

Egg Harbor City School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Egg Harbor City School District is based on the New Jersey Department of Education's (Department) monitoring of the district that took place in the summer 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 September 11, 2008. A summary of the Department's observations, conclusions and recommendations is set forth below.

Background

The Egg Harbor City School District, located in Atlantic County, educates children in preschool through grade 8, while students in grades 9-12 are part of the Greater Egg Harbor Regional School District. The district has two schools, the Charles L. Spragg Elementary School, serving preschool through fourth grades and the Fanny D. Rittenberg Middle School, serving grades five through eight. The total K-8 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 455,² and 71.42% of the students in the district are considered to be "at-risk" (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 district enrollment has declined by 21.69% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group (DFG) A. A detailed description of the enrollment, district wealth measures and state aid calculations for the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years are detailed below and are contained in the District State Aid Profiles attached.

QSAC Monitoring

In the summer of 2007, the Department monitored the Egg Harbor City School District 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. Egg Harbor City scored over 80% in all five areas: Instruction and Program (92%), Fiscal Management (94%), 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.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on 2005-2006 assessment results, Egg Harbor City met the definition of district

¹ The DOE site visit team consisted of Willa Spicer, Deputy Commissioner, Rochelle Hendricks, Assistant Commissioner, Gerald Vernotica, Assistant Commissioner, Donna Arons, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, Joan Saylor, Director, Tom Dowd, Executive County Superintendent, and Charles Mueller, Executive County Business Administrator.

² This is the enrollment count used for the calculation of state aid. Students in grades 9-12 are included in the resident enrollment of the regional district.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population³ in language arts literacy and mathematics. The district also showed an increase over the prior year of at least 5% in the proficiency rates for total student population in language arts literacy and mathematics.⁴ The NJQSAC monitoring also revealed that Egg Harbor City 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, Egg Harbor City 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, Egg Harbor City 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).

The QSAC monitoring also identified areas of needed improvement in Instruction and Program. Specifically, the district does not adequately assess the progress of each student in mastering the NJCCCS at least two times each year including content areas not included on statewide assessments (QSAC I&P DPR indicator A12). Although Egg Harbor City is not required pursuant to NJQSAC to submit an improvement plan, the district needs to focus attention on improving its assessment program, which will enable it to better analyze student needs and direct resources accordingly.

District Assessment Survey

In July 2008, the Egg Harbor City School District completed a comprehensive assessment survey designed by the Department to assist the district in identifying areas of unmet need in the district. Egg Harbor City described its needs as primarily stemming from two areas: the demographics of its student population with its relatively high concentration of at-risk, Hispanic and special education students, and the age and unsuitable condition of its facilities. In addition, the district noted that it is unable to afford full-time teachers in a number of content areas.

³ This calculation does not take into account whether the district meets AYP for each separate subgroup.

⁴ The summary data form provided to the district during the NJQSAC monitoring erroneously reported that the district achieved 95% proficiency in language arts literacy and mathematics, when the district actually received points for achieving a 5% increase in proficiency rates. This correction does not change the district's score on those indicators.

As indicated above, 71% of Egg Harbor City's student population is considered at-risk, meaning that the students are at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines, and 41% of the students are Hispanic. The district's special education classification rate is 19.5%, which compares to the state average classification rate of 14.69% used to calculate the SFRA's census-based funding. According to the district, the demographics of the student population have presented a number of challenges, including high mobility rates, increased special education needs and ESL services. The district also noted that parental involvement in education is limited and that it must make a number of referrals to social services agencies (Egg Harbor City School District Assessment Survey p. 10). According to the survey response, the district has begun to take steps to address the issues associated with this student population by expanding its public relations programs to actively engage the parents and community in the planning and implementation of the district's educational program. It also uses grant funding to offer parental workshops and before- and after-school student activities.

In addition, the district has identified language arts literacy as an area of concern and instituted a new Core Reading Program for all grades in the district. This program involves supplemental services during the day and after school. The district has also hired instructional coaches to provide professional development in areas such as ESL, basic skills and special education instruction in an inclusive setting.

Despite these efforts, the district indicated that it was seeking additional resources to address the issues facing its at-risk and Hispanic population. Specifically, the district identified the following as additional resources that it required: an additional special education teacher in each building, an additional ESL teacher, an additional Basic Skills teacher and Reading Specialist at each school, a full-time in-school suspension teacher at the middle school and an additional social worker. The district also seeks funding to offer enhanced parental support services and contracted services through outside agencies in the areas of social work and behavioral therapy. The Department notes that the special needs of at-risk and limited English proficient students were specifically addressed during the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, are incorporated into the School Funding Reform Act's (SFRA) determination of additional weights for such students in determining funding for the district.

Egg Harbor City stated in its survey response that it currently had a full-day preschool program for four-year olds, and that it was planning to offer full-day preschool for all three- and four-year-olds beginning in 2009-2010. Under the SFRA, the district is classified as a universal district, which means that it must provide preschool to all eligible three and four year-olds within five years. The district believes that finding highly qualified preschool teachers and sufficient space to house the program will be challenges.

With respect to its elementary and middle schools, the district reported that it had a curriculum that was fully aligned to the NJCCCS, and that all of its teachers are Highly Qualified as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. It further stated that all of

the district's textbooks, instructional materials and technology are aligned to the curriculum.

Regarding the visual and performing arts, the Egg Harbor City stated that its use of part-time art and music teachers prevents it from fully implementing its arts curriculum in all grade levels and school buildings. There is a classroom dedicated to the visual arts in each school building, but there is no room dedicated to music in the middle school. At both schools, performing arts instruction is embedded within the music and physical education curricula. There is no room dedicated to performing arts in either building.

In its survey response, the district also stated that there is no library at the middle school and only a small library with an aide in the elementary school. The district cited a need for additional library space, as well as two certified library/media specialists, one for each school, as well as additional resources for the libraries.

The district stated that world languages are taught in every grade through a video program, and the district would like to be able to hire a world languages teacher. Egg Harbor City stated that it provides gifted and talented services in all grades, but that it lacks funds to employ a full-time gifted and talented teacher as well as a music and art teacher in both buildings to address students gifted in music and/or art. The district does not have an alternative education program and indicated that, as addressed in individual student IEPs, where behavior and health needs of students determined to be at risk of school failure dictate, or where removal is otherwise mandated, the children are referred for out-of-district placement. The district's suspension rate is 11%.

In the survey, the Egg Harbor City reported a special education classification rate of 19.5%, of which 6% are referred for out-of-district placements. The district does not have a backlog in conducting required activities for students referred to the child study team or students with IEPs and all IEPs are implemented as written. The district stated that it would like to hire additional special education teachers for inclusion purposes.

With respect to its facilities needs, the district indicated in the survey that it believed it does not have adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS. In particular, it stated that it needs six additional classrooms in each school. It also noted that the middle school lacks an adequate science lab, language and career labs, library, music room and cafeteria. The middle school is not in compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and lacks adequate space to meet the health needs of the students and maintain confidentiality of care. The district also noted that the building has inefficient heating/electrical/plumbing systems. Finally, the district expressed concern that it lacks sufficient classroom space to serve its eligible universe of 3- and 4-year-olds in-district when the new preschool program under the SFRA is fully implemented.

The district reported that it has embedded technology into the learning experience in all curricular areas and that it has assigned a technology coordinator to be specifically responsible for supporting skill development and technology infusion into the curriculum

for staff and students. It further stated that all of the district's school buildings have the equipment, connectivity and technical support necessary to provide e-learning opportunities in all learning environments. It noted that it does not have available space to equip classrooms with appropriate technology, especially in the middle school, where the electrical capacity is insufficient.

Site Visit

On September 11, 2008, members of a team of Department personnel traveled to the Egg Harbor City Administration Building and met with the district's superintendent, principals of the two schools and various other administrators. A follow-up interview was conducted with the superintendent. During the course of these conversations, the team from the district discussed Egg Harbor City's goals and its strategies to achieve those goals, as well as the challenges still facing the district.

The Egg Harbor City School District is a very small district that is doing an admirable job analyzing the needs of its student population and developing strategies to address those needs and improve student performance. The district has a curriculum fully aligned with the NJCCCS, and that curriculum is implemented in all of the district's classrooms. According to the superintendent, the district began using the Everyday Math and Connected Math programs five or six years ago, and since then has seen fairly consistent gains in mathematics performance, at least in the elementary grades. The district is currently focusing its efforts on language arts, which presents more of a challenge, given the large percentage of students who do not speak English at home. Egg Harbor City recently implemented new K-6 and 7-8 language arts programs, which present opportunities for addressing individual student needs. The superintendent reports that the district is already seeing benefits from the programs, in that the students are more proficient in language arts literacy, and the teachers feel that they are effective. In the 2008 State assessments, 71% of the eighth graders passed the language arts test while 57% of the fourth graders were deemed proficient.⁵ In mathematics, 69% of the fourth graders and 41% of the eighth graders passed the 2008 assessments. Based on the 2008 assessment results, both district schools achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).⁶

The Egg Harbor City district generally has three classes per grade. The average class size in the elementary school is around 16 and the average for the middle school is 15. The Department notes that the staffing ratios identified as part of the development of the SFRA are 18:1 in elementary school and 20:1 in middle and high school. The district is making a strong effort to track its students' progress from preschool through high school (the district sends its high school students to Absegami High School, in the Greater Egg Harbor Regional School District), and to ensure that key transitions—between elementary/middle school and middle school/high school—occur smoothly. As

⁵ The district's proficiency rates on the State assessments reflect a certain degree of fluctuation from year to year, which may be due, in part, to the small number of students tested.

⁶ The middle school was in Schools in Need of Improvement (SINI) "hold" status, which means that if the school makes AYP based on the 2009 assessments, it will no longer be considered in SINI status. The elementary school is not in SINI status.

a result of these efforts, and the articulation of the district's curriculum with the regional high school district's curriculum, the superintendent reports that the dropout rate of Egg Harbor City high school students has dropped dramatically.

The district received an 11.48% increase in State aid under the SFRA in 2008-09, amounting to \$536,206. It used this increase in aid to address what it felt were its most critical needs. It upgraded the art and music teachers in the middle school to full-time, and hired a speech language therapist, a computer technology teacher and a groundskeeper. The district was also able to keep its total tax levy flat while decreasing its tax rate due to an increase in ratables. The district transferred \$150,000 to capital outlay reserve rather than having these funds lapse to excess surplus at the end of the 2007-08 school year. According to the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) for the year ending June 30, 2008, the district had \$281,582 in excess surplus designated for the subsequent year budget.

The Egg Harbor School District also receives grant funding and federal funding that it has used to hire coaches. There are currently three coaches at the elementary school (one for language arts literacy, one for mathematics and one for special education) and two coaches at the middle school (one for language arts and one for mathematics who also teaches one class). The superintendent expressed his concern that the grants funding these positions are time limited and therefore might not be available in the future. He also indicated that his top priorities, should additional funding become available, were library/media specialists, expansion of preschool, an additional basic skills teacher, a middle school special education teacher and a world languages teacher. The Department notes that many of these positions 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.

Facilities

During the site visit, the district personnel outlined their proposals for several large construction projects to address the deficiencies that the district had delineated in its response to the survey. The district received State funding for these projects through the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, P.L. 2008, c.39 (EFCFA). The first project includes a renovation/addition to the elementary school, which will include the addition of three classrooms for preschool and an expanded library. This project is under construction and scheduled to open in September 2009. The other project is a replacement building for the middle school, which should be completed in September 2010. After the construction is completed, the schools will be reconfigured so that the elementary school will serve students in preschool through grade 3 and the middle school will serve grades 4-8. The State share of the elementary school project is \$518,665 of the total cost of \$2,612,200, and the State share of the middle school project is \$5,733,840 of the total cost of \$24,283,280.

School Funding Reform Act

The Egg Harbor City School District received an 11% (\$536,206) increase 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-8 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649⁷. The district's enrollment of middle school students (defined as grades 6-8) are then multiplied by the additional weight of 1.04. The district's adequacy budget also includes an additional weight of .57 for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$1,783,077 in FY08-09 and \$1,705,851 in FY09-10.⁸ The district's State equalization aid is then calculated by determining the difference between its adequacy budget and the district's local fair share (its ability to tax). For FY08-09, the district's local fair share was \$1,964,663, which is based on its district wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, its per pupil property wealth was \$436,110 and its per pupil income was \$91,138. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$2,031,518, and its per pupil property wealth is \$460,169 and its per pupil income is \$104,264. For both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy.⁹

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 general for 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 Egg Harbor City is a DFG A, 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, Egg Harbor will be receiving federal funds to support students with special needs (at-risk and special education) through the 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. The district is to be

⁷ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

⁸ 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.

⁹ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$1,902,167 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$1,964,663 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$1,902,167 compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$2,031,518.

commended for the ways in which it has thoughtfully analyzed its problems, developed strategies to address them, and boosted its students' achievement.

Programmatically, the district began by ensuring that it has an up-to-date curriculum, aligned with the NJCCCS, that is being taught in the classrooms. The district has identified language arts literacy as a major issue facing its student population given the large proportion of at-risk and bilingual students, and it has instituted a new reading program and focused professional development activities in this area. In this regard, the district benefited from the State aid funding changes brought about by the SFRA.

In addition, the district receives federal grant funding that it has effectively targeted for professional development and the hiring of literacy and math coaches. The district is seeing the benefits of all of these programs in improved proficiency rates on the State assessments and expects to continue to see improvements as measured by success in high school and beyond.

With respect to its facilities, the district has developed two major construction projects that are underway and should be completed by September 2009 (elementary school) and September 2010 (middle school). This new construction should resolve the facility issues that Egg Harbor City perceives as most critical.

In analyzing the issues facing Egg Harbor City, it is important to recognize that the district faces many increased challenges due to its small size. Many of the positions the district has identified as priority needs are incorporated in the calculation of the SFRA per pupil base, LEP and/or at-risk amounts. The SFRA specifically provides for significant additional resources for districts like Egg Harbor City that have very high percentages of at-risk students; however, the statute was not designed to support the delivery of educational services in school districts this small. To the contrary, the Legislature deliberately avoided creating a financial reward for small districts by basing SFRA funding on the resources needed to provide educational services in an efficient manner. A district, such as Egg Harbor City, educating fewer than 500 K-8 students simply cannot realize the economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. Smaller districts cannot offer diversity in programming options since they lack sufficient students to maintain reasonable class sizes for some types of offerings. Thus, while the district may like to hire a full-time gifted and talented teacher, this does not appear feasible nor cost efficient at this time, given the small number of students that would likely participate in the program. Moreover, small districts like Egg Harbor City often must rely on part-time staff or staff serving multiple roles. As part of his responsibilities under the CORE legislation, P.L. 2007, c.63, the Executive County Superintendent is charged with recommending to the Commissioner a school district consolidation plan to eliminate all districts, other than county-based districts and preschool or kindergarten through grade 12 districts in the county, through the establishment or enlargement of regional school districts. As part of this effort, the Department will be commissioning regionalization studies. Due to the constraints facing Egg Harbor City because of its extremely small size, this district is being treated as a high priority and will be placed in

the first group of districts for regionalization studies, which will begin in September 2009 and conclude by December 31, 2009.

During the site visit, district administrators discussed their plans and progress in including special education students in the general education classrooms and using differentiated instruction. The Department's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) offers professional development opportunities in differentiated instruction for the special education population through its Learning Resource Center (LRC) in the Southern Region. The Commissioner directs OSEP to coordinate such training with Egg Harbor City. In addition, the Department also 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 training on this topic, if Egg Harbor City so desires. Finally, the Department has made arrangements with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Lab (REL) to work with Egg Harbor City 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 to make arrangements to provide this assistance.

With regard to Egg Harbor City's other staffing issues, the Department notes that the district is taxing slightly under its local fair share. According to the superintendent, the district's 2009-10 budget, approved by the voters, includes a 4% levy increase that will enable the district to hire additional personnel.

The NJQSAC monitoring identified a need for Egg Harbor City to improve its assessment practices in order to improve student performance. The State provides a computer based assessment system, called *Learnia*, free to districts. This system provides teachers with an important tool to manage instruction and adjust it to the needs of every student. The system also provides training on classroom assessment processes as well as how to use the new software. Egg Harbor City should take advantage of this free service to improve instruction.

In sum, the Egg Harbor City School District is a district facing numerous challenges given the significant number of at-risk and LEP students. These challenges are significantly exacerbated by the district's small size. The SFRA along with other complementary statutes such as CORE and EFCFA can provide the necessary tools to address those challenges but the regionalization study is a critical step in doing so.