

Hempstead Union Free School District Fourth Quarter and Year-End Report

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Substantial progress is being made in the Hempstead Union Free School District (Hempstead, HUFSD, or District), but it will take sustained time and effort to reach "success." In a recent interview with Newsday, I was asked how long I thought that would take. I replied 5-10 years. Some areas will take more time, some less, but the point that I was trying to make, which I still believe strongly, is that reaching levels that one would define as "success" requires sustained effort and disciplined rigorous focus, particularly on the part of the Hempstead Board of Education (Board) and District leadership. That is not a criticism, but a statement of reality.

I am pleased to report examples of progress in many areas as of October 1, 2018:

- ◁ Hempstead's Grade 3-8 Math and ELA scores are up significantly for the second year in a row, with more students achieving levels 3 and 4 and fewer students achieving at level 1.¹
- ◁ The graduation rate for the class of 2018 was a significant improvement over the graduation rate for the class of 2017.
- ◁ Teachers and administrators are moving to implement the initial pieces of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary and Middle years programs.
- ◁ More Advanced Placement (AP) courses are being offered at Hempstead High School ("the High School").
- ◁ Elementary music programs are being rejuvenated. In 2017-18 all elementary schools had general music but only one out of seven offered instrumental music. This year, all seven elementary schools have some instrumental music.
- ◁ Response to Intervention (RtI) services are being strengthened.
- ◁ Student data is being cleaned up to promote accuracy, transparency, and accountability.
- ◁ Hempstead Kindergarten classes have been housed in a former parochial school after their building (Prospect) was struck by lightning and burned.
- ◁ Longstanding facilities issues are beginning to be addressed.
- ◁ The design for a new school to replace the Rhodes School, which was closed and then abandoned 17 years ago, is being prepared for submission to the New York State Education Department (NYSED or Department).
- ◁ The first ever Energy Performance Contract (EPC) is about to be sent to potential contractors with a closing date in December.
- ◁ Funds have been encumbered budget line by budget line in the 2018-19 budget, as they should be.
- ◁ Tax anticipation notes have already been floated at reasonable rates.
- ◁ The forensic audit commissioned by the Board of Education is drawing to a close.
- ◁ The recommendations of the District's three audit firms over the past three years are finally in the process of being implemented.
- ◁ The District's year-end financial reports were completed on time.

¹ Due to the shift from three to two test sessions, 2017-18 assessment results are not directly comparable to those from prior years. Nevertheless, the new baseline is encouraging.

- < The Board has restarted, or is about to restart, contract negotiations with bargaining groups to replace long-expired bargaining agreements.
- < Outdated technology equipment is being replaced at a rapid rate.
- < New

member was then reinstated by a Commissioner's decision in November 2017, which then re-aligned the Board majority. This was then followed by an extraordinarily divisive Board election in May 2018.

- < Individuals were appointed to three critical positions (superintendent, assistant superintendent for business, and high school principal). Regardless of their qualifications, these individuals were inexperienced in the positions to which they had been appointed. All three are not currently serving in their positions. In one case—the assistant superintendent for business—there is still not a permanent replacement.
- < The District encountered severe and apparently unanticipated cash flow problems in mid-winter, on the order of \$12-15 million, and was months behind in paying Nassau BOCES.
- < A payroll at the end of February was almost not completed on time due to disputes involving staff and Board members.
- < Over \$2 million in improper charges to a 2016-17 State grant were rejected by the Department due to errors. For example, 2017-18 expenditures were charged to the prior year and expenditures were not included in the grant proposal. This resulted in a charge back to the General Fund and a restatement of the 2016-17 financials.
- < Hempstead High School and the Obama and Prospect elementary schools had to be closed due to frozen pipes and/or lack of heat due to an apparent failure to conduct proper preventive maintenance.
- < At the October 2017 regular Board meeting, a law firm was approved retroactively for work that had commenced at the beginning of August 2017 without the Board's approval.
- < There were significant problems with accuracy and completeness of student data, which affected reports to the State.
- < High school administrators and staff ha

The Board and District leadership have also pushed forward in several other areas:

- Energy Performance Contract (EPC): The District has never had an EPC. A request for proposals was sent out to potential bidders in October 2018. There are potentially over \$20 million in projects. The final figure could be considerably higher given the lack of prior work and the size and age of the District's facilities.
- Long-term plans to address overcrowding: The Board and District leadership have begun to push for plans to address the overcrowding at all levels.
- Cleanliness and basic building maintenance: At times it has seemed like micromanaging, but it has been encouraging to see Board members paying attention to the environments students and staff members inhabit daily and promoting attentiveness to school facilities.

In recent weeks, members of the Board and the District leadership have engaged in serious discussions regarding contract negotiations. I have listed negotiations with the District's bargaining groups as one of the primary challenges facing the Board for a couple of quarters. Prior to these recent discussions, there had been no serious Board and District leadership discussion of this area. Discussion does not necessarily solve this longstanding issue, but it is an important start.

In previous reports, I noted the challenges facing the Board as I saw them. Some of the issues I noted previously have been noted above as being in the process of being addressed. As my initial term of appointment closes, I would like to highlight certain specific and ongoing challenges:

- ◁ The first is tied directly to your original decision to invoke the DE law: Despite the chaos and controversy of the past year, considerable progress has been made in many areas, particularly in recent months. The challenge for the current Board and District leadership is how to put that progress on a firm and lasting footing so students in Hempstead are not at risk of having their schools regress at some point in the future. Given the structure of public education in New York State, it is rather unfair to lay this challenge at the feet of the current Board and District leadership, but it is one that they are thinking about, particularly with recent controversies so vivid.
- ◁ The second is tied to part of the first: The Acting Superintendent is currently assuming the responsibilities of both the superintendent and her prior position as Associate Superintendent for Elementary Curriculum and Instruction. In addition, the District does not have a permanent Assistant Superintendent for Business and, until recently, did not have an experienced and qualified head of facilities. All districts and all boards of education need an effective and cohesive leadership team; a district working to overcome the challenges that Hempstead has historically faced needs such a team even more.
- ◁ The third is tied to both of the previous concerns: For the benefit of its students and to gain greater community support, the Board and District leadership need to be extraordinarily clear about their highest priorities and lay out a clear path forward regarding what will happen and when so that the community may benchmark the District's progress and give input and support. In this regard, I believe that your new

request for a re-assessment of priorities and a revised plan of action to address them within 45 days of my reappointment for a second year is both appropriate and helpful.

- ◁ The fourth is to shift attention to instructional improvement: The District has made a major long-term commitment to the implementation of the IB Primary and Middle Years programs. This is exciting as well as promising. However, implementing these programs needs constant attention, support, and monitoring on the part of the Board as well as the District leadership. This attention must be visible month after month. It should be driven by data and by actual steps rather than promises or plans for the future. This is about implementation. Hempstead's Board and District leadership need to show the community and the staff that "students first" applies first and foremost to instruction. With this area above all, the emphasis must be on implementation of plans. Plans without action change nothing for students.

Some of the most troubling issues facing the District are regarding budget and fiscal operations. My initial assessment was very negative, and I reiterated the severity of the District's problems in this area in both my second and third quarter reports.

Considerable progress was made during the fourth quarter. Some of the progress has been noted above, but parts are worth reiterating.

Rhodes School tear-down and replacement is well underway

Student Achievement on Grades 3-8 State Assessments²

LEVEL 3 & 4 %	LEVEL 1 %
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SCHOOL

complaints have been resolved. In addition, there are five additional inclusion classes in 2018-19.

One area that will see significant improvement in 2018-19 as compared with the current and prior years is Response to Intervention services. Staffing was added in the 2018-19 budget. The shortfall in this area in previous years put extra pressure on both regular classroom teachers and special education.

The District continues to implement the English Language Learner (ELL) Corrective Action Plan imposed by the State. Significant progress is being made, but given the challenges faced by ELL students in the District, this is an area of very significant need. Several examples:

- The Seal of Bi-Literacy for High School students was implemented
- A Newcomers after-school program was created
- Additional dual language classes were implemented for 2018-19, along with a year-long professional program in dual language

As noted by superintendents across the State, the recruitment of bilingual staff away from Hempstead has become a significant problem due to the shortage in the number of appropriately trained staff. Hempstead lost several bilingual teachers just before the start of the new school year. This may continue to be a problem for the foreseeable future.

A NYSED audit of Hempstead's food services program this spring revealed a number of serious issues of non-compliance that had not been a problem in a review three years earlier. Why the District had drifted into non-compliance in the intervening years is unclear, and no one else in the District had been aware of the problems. Both the Food Service administrator who was in charge of the program for the past several years and the Assistant Superintendent for Business who oversaw this

Nassau BOCES worked constructively with the District and NYSED to address certain enrollment and achievement software problems, but the District needs to resolve these permanently.

There were times this year when I despaired whether the District could, in fact, turn itself around. It was clear from the beginning of my appointment that there was the capacity to realize change and that, despite the District's history, there was a surprising, and very encouraging, level of optimism that the District could improve. Disputes between adults and the resulting diversion of time, energy, resources, and attention away from improving the District for the benefit of students presented a major obstacle. Many of the effects of those previous obstacles are still present.

In the third quarter report I noted the progress that was being made. I am pleased that the progress has continued in the fourth quarter. The long-term challenge is to ensure that the pace of progress is sustained and that the changes are permanent and lasting.