

Little Egg Harbor School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Little Egg Harbor Township School District is based on the New Jersey Department of Education's (Department) monitoring of the district that took place during the fall of 2007 pursuant to the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC) system, N.J.S.A. 18A:7A-3 et seq., a School District Assessment Survey completed by the district in July 2008, and a site visit performed by a team of Department personnel¹ on December 12, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Little Egg Harbor Township School District, located in Ocean County, educates children in preschool through grade 6. Since Little Egg Harbor is a member of Greater Egg Harbor Regional high school district, children in grades 7-12 are part of the regional district. The district has two schools, the George Mitchell Elementary School, serving children in preschool through grade 2, and the Frog Pond Intermediate School, serving grades 3-6. The total K-6 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 1,537², and 35.71% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-6 enrollment of the district has declined by 5.07% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group (DFG) B. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and State aid calculations for the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years are detailed below and are contained in the District State Aid profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the fall of 2007, the Department monitored Little Egg Harbor Township pursuant to NJQSAC. Under NJQSAC, districts are evaluated, using an assessment tool known as the "District Performance Review" (DPR) in the five key areas of school district performance: Instruction and Program, Fiscal Management, Operations Management, Personnel and Governance. Districts that satisfy 80% of the indicators in any area are considered to be high performing in that area. Little Egg Harbor Township School District scored over 80% in all five areas: Instruction and Program (82%), Fiscal Management (99%), Operations Management (100%), Personnel (100%) and Governance (100%). As a result of these scores, the district will be designated a High Performing district pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:30-4.1(d). The complete results of the NJQSAC decision are attached.

¹ The DOE site visit team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Rochelle Hendricks, Assistant Commissioner, Gerald Vernotica, Assistant Commissioner, Joan Saylor, Director, Bruce Greenfield, Executive County Superintendent, and Mike Foster, Executive County Business Administrator.

² This enrollment count is used for the calculation of state aid. High school students are counted in the resident enrollment of the regional district.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on the 2006-2007 assessment results, Little Egg Harbor Township met the definition of district Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population in language arts literacy and mathematics. In addition, at least 70% of the district's total student population was proficient on the most recent science assessments.

The NJQSAC monitoring also revealed that Little Egg Harbor Township has an up-to-date curriculum aligned with the most recent version of the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards (NJCCCS) and that the district requires and verifies that the curriculum in each area is fully implemented at all grade levels and includes clear grade level benchmarks and interim assessments (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B1, B2 and B3). The district also demonstrated that its curriculum is horizontally and vertically articulated among all grades, content areas and schools through the use of strategies such as curriculum mapping, and that it convenes curriculum articulation meetings across regional and in-district schools, grades and content areas at least twice a year (QSAC I&P DPR indicators B5 and B6).

Moreover, Little Egg Harbor Township satisfied all of the indicators in Section C of the I&P DPR which measures whether the district employs instructional strategies and processes that support the achievement of the NJCCCS. Specifically, during the monitoring, Little Egg Harbor Township demonstrated that it implements a supervisory process that ensures that all areas of the curriculum are taught in every district classroom and that teachers receive meaningful feedback, that it requires and verifies that lesson plans are aligned with the curriculum and reviewed monthly by supervisors, that supervisory practices focus on classroom instruction and that teachers and supervisors analyze student work to determine if instruction is aligned with the curriculum (QSAC I&P DPR indicator C1).

District Assessment Survey

In July 2008, the Little Egg Harbor Township School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need. The district described its needs as primarily stemming from student poverty. It noted that many students are exposed to negative influences in the home and community, including drugs, alcohol and domestic violence, with the result that children come to school unprepared to learn. The district attempts to address this challenge by working with the Department of Children and Families to address imminent dangers and neglect. It also offers free breakfast to eligible students, provides before and after care and summer camp. In addition, funding permitting, the district offers free parent workshops and provides district counseling and a behavioral specialist to assist the students. The district also stated that it has a need to upgrade and expand its facilities in order to provide needed space to deliver a high quality education.

In its survey response, the district indicated that it had a board-approved curriculum aligned with the NJCCCS and that the district's textbooks, instructional materials and technology are aligned to the curriculum. More specifically, the district

stated that it had a fully implemented visual arts and music curricula, with a dedicated room for each in each school building. The district does not have a room specifically dedicated to the Performing Arts, and uses a multipurpose room/cafeteria for assemblies and performances. The district cited a need for facility space dedicated to the performing arts, since using the current rooms, which also serve as the cafeterias, limits the access time for use of the stage and requires these elementary school children to sit on the floor. It also noted that once its current construction projects are completed, the Intermediate School will no longer have a dedicated instrumental music room with a soundproof booth. Finally, the district stated that the visual arts program lacks the technology, facilities and staffing to provide computer instruction in graphic design and animation. The district has also fully implemented a world languages curriculum that is taught in person by a certified staff member. Little Egg Harbor indicated that it would like additional resources to be able to offer languages other than Spanish. The district has a library/media center in each school building with appropriate books and other reading materials for all grades in the school. It indicated that it had a need for funding to provide access to more 21st century technologies for student research, visual collaboration and distance learning.

According to the district, it provides gifted and talented services in all grades but feels the need for additional funding for staff, technologies and space to enrich the program to help students excel in the 21st century. The district does not have an Alternate Education Program and student needs are addressed through counseling services and a behavioral specialist. The district stated that its suspension rate for the 2007-2008 school year was .003%. Little Egg Harbor also offers a number of before-school, after-school and summer programs for its students, as well as extracurricular programs and summer camp.

Little Egg Harbor reported a 12.8% special education classification rate, which is less than the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the School Funding Reform Act's (SFRA) calculation of the census-based special education funding. Approximately 1.3% of classified students are placed in out-of-district facilities. Little Egg Harbor does not have a backlog in conducting required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs and reports that all IEPs for students with disabilities are implemented as written. The district noted that special education students receive all necessary services. However, the district noted a need for additional space for the resource room, professional development in differentiated instruction and additional sound field systems and interactive technologies, such as interactive whiteboards.

According to the survey response, the district was operating a half-day preschool program for 4-year-olds and planned to begin full-day programs for 3- and 4-year olds. It is a universal district and is planning for the implementation of expanded preschool under the SFRA. It indicated that it has concerns about finding space to house the expanded program.

With respect to facilities, Little Egg Harbor Township indicated in the survey that it did not currently have adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS, because the expansion of preschool has strained the district's capacity. The district also noted that the multipurpose rooms are used as cafeterias. Referenda passed in 2006 and 2008 will provide some necessary renovations to the facilities and add additional classrooms. The district plans to convert both buildings to preschool-6 buildings. Little Egg Harbor was using 11 temporary classroom units, but at the time of the survey, anticipated that once the renovations were complete with 14 new classrooms and a science lab, the trailers would no longer be necessary. The district has concerns about security and safety, noting that classrooms are overcrowded and that despite security cameras, a T-Pass system, and locked doors, it is still difficult to guarantee the security of the staff and students. The Department notes that the SFRA provides categorical funding for security.

According to the district, it has embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas and has assigned a technology coordinator or staff member to be specifically responsible for supporting skill development and technology infusion into the curriculum for staff and students. With respect to technological hardware, the district reported that both school buildings have the equipment, connectivity and technical support necessary to provide e-learning opportunities in all learning environments. However, the district emphasized that it needed additional technology to provide one-on-one computing rather than requiring students to share computers. In addition, it stated that it needed additional funding to upgrade the bandwidth and current infrastructure. The district stated that it would like to include more interactive whiteboards in the classrooms. The district also wants to add an additional computer lab and a computer science teacher once the renovations to the Mitchell School are complete.³

Finally, regarding the district's staffing, in the survey Little Egg Harbor Township stated that 100% of its teachers are Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. It indicated that its staffing needs include parent involvement specialists, home school liaisons, more counselors, additional reading specialists, math specialists, additional teachers for the gifted and talented program, additional computer science teachers and an increase in the number of classroom teachers to reduce class size. The Department notes that many of the positions cited by Little Egg Harbor were identified as necessary educational resources in the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA's determination of per-pupil costs. The district indicated that it had difficulty attracting specialized staff because of the inability of the district to pay competitive salaries.

Site Visit

On December 12, 2008 members of a team of Department personnel traveled to the Little Egg Harbor School District and met with the district's superintendent and other

³ The funding model in SFRA includes resources for technology and assumes technology education is integrated into the curriculum, obviating the need for a separate computer science teacher. A computer-student ratio for elementary school students of 1:1 is beyond the needs identified by the process that led to the creation of the SFRA.

district personnel. During the course of this conversation, the team from the district discussed Little Egg Harbor's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals as well as the challenges still facing the district.

The site visit revealed a district that is succeeding in providing a quality education to its student population. All students get regular art, music and world language instruction. In addition, the district emphasizes targeted instruction to struggling students, employing eight Basic Skills teachers, with 3 of those teachers in grades 1-2 and 5 of those teachers in grades 3-6. The school has a reading specialist, a literacy coach and a behavioral specialist. At the time of the visit, the district was training one teacher in the techniques of "Reading Recovery" so that the teacher could provide more help for students who were having difficulty learning to read. In math, the district had just adopted the Trail Blazers series and had implemented a program of professional development to help teachers learn to use the text well.

With these efforts, the Little Egg Harbor School District has maintained a relatively high level of student performance, as measured by the State assessments. In 2008, 82% of the total student population achieved proficiency on the ASK4 in Language Arts and 82% were proficient in math.

The district has made it a priority to improve and expand the classes and services provided to special needs children in-district. The school system classifies 12.8% of its students and provides replacement classes, inclusion classes and in-class support as needed. There are over 30 full-time assistants and 8 part-time assistants working with children who carry IEPs. There are also two full-time gifted and talented teachers who provide a series of services for those students deemed "gifted and talented."

A good deal of the discussion in Little Egg Harbor, however, centered on the particular nature of the population in this community. The administrators call the community "different," pointing out that many of the parents work in Atlantic City. The township is very big, at 50 square miles, and the schools are relatively distant from most of the homes so children are often "isolated" at home. The district provides many activities for students in order to alleviate this problem.

In addition, 35% of the students are "at-risk" and the community has a high rate of domestic violence incidents. Last year there were 6 suicide threats. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the students receive counseling and the school district maintains a social worker for the regular education population. District personnel indicate that in order to fully provide for students with the most needs, more professional attention is required. Specifically, as family issues regularly impact students and the overall school climate, the administrators feel that they need additional community involvement specialists in order to deal with these issues. The Department notes that the special needs of at-risk students were specifically addressed during the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the SFRA's determination of additional weights for such students in determining funding for the district.

The school provides many services for its population, including providing before-school, after-school and summer school programs. Additionally, Little Egg Harbor maintains a Community School and a Summer Camp that provide many activities for all ages at reasonable prices.

Facilities

The district has initiated major addition and renovation projects in its schools, for which it received debt service aid from the State. During construction, the district revised the plans to add a number of preschool classes, which then limited the space available for the upper grades. Subsequently, the district applied for State grant funding pursuant to amendments to the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c.39 (EFCFA), which authorizes additional funding for school facilities projects in regular operating districts. In the first round of funding, the district applied for funds to construct a new early childhood center. The project, with a total estimated cost of \$12,000,000, was approved, with a State share of \$2,277,475 and a local share of \$9,722,525. The district is exploring ways to fund the local share of this construction. In addition, in the second round of funding, the district was approved for funding for a smaller project involving the removal and replacement of veneer at the Intermediate School to address structural issues. The total estimated cost of the project is \$1,497,206, with a State share of \$598,882 and a local share of \$898,324.

School Funding Reform Act

The Little Egg Harbor Township School District received a 2% increase (\$205,174) in State aid pursuant to the SFRA in FY08-09 and will receive no increase in State aid in FY09-10. Under the formula, the district's "adequacy budget" is calculated by multiplying the district's K-6 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649.⁴ The district's resident enrollment for grade 6 is then multiplied by the additional weight of 1.04. The district's adequacy budget includes additional weights of about .50 (FY08-09) and .51 (09-10) for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$2,303,398 in FY08-09, and \$2,602,878 for FY09-10.⁵ The district's State equalization aid is calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and the district's local fair share. For FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$12,274,249, which is based on its district-wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, per pupil property wealth was \$1,063,132 and per pupil income was \$139,413. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$12,804,720, its per pupil property wealth is \$1,079,081 and its per pupil income is \$148,455.⁶ For both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy.⁷

⁴ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

⁵ Once the components of the adequacy budget are summed, each district's adequacy budget is multiplied by a Geographic Cost Index number to reflect regional cost differences.

⁶ In both years, the district's per pupil property wealth exceeded the State averages.

⁷ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$9,596,284 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$12,274,249 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$9,741,177, compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$12,804,720.

The funding formula under SFRA also provides for categorical security aid as well as aid for transportation and special education. Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-46, every three years the Commissioner will re-evaluate and recommend to the Governor and Legislature any appropriate changes to the funding elements of the SFRA (such as the State average classification rate for general special education students and the additional weights for at-risk and limited English proficient students). For the intervening years, the cost factors in the SFRA are updated according to the Consumer Price Index.

The SFRA also dramatically increases access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to eligible students within five years. As Little Egg Harbor is classified as a DFG B, the district will be required to offer full-day preschool to its 3- and 4-year-old population within that time frame.

In addition to these State funds, Little Egg Harbor will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through Title I and IDEA, as well as additional funds through those programs pursuant to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department agrees with the district's assessment that it faces a number of challenges due to the demographics of its student population. Nevertheless, the district is to be commended for the resourceful ways in which it has addressed these issues and maintained high performance levels of its students.

In terms of Little Egg Harbor's interest in improving support for high-need students and families, the district should examine programs that focus on fostering school communities and a sense of belonging. These programs are important to students who are isolated geographically and, therefore, socially. The Fairfield School District, located in Cumberland County, appears to have a very effective program, and the Commissioner directs the Executive County Superintendent to assist the two districts in coordinating efforts, so that Little Egg Harbor can learn from the Fairfield experience, and perhaps implement a similar program. Additionally, the Department offers training to districts on developing and improving Intervention and Referral Services. The Commissioner directs the Department's office of Educational Support Services to coordinate a regional training on this topic, if Little Egg Harbor and/or other districts so desire. Finally, the Department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Little Egg Harbor and other rural districts to meet their needs for staff development in the various content areas as well as with special needs children who need particular attention and strategies in order to succeed. The leadership of the REL will contact the district shortly, if it has not already done so, to make arrangements to provide this assistance.

With respect to facilities, the district is currently engaged in a renovation and addition project for which it received debt service aid from the State. Moreover, Little Egg Harbor recently received approval for a grant to assist in funding construction of an early childhood center and another grant for renovations to the Intermediate School.

Assuming that the district can secure funding for the local share of these projects, this construction should resolve what the district considers to be its most critical needs with respect to its facilities. The Department further notes that N.J.S.A. 18A:7G-12 provides a mechanism for the district to petition the Commissioner to order issuance of school bonds if the voters in the district have twice failed to approve a referendum for a school construction project that is necessary for the provision of a thorough and efficient system of education in the district..

Programmatically, the district has developed an up-to-date curriculum, aligned with the NJCCCS that is fully implemented in the classrooms. Students receive academic support in numerous areas, including on-site specialists, teaching assistants and coaches. The teachers have books and instructional materials aligned with NJCCCS. In addition, the district has a strong visual arts and music program. The NJQSAC review indicates that all the areas under review are satisfactory.

To the extent that Little Egg Harbor contends that it has staffing or other identified resource needs, the Department notes that the district is currently taxing well below its local fair share and although it raised its levy for FY09-10, it did not raise it by 4%, as permitted by law. Further, the district's equalized tax rate is well below the state average. In the future, the district should consider additional increases to its tax levy which would provide additional resources to enhance staffing and programs desired by the district.

In sum, the Department finds that the SFRA and other complementary legislation, including EFCFA, provide the necessary resources for the district to continue to improve the educational opportunities available to its students. While Little Egg Harbor can identify areas where it could improve the delivery of educational services, those areas can be addressed within the current statutory framework with the assistance of the Department.