunger Free NJ and addressed the outstanding bills regarding school meals.

She encouraged superintendents to get in touch with her to talk more about bills and any suggestions or concerns they have.

IV. Presentation: Senator Vin Gopal

Superintendent Kummings introduced Senator Gopal, Chair of the Senate Education Committee. He said the Senator had joined a GSNJ meeting last year and promised to come back.

Senator Gopal thanked the group for having him. He said 2024 will be a big year. It's the last year of S2 formula funding, and the 2% cap, mental health resources, and other aspects of the SFRA also need to be looked at.

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The Senator expressed concern about virtual learning and its effectiveness. Covid has had a major impact on education. Some families did not have Wi-Fi or food security. He said state agencies need to come back to fully in person also.

He said teacher shortages and how assessments affect teacher evaluations will continue to be looked at. He added he would like to get extraordinary special education aid up to 100%.

He noted that the Department of Education has had staffing issues, and the Acting Commissioner is in the process of leaving. There will hopefully be a new Commissioner in the next few months. Now that the election is over, Senator Gopal said there's a need to focus on these major issues.

Ms. Schulz thanked the Senator for all the work he does with NJASA and GSNJ. She asked if he knew who would be joining him on the Senate Education Committee. He said there will be new committee members, but he is unsure who they will be.

Jersey City Superintendent Norma Fernandez said Jersey City has been impacted by the S2 legislation. She asked if there was any information about the Jersey City payroll tax and accountability around the tax. The Senator said his team would look into that.

Pemberton Superintendent Jeff Havers asked if there will be any action taken regarding impending aid cuts under S2. Senator Gopal said there will be. He noted that this last year of S2 will be tough, and school districts in his legislative district are greatly affected. He said it will be his priority that districts see minimal cuts.

Senator Gopal thanked the group again and encouraged them to reach out to his policy staffer, Mike Illiano, with any questions. Mike can be reached at milliano@njleg.org.

V. ELC Update: Sharon Kregel, Director of Strategic Partnerships, Policy, and Communications

Sharon Kregel informed the group about ELC's upcoming reports in 2024 on the SFRA, S2, and the Educational Adequacy Report.

She said that if ELC can be of assistance to please let her know. She reminded meeting participants that Danielle Farrie, ELC Research Director, will present at the GSNJ March meeting about the Governor's school funding proposals in his FY25 State Budget address.

VI. Approval: November 29, 2023 Meeting Minutes

The minutes were moved and approved.

Superintendent Kummings thanked everyone for joining the meeting and encouraged members to recommend speakers for future meetings.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00 a.m.