

The End of State Occupation or The Return to Local Control or Year 27 of the 5-Year Plan

By Chris Neidenberg

Just over a year after the now former state Commissioner of Education David Hespe announced his commitment to returning full local control to the Jersey City Public School District, neither the state, nor district, can say for sure precisely when that will happen.

For at least as of early October 2016, a significant component of the transition plan that perhaps has the greatest impact on the some 2,700 teachers on the ground delivering education to the system's roughly 30,000 children - "Instruction and Program (I&P)" - remains in the hands of Trenton bureaucrats.

This, almost eight months after a local working group submitted a plan establishing a framework for retaking I&P which the state approved.

In fact, the current I&P stalemate has caused the district to be almost four months overdue in regaining the area and complete local autonomy - based on the initial goal Hespe laid out in a press release issued Oct. 7, 2015.

"Commissioner Hespe also established a working group that is tasked with establishing a plan for returning the final area of instruction and program that would provide full local control to the district by as early as the end of the (2015-16) school year," his release stated at the time.

Hespe, ending his second stint heading the department, resigned in late September to pursue other opportunities. He has since been replaced by Acting Commissioner Kimberley Harrington.

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles told JCEA.org in an email the district must fulfill additional requirements before it can actually take control of the state-approved I&P plan.

"It is a process by which we demonstrate readiness for control of instruction and programs," she wrote, apparently unconvinced such "readiness" has been demonstrated.

Lyles offered no ideal time frame for when the district's reacquiring control of I&P will finally be achieved.

Neither would she address why the district has been so late in meeting Hespe's earlier ideal time frame (by July 1, 2016) - given the state approved the local working group's I&P plan almost eight months earlier.

The area of Instruction and Program is one of five reviewed for any district under the state's Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC). It scores each area following a periodic comprehensive evaluation, done with the help of the district's county executive superintendent. Four other components - Personnel, Operations, Fiscal Management and Governance - are now controlled by the district.

The process is particularly critical for major urban school systems subject to state intervention, such as Jersey City. It gauges when areas of state control might be returned to local authorities so they can start making their own decisions.

A year after Hespe said it was conceivable the district could have retaken control of I&P by last July, the return process for I&P significantly failed to meet that goal.

And a check of at least one promotional video, reporting on the district's opening of the new Maya Angelou School, shows it presenting inaccurate information on the district's current status.

In an introduction employing fast-moving graphics, titled, "Jersey City by The Numbers," it includes the words, "Local Control After 27 years."

In an email to JCEA.org, DOE Press Secretary David Saenz would only state, "Jersey City has local control in four of the five areas, with the remaining area under state control of instruction and programming. I have nothing else to add."

He was responding to Hespe's suggestion, in the press release issued just over a year ago, that the district might have been able to retake control of I&P as early as last July.

Saenz further wrote in an email the state approved the working group's District Improvement Plan last Feb. 26, just over four months before Hespe's ideal time frame - for restoring full local control in the district - would have kicked in.

He explained the plan's "focus is on improving I&P," and only establishes "a foundation for return of I&P to local control."

Upon being emailed specific questions sent her relative to what the district must do to end state control in I&P, Dr. Maryanne Dickar, Lyles chief of staff/spokeswoman, referred JCEA.org to the "Public Board Docs" section of the district's website (www.jcea.org).

The search turned up no documents relative to a potential I&P turnover. Yet Hespe's May 12 letter to Board President Vidya Gangadin, dealing with return of two other QSAC areas (Operations and Personnel), suggests that, almost eight months after the state approved the district's I&P plan, a "transition" period must first take effect.

In the letter, Hespe explained the period begins upon the board's approving a measure triggering even further state oversight/monitoring.

"The attached plan is to be presented at a public meeting of the Jersey City Board of Education and officially noted in the minutes," Hespe wrote. "The board is then required to immediately implement the plans as provided therein."

He continued, "The department will continue to monitor the district to ensure the progress is sustained and that the board is appropriately adhering to and implementing the plan with the assistance of the commissioner's designee."

In reacting to the developments, a pessimistic Ron Greco, JCEA president, said it seems the last vestige of state control, I&P, will remain in place for another 15 months - after Hespe once raised the possibility it could have been returned to the district's central office three months ago.

"When the governor changes, state control will go away," he predicted, referring to Republican Gov. Chris Christie. "I do not believe Mr. Christie will relinquish control of Jersey City, or for that matter, control of Newark, Camden or Paterson. Too much money is being made by politically-connected law firms and consulting agencies designated by the state."

At least two officials having clout in the district, Board Member Ellen Simon, and state troubleshooter Cathy Coyle, who works with New Jersey's local Regional Achievement Center in trying to significantly improve academic performance at the city's "Focus" and "Priority" Schools, have been quoted in published reports as saying returning I&P to local control is not the only issue hampering state withdrawal.

In articles published by the Jersey City Reporter and Hudson County View, they have been quoted as citing the board's need to implement a strong anti-nepotism policy - preventing the appointment of friends and relatives to district jobs - as a major factor complicating the state's implementing full local control.

Coyle was quoted during a June special board meeting, specifically dealing with ending any state control.

In fact, Simon has been quoted as saying the state education department earlier warned in a letter to the district that it could rescind its earlier commitment toward ending control - if the board fails to approve an acceptable hiring policy.

But, according to QSAC, a district's adopting policies on such hiring practices has nothing to do with meeting the I&P component.

A QSAC checklist requires each district to provide a "Statement of Assurance" showing compliance in five areas: providing periodic reports to the school board and the public regarding student performance on state standardized tests, properly communicating district graduation requirements to all affected stakeholders, including students, implementing new or revised board-approved curricula which properly aligns with the New Jersey Common Core Curriculum Standards (the I&P area most significantly impacting teachers), properly aligning career and technical education programs with the State Plan for Career and Technical Education, and, for districts receiving pre-school aid, having a pre-school program approved by the DOE's Division of Early Childhood Education.

Simon did not return an email seeking comment.

Saenz did not address the hiring policy issue in his emails. But Saenz and Lyles did say return of I&P is the only matter still at issue with Trenton.

"I do not know which published reports you are specifically referencing and even if I did I would not comment on their comments," Lyles wrote. "If you want a copy of any letter referenced by Ms. Simon, I suggest you ask her for it."

There are 13 members of Jersey City's District Working Group. In his Oct. 7, 2015 press release, Hesse said it would be tasked with exploring "the return of local control in the remaining area under state control, instruction and programming," and with "creating a plan to address the area of instruction and programming."

Minna Batros - Liberty High School student

Hope Blackburn - attorney representing the district's school administration

Vivian Brady - chief of staff, for Mayor Steven Fulop

Board of Education Secretary/Business Administrator Luigi Campana

Board President Vidya Gangadin

Sakeema James - chief of staff for State Sen. Sandra Cunningham (D-31)

City Council President Rolando Lavarro

Thomas Macagnano - president of the Administrators and Supervisors Association of Jersey City

Alma Santana - community representative from the Juan Pablo Duarte Association

Tina Thorp - JCEA second vice president, designated by President Ron Greco

Steve Tully - assistant director, AFSCME Council 52

Celeste Williams - chief of talent for the school district

Edna Williams - Lincoln High School Parent Council president

Note: Greco said Thorp was never invited to sit in on any meetings during which the working group deliberated in providing the state an I&P plan, most important to the teachers, even though he designated her to serve as the association's representative to it. He said Thorp was not invited to any such meeting until after the board held a special meeting in June on ending state control - but long after the state approved the working group's I&P plan.