



*NYCLU staff statements
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DONNA LIEBERMAN

Welcome everyone, I am Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Thank you for joining the NYCLU today as we announce a federal voting rights lawsuit against the East Ramapo Central School District. The way the district is conducting its school board elections unjustly and unjustifiably dilutes the votes -- and the voices -- of black and Latino residents.

The consequences of this disenfranchisement are felt daily by parents and students in the district. The East Ramapo Central School District is a tale of two school systems, with a school board that serves only one.

More than 99 percent of the district's 27,000 private school students are white, while 96 percent of the district's 9,000 public school students are children of color. Over the last decade, the district's white majority community, which favors private school education, and has backed candidates who now control eight of the board's nine seats.

As a result, the board has severely slashed the district's public school budgets and diverted resources to private schools. Now, public schools that were once top performers have withered, shedding jobs, services, and resources.

Today, only 22 percent of students in grades 3-8 are proficient in English. Only 19 percent are proficient in math. Last year, Spring Valley High School and Ramapo High School had the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout rates of all public high schools in Rockland County.

To salvage the district's public schools, the public school community has sought representation on the school board. They have put candidate after

candidate forward, year after year. Yet, because of the way elections are run – with district-wide votes for every seat – they have not won a contested board seat since 2007.

Given these cuts and vote dilution, the school district has both disowned and disenfranchised communities of color. It has walled itself off from public accountability for the ways it is failing public school students.

This experience of polarized voting blocs and at-large voting is not limited to the East Ramapo school district, neither in New York State or the country. But it is a shockingly extreme instance of these problems.

Today you will hear from plaintiffs in our lawsuit, including parents of public school students, former board candidates, and racial justice advocates. The future they promised their children has dimmed. The voice they thought they could exercise as Americans has been muted. The institutions of democracy on which they rely have shut them out.

You will first hear from Perry Grossman, senior voting rights project attorney with the NYCLU; after that you will hear from public school parent Eric Goodwin, followed by Willie Trotman, president of the Spring Valley Branch of the NAACP; then district resident Dorothy Miller, and finally our own Lower Hudson Valley Chapter Director Shannon Wong.

PERRY GROSSMAN

My name is Perry Grossman and I am a senior staff attorney at the New York Civil Liberties Union.

Everyone deserves an equal opportunity to elect people who represent them. We are here today because the voting system used to elect school board members in the East Ramapo Central School District has disenfranchised black and Latino voters.

Today's lawsuit charges that the district's at-large voting scheme violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits voting practices that discriminate on the basis of race, color, or minority status.

To date, board members have been elected by all the voters of the school district, rather than individual geographic areas. This has allowed the district's white majority - which tends to vote as a political bloc favoring private education – to control eight out of nine seats on the board.

Communities of color, who tend to vote together in support of candidates favoring investment in public schools, have not seen their candidates of choice win a contested seat since 2007.

This case is an extreme example of a common problem facing racially diverse school districts nationwide. The toxic combination of at-large election systems and racially-polarized voting often prevents minority voters from holding school boards accountable for providing their children with quality public education. Thankfully, the Voting Rights Act provides a remedy to change a system that has alienated minority students, parents, and residents from the school district and also fostered deep resentment across the community.

Our suit asks the court to stop the district from holding further elections until a ward system is in place. We call for the district to be divided into nine single-member districts. A ward system would provide minority voters with the opportunity to elect officials who represent them and the interests of public school students and their families. Thank you.

SHANNON WONG

My name is Shannon Wong, the director of the New York Civil Liberties Union's Lower Hudson Valley Chapter.

I am glad to be here beside Dorothy and to stand with the other members of the East Ramapo School District who have been the victims of extreme cuts to their public school system for far too long. We have watched the schools go from good, to among the county's worst. East Ramapo's reputation is so damaged that this year the adjacent Ramapo Central School District changed its name to the Suffern Central School District to get distance from its troubled neighbor. National attention has turned to both the schools' decline and the contentiousness over the school board's actions.

Parents who send their children to public schools in the district cannot afford to be ignored any longer. Their votes and their voice matter. Black and Latino residents throughout the district need a meaningful opportunity to vote for the people they want to represent them – for the sake of the voters in the district and for the future of the district's public school children. Thank you.