

July 19, 2023

Dear Governor Hochul, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Speaker Heastie:

We write to call your attention to an urgent situation in the East Ramapo Central School District in Rockland County, a district where 96 percent of the students are Black, Latino/a, or Asian, and 54 percent are English language learners who overwhelmingly are immigrants. **Every school building in the district has been found to be in failing condition by the state mandated Building Conditions Survey.**

Drinking and cooking water in all school buildings are contaminated with lead, frighteningly reminiscent of the environmental racism seen in Flint, Michigan. Much like Flint, the lead in the water at East Ramapo public schools was discovered seven years ago, yet it remains unaddressed. While drinking fountains and water for cooking are shut off, children as young as pre-k and kindergarten are using lead contaminated water to wash their hands in school bathrooms. The only protection the district is providing these young children from the potential brain damaging impacts of lead poisoning is posted warning signage. It is simply beyond belief that New York State is tolerating this outrageous public health hazard.

Turning off or blocking all drinking and cooking taps should have been a short-term bridge to addressing the underlying situation. But because of the long history of East Ramapo's board and local voting majority defunding public schools, no long-term solution has been possible.

In addition to lead contamination, the school buildings are full of conditions rated as unsatisfactory. The following received unsatisfactory ratings in some buildings:

- HVAC and ventilation systems, kitchen hoods, heating systems, and cooling and air conditioning systems;
- Electrical power distribution systems and emergency and standby power systems;
- Exterior and interior walls, including interior barrier walls and fire walls;
- Interior and exterior doors, windows, interior and exterior stairs, handicap accessibility ramps, and school elevators;
- Sidewalks, roadways, parking lots, and stormwater drainage systems;
- Ceilings, wood flooring, and carpeting;
- Athletic fields, play fields, playgrounds, and playground equipment;
- In addition, all district office and non-classroom buildings are rated as unsatisfactory.

These deplorable conditions have come to the public's attention, in no small part, as a result of efforts by NYSED-appointed Monitors, but the Monitors do not have the power to fix these or other major problems in the District. Because the District has been unable, or unwilling, to raise enough local revenue to address these environmental hazards, maintenance is deferred, costs rise, and children's health and safety are compromised. The state has an obligation to protect the children of East Ramapo public schools; it can no longer defer to local voters to allow children to be exposed to lead, and to be denied their right to a sound basic public education.

It is well-known that East Ramapo represents perhaps the most dramatic example of systemic racism in New York State's education system. While public school students are overwhelmingly students of color, a majority of voters are white and send their children to the more than 180 private schools in the district. Six of the past 8 district budgets have been defeated, and the total amount of local tax levy dollars has not increased since 2017, despite increases in student

enrollment, rising costs, and consistent support for budgets among public school families. The Monitors project that in a few years, East Ramapo will face a \$40 million annual deficit unless voters were to make an about-face and consistently support district budgets.

Bringing building conditions to a satisfactory rating will require a \$236 million investment. This estimate does not include work needed to address severe overcrowding in the high schools or the need to upgrade facilities to meet instructional needs and current educational standards for science labs, media centers, etc. Meanwhile Moody's credit rating agency has downgraded East Ramapo's credit rating due to "its history of very weak governance and lack of voter support of budget." Yet, while the students are being exposed to lead infested water, the district chooses to spend an astronomical \$60 million annually on transportation, one fourth of its total budget, by offering busing to all students no matter the distance. This exorbitant expense, which primarily benefits white private school students, takes \$9 million of funding out of public school programs annually, according to the NYSED Monitors (as well as costing the state \$22 million in excess transportation aid). Astoundingly, for a district that wildly overspends on transportation, public school parents report that their children are often not picked up or are crammed into overcrowded buses.

The poor building conditions contribute directly to inadequate educational opportunities in East Ramapo public schools. Four out of 11 elementary and middle schools are ranked by the state as among the lowest 5% percent of schools in the state in student performance. Outcomes in the high schools rank in the bottom 10% of districts in core subject performance, graduation rates, and chronic absenteeism.

This is an extraordinary situation, and an extraordinary response is necessary. We call on the state to take over the East Ramapo Central School District and to take immediate actions to remediate the lead in all school buildings before the new school year begins and ensure that students are provided with safe school environments that are conducive to learning.

We cannot allow any children to learn in such deplorable, unhealthy, environmentally racist conditions. East Ramapo's white majority rule over a community of color is more reminiscent of the Jim Crow South than what we expect in New York.

Sincerely,

Alliance for Quality Education
Citizen Action of NY
Citizens' Committee for Children of NY
Citizens United to Protect Our Neighborhoods (CUPON) – Hillcrest
Citizens United to Protect Our Neighborhoods (CUPON) – Ramapo
EarthJustice
Friends of Regent Judith Johnson
Health Lifeline of Nyack
Jews for Racial and Economic Justice
Las Mejores Huellas de Los Inmigrantes
New York Civil Liberties Union
NYC Coalition for Educational Justice
The NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools
Orangetown Democratic Committee Executive Committee
Power of Ten

Proyecto Faro
Ramapo Lenape Nation
The Redimodes
Rockland Coalition to End the New Jim Crow
Rockland Jews for Immigrant Justice
Rockland United
Rockland Working Families Party
Sisters of St. Dominic of Blauvelt, NY
Westchester Jewish Coalition for Immigration

CC:

Senator Shelley Mayer
Assemblymember Ken Zebrowski
Senator Bill Weber
Commissioner Betty Rosa