

Ocean Township School District Needs Assessment

This needs assessment for the Ocean 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 2008 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 Ocean Township School District, located in Ocean County, educates children in preschool through grade 6. The district educates about 500 students in kindergarten through grade 6, and sends students in grades 7-12 to Southern Regional High School through a send-receive relationship. Ocean has two schools – the Frederic A. Priff Elementary School, serving children in preschool through grade 3, and the Waretown Elementary School, serving grades 4-6. The total K-12 enrollment of the district, pursuant to the 2008 Application for State School Aid (ASSA) is 980.5², and 25.08% of the students in the district are considered to be “at-risk” (at or below 185% of the federal poverty guidelines). Total K-12 enrollment of the district has declined by 15.11% since 2000. The district is classified in District Factor Group CD. 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 2008, the Department monitored Ocean 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. Ocean Township School District scored over 80% in all five areas: Instruction and Program (87%), Fiscal Management (95%), Operations Management (94%), Personnel (100%) and Governance (100%). As a result of these scores, the district was designated a High Performing district pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:30-4.1(d). The district previously received a copy of its NJQSAC decision.

With respect to Instruction and Program, the NJQSAC monitoring revealed that, based on the 2007-2008 assessment results, Ocean Township 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, Joan Saylor, Director, Bruce Greenfield, Executive County Superintendent, and Mike Foster, Executive County Business Administrator.

² The resident enrollment is the count used for the calculation of state aid and includes students in grades 7-12 who are educated in Southern Regional through a tuition arrangement.

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for its total population in language arts literacy and mathematics. In addition, the district had no schools in “Schools in Need of Improvement” (SINI) status pursuant to *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 6301, *et seq.*, and at least 70% of the district’s total student population was proficient on the most recent science assessments.

The NJQSAC monitoring also revealed that Ocean 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, Ocean 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, Ocean 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 Ocean 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 most pressing need as the disparity between the high achieving students and those that are struggling academically, and finding a way to close the achievement gap between those two groups. The district is addressing this challenge through before- and after-school programs, using programs such as Fast ForWord and Study Island, and increasing contact time between teachers and the neediest students. The district also expressed concerns about managing the tuition and transportation costs that it incurs in sending its students to Southern Regional School District.

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 fully implemented visual arts and music curricula, with a dedicated room for each in each school building and that performing arts classes take place through physical education and music classes. The district cited no unmet needs in its visual and

performing arts program. The district has also fully implemented a world languages curriculum that is taught in person by a certified staff member. Ocean Township 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 possible need for a part-time librarian as one media specialist is shared by the two schools in the district.

According to the district, it provides gifted and talented services in all grades and has no unmet needs in that area. It indicated that it has a very low suspension rate and that it offers before- and after-school programs and special education summer school.

Ocean Township reported an 18% special education classification rate, which is higher than the state average classification rate of 14.69% used in the calculation of the School Funding Reform Act's (SFRA) census-based special education funding. Ocean 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 it provides "an excellent special education program" in the district and indicated that it has no unmet needs.

The district currently operates a half-day preschool program for 4-year-olds. It is a targeted 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, Ocean Township indicated in the survey that it currently has adequate space to deliver the NJCCCS, but if enrollment increased by more than 200 students, it would need additional classroom space. The district stated that the number of small group instruction rooms in the Waretown Elementary School is limited. The district also noted that the multipurpose rooms are used as cafeterias, and that a referendum in 2006 that would have provided more gymnasium and auditorium space was defeated. The district does not use trailers to provide instruction or services to students and cited no health or safety concerns regarding the district's facilities.

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. The district stated that it would like to include more interactive whiteboards in the classrooms.

Finally, regarding the district's staffing, in the survey Ocean 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 a literacy coach for the primary grades and a liaison for transportation with Southern Regional. The district indicated that it had no challenges attracting qualified staff to the district.

Site Visit

On December 12, 2008, a team of Department personnel traveled to Ocean Township and met with the district superintendent and administrative staff. During the course of the meeting, the superintendent, business administrator and other district staff provided the department team with an overview of district initiatives, improvements that have been made since the district completed its Bacon School District Assessment Survey in 2008 and challenges still facing the district.

The Ocean Township superintendent portrayed the district as one that has a talented administrative team that has added needed stability to the district. Administrative continuity has resulted in improved programs and offerings. The district is proud of its “strong new math program,” special education programs, extensive after-school offerings, and its Child Study Team and intervention model (Intervention and Referral Services) which has helped identify developmental needs. Administrators characterize the district as having a diverse community with a supportive senior population. Senior housing has generated rates and provided volunteerism in the school community. The district team highlighted “very good support programs which is supported by a Reading Recovery Teacher, Basic Skills Instruction, the Fast ForWord Program and dedicated teachers.” The district has had a long time send-receive relationship with Southern Regional School District for grades 7-12 and recognizes that tuition and transportation costs have presented budgetary challenges.

In the most recent State assessments (2008) the fourth graders demonstrated an 80% proficiency rate in language arts and an 85% proficiency rate in mathematics. The Department notes that the school has met Adequate Yearly Progress pursuant to proficiency targets and performance rates required by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. The Executive County Superintendent characterized the district as a “solid, well run district which has made good progress.”

According to the 2007-08 New Jersey School Report Card, class sizes in the district average 16.2 at the Waretown Elementary School and 18.3 at Frederic A. Priff School. 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.

Facility Needs

At the time of the site visit the district administration identified minimal facility needs, which included renovations to both facilities and additional small group instruction rooms. The district passed a referendum in 2007 for renovations that included repaving and resurfacing the parking lot and sidewalks, boilers and controls upgrades, and other improvements. The total estimated cost for the approved project is \$4,349,818 and the district is receiving debt service aid in the amount of \$2,162,239. A second referendum in the same year failed. This would have addressed converting office space into small group instructional space and the addition of a new gymnasium. It should be

noted that the district does not use temporary trailers for instructional use. Trailers house the administrative offices.

School Funding Reform Act

The Ocean Township School District received a 2% (\$148,237) 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-12 enrollment by the base amount of \$9,649.³ The district's enrollment of middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12) students are then multiplied by the additional weights of 1.04 and 1.17, respectively. The district's adequacy budget includes additional weights of about .47 (FY08-09) and .48 (09-10) for each at-risk child, which amounted to a total of \$963,050 in FY08-09, and \$1,127,600 for FY09-10.⁴ 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 \$10,747,817, which is based on its district-wide property wealth and total income – for comparison, per pupil property wealth was \$1,407,029 and per pupil income was \$191,675. For FY09-10, the district's local fair share is \$11,008,323, as its per pupil property wealth is \$1,459,549 and its per pupil income is \$198,952.⁵ For both years, the district's local fair share exceeded its prior year tax levy,⁶ and its spending exceeded its adequacy budget.

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 increased access to preschool education, requiring districts to offer preschool programs to 90% of eligible students within five years. As the Ocean Township School District is a DFG CD with less than 40% of its students deemed at-risk, eligible students are defined as all at-risk 3- and 4-year-olds living in the district.

In addition to these State funds, Ocean Township 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).

³ This amount increased to \$9,971 for FY 2010.

⁴ 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.

⁵ In FY08-09, the district's per pupil property wealth and per pupil income exceeded the State averages. In FY09-10, the district's per pupil property wealth exceeded the State average.

⁶ The district's 07-08 tax levy was \$8,654,519 compared with its 08-09 local fair share of \$10,747,817 and its 08-09 tax levy was \$9,000,700, compared with its 09-10 local fair share of \$11,008,323.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Department commends the district, its board and administration for the attention given to providing a thorough and efficient education to the children of Ocean Township. The district has improved test scores and addressed numerous financial challenges over the last few years with positive results. The district received a two percent increase in state aid due to the new funding formula. The additional state aid was used to hire staff and assist the district with fiscal stability. According to the FY 08-09 district profile, both the property wealth and income level of the district, relative to the state average, have increased over the past 7 years by 66 percent and 38 percent respectively. In FY07-08 the district local fair share was \$10,747,817 with a tax levy of \$8,654,519. The Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports (CAFRs) demonstrate the district generated a significant excess surplus in FY07 and FY08 (\$1,013,814 and \$1,204,728, respectively) which must be budgeted in the subsequent year. The FY08 CAFR shows that the district placed \$181,500 in capital and \$255,500 into maintenance reserve. The FY08-09 budget contained an expansion for the co-curricular programs and media services as the district decided to increase time for its part-time media specialist. The district also decided to consolidate the superintendent position with a principal position due to the retirement of the superintendent. This has reduced administrative costs and saved the district salary and benefits. The district is still concerned with tuition adjustments with Southern Regional.

Ocean stated in its survey response that one of the greatest challenges facing the district was to close the achievement gap between high and low-performing students. One proven method of achieving this goal is to provide enriching educational experiences to young children through high quality preschool programs. Pursuant to the SFRA, Ocean is required to implement a full-day quality preschool program for its 3 and 4 year-old at-risk students. The district is planning to initiate this expansion, and once implemented, the district should begin to see improvement in student achievement. Another strategy for improving performance of struggling students is through the use of a reading coach to work with challenged readers. The district has indicated a desire to hire such a coach, and based on the district's budgetary information, it appears that it has sufficient funds for such a position. Moreover, this position was identified as a necessary educational resource in the process of developing the SFRA and, therefore, is incorporated into the SFRA's determination of per-pupil costs.

With respect to facilities, the district identified the need for renovations and small group instruction space due to a failed referendum in 2007. The district is eligible to apply 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. It is contemplating this option. 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..

In analyzing the issues facing Ocean Township, it is important to recognize that the district faces many difficulties due to its small size. A district that educates only 500 students cannot realize economies of scale that its larger counterparts can achieve. In addition, smaller districts like Ocean cannot offer the diversity in programming options that larger districts can offer. 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 Ocean Township 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.

The district indicated that it had concerns regarding its ability to meet the rising tuition and transportation costs incurred in sending its students to Southern Regional. The Department notes that the increase in Ocean's tax levy for FY 2009-10 was less than the 4% permitted by law, despite the fact that the district's current levy is 20% below its local fair share and its equalized tax rate is 20% below the state average. In future years, the district should consider a greater increase in the tax levy, if needed, to meet its resource needs.

Regarding Ocean's issue with rising transportation costs, the Department notes that the Executive County Superintendents are required to conduct transportation efficiency studies for their counties and to report the results of those studies to the Commissioner and Legislature. N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-2.6. The Executive County Superintendents are in the process of finalizing these reports, which will be used to promote coordination and regionalization of pupil transportation services in the counties, which should result in cost-savings for the districts involved.

In sum, the Department finds that the SFRA and other complementary legislation such as CORE provide the necessary resources for Ocean Township to continue to improve the educational opportunities available to its students. Like many districts in the State, Ocean can identify areas where improvements can be made in the delivery of educational services. The Department will work with the district, as described above, in that endeavor.