

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

Tuesday, October 24, 2023, Workshop 2023, Atlantic City

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

Superintendent Kummings began with a description of GSNJ since the meeting was open to all Workshop participants, and he asked participants to reach out if they were interested in joining the organization. He then introduced Robert Kim, Education Law Center Executive Director.

II. Presentation: Robert Kim, ELC Executive Director

Mr. Kim started his presentation by noting his deep appreciation for the work that superintendents do. He said he was looking forward to this conversation about issues facing us all.

Mr. Kim said he started at ELC in March. It was a homecoming for him since he went through New Jersey public schools. He started his career in civil rights litigation, then he went over to the union side in Washington, D.C., where he tried to improve NCLB. He then worked at the U.S. Education Department in both Obama Administrations, focusing on civil rights, including Title IX and students with disabilities. He said he was happy to come back to the state and work on education equity and looked forward to working with GSNJ.

Mr. Kim said he will carry on the legacy of ELC, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year. He spent the past summer getting up to speed. He also noted ELC's recently revamped mission statement and the organization's work towards equity for students using litigation, research, policy and advocacy.

He noted that ELC works in New Jersey and nationally, especially on school funding. ELC is also fighting the private school voucher movement across the country and is watching developments nationally that are challenging for public education and therefore for our democracy, he added.

Speaking about ELC's New Jersey work, he said school funding-related efforts are focused on a campaign to revamp the SFRA. He noted that the state is projected to reach full SFRA funding in the FY25 State Budget, and ELC is pressing for that. He said there is also a need for a full-scale Educational Adequacy Report as required by the SFRA; the next report is due in spring 2025. He noted that ELC will keep GSNJ members up to date on the Governor's funding proposals.

On the S2 amendment to the SFRA, Mr. Kim said the Legislature needs to pass a bill during the upcoming lame duck session to deal with the unexpected and very large school budget cuts. He said the recommendation would be to cap the total amount of the cuts and lift the 2% property tax cap.

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He also noted that the coming fiscal cliff will impact all districts when federal covid relief money is gone, and that makes it even more important for the administration to deal with S2 and reach full SFRA funding.

On school facilities, Mr. Kim said in the coming two years ELC will press the Murphy Administration to renew its commitment to facilities funding. He said the NJ Supreme Court didn't require the Administration and the Legislature to allocate more money for the SDA, but that was probably because almost \$2 billion had been allocated in the previous two budget years. He asked meeting participants to let him know about any facility issues, both in SDA districts and RODs. He said ELC could go back to court at some point if necessary.

On school climate, Mr. Kim said ELC is looking at disproportionate discipline, non-discrimination, equity for English learners and special education students, etc. He said ELC has an intake system and works with several partners on these topics, including GSNJ, ACLU-NJ, Our Children/Our Schools, etc. ELC is also looking at systemic litigation around students' rights and is currently involved in litigation around the timeliness of special education evaluations and in the charter school segregation case.

On racial equity, he noted the recent decision in the lawsuit *Latino Action Network v. NJ*, which was mixed. But he added the judge said both fair and equitable funding and a diverse learning environment were required for a "thorough and efficient" education. Mr. Kim said ELC is advising the lawyers and plaintiffs in the case, and the current idea is to appeal because the judge didn't require the state to do anything. He added that it's critical for all of us to have a dialogue about desegregation.

Mr. Kim noted that New Jersey has among the top five most segregated school systems in the U.S., along with Connecticut. He added that New Jersey is one of only two states to have desegregation as a requirement in the State Constitution. Noting that all kids benefit from racial diversity in schools, he said we need to think of remedies that work for kids and families.

Mr. Kim finished by saying that he welcomes GSNJ members' input and feedback.

Keyport Superintendent Lisa Savoia said her \$20 million budget is down \$1.5 million under S2. She said that equates to a lot of teachers. She added that if she could have that money back, she could save programs. She said she's also in a send-receive relationship. Some students go to Red Bank Regional High School and some to magnet high schools. She said she would volunteer to be on any committee to work on these issues.

In response, Mr. Kim said ELC is basically your legal team. We're always thinking about the next iteration of ensuring a "thorough and efficient" education. We need to be in dialogue around this. What are the components of a high quality education, he asked.

Millville Superintendent Tony Trongone asked about the status of the proposed bill to put charter schools in the SDA. ELC's Sharon Kregel answered that ELC continues to oppose the bill and is on the lookout for changes to the bill or the introduction of a new bill.

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Superintendent Kummings said there needs to be an in-depth discussion about the school funding formula along with some stopgap measures for the coming year. He said Wildwood is an intervenor in the LAN desegregation case because it's important to look at all options (e.g., charters, interdistrict public school choice) and what they do and how they impact segregation. We have to share our experiences with ELC, he added.

Mr. Kim asked participants to please get in touch with him and let him know what's going on at the local level. He also asked participants to invite him to come visit their districts and meet with them.

The meeting was adjourned at 10 a.m.