State names three-member panel to study East Ramapo schools

ALBANY—The State Education Department has appointed a three-member team to study Rockland County’s troubled East Ramapo school district, a plan that some say is a stalling tactic.

The team will be headed by Dennis Walcott, who served as New York City schools chancellor under former mayor Michael Bloomberg. It will have four months to monitor the district’s operations and report back to the state and Board of Regents, according to a news release that accompanied the announcement. The team, however, will not have veto power over the school board.

“Dennis Walcott’s appointment and the district’s stated commitment to working in partnership with the State Education Department are crucial steps toward reversing the district’s disastrous decline and repairing the deep rifts in the community,” Regents chancellor Merryl Tisch said in a statement. “We must act now to make sure that the civil and educational rights of a community of overwhelmingly low-income minority children are not denied.”

East Ramapo schools have seen deep program and staffing cuts in recent years at the hands of a growing Orthodox Jewish population that gained control of the school board even though their children attend private yeshivas.

State leaders and advocacy groups have accused the board of making decisions that favor private school students at the expense of public school students. The dispute is complicated by the fact the public school population is made of low-income families, immigrants who do not speak English and students with disabilities.

“The Board of Regents and I recognize the seriousness of this situation, and I have made it one of my top priorities to ensure that the state Education Department acts swiftly to ensure that the educational rights of the district’s students are protected,” state education commissioner MaryEllen Elia said in a statement.

In addition to Walcott, other members of the team are Monica George-Fields, a learning and teaching expert adept at school turnaround, and John Sipple of Cornell University, who has a background in education policy and finance, according to a news release.

The team will monitor fiscal and operational management as well as educational programming and regularly report back to Elia.

Walcott said the team will not shy away from holding the district accountable to the community.

“Our goal is to help the district develop sustainable practices to ensure that East Ramapo is able to provide, and actually does provide, appropriate educational programs for all its students,” he said.
East Ramapo school board president Yehuda Weissmandl said the board is eager to work with the team and committed to cooperating with the state.

The district has attracted the scrutiny of a number of state agencies including the comptroller’s office. Last year, the Board of Regents appointed attorney Hank Greenberg to study the district and make recommendations for legislative action.

“This is another study,” David Bloomfield, a professor of education leadership at Brooklyn College and the City University of New York Graduate Center, said about the new team. “The monitor was quite clear about maleficence in the district and to delay the inevitable is an affront.”

Bloomfield said Greenberg’s findings and audits from the state comptroller’s office should be grounds for an intervention by the state to override the board.

“They are still just studying the problem where there have already been findings. It’s duplicative and raises questions about the sincerity of Chancellor Tisch in tackling this problem,” he said.

Andrew Mandel, an organizer of Strong East Ramapo, a community group that has pushed for state oversight, said he’s glad there’s some action taken, but it does feel like “another version of the same solution.”

“It feels like we’re marching in place,” he said, though he added he was hopeful the three monitors would yield more evidence so the state can take action.

At the end of this year’s legislative session, lawmakers raced to pass a bill to empower a state-appointed monitor to veto decisions of the East Ramapo board. The bill passed in the Assembly but the Republican-controlled Senate blocked it. As a result, the newly appointed monitors will not have the power to overrule board members. Lawmakers from both houses have pushed for the state Education Department to more aggressively use its enforcement powers.

Assemblyman Kenneth Zebrowski, a Democrat who represents part of the East Ramapo district, said in the release that even though he would prefer a monitor with the power to override the board, appointing the team is a “great step forward.”

Zebrowski said he will be requesting that the team have a consistent presence in the district and regular contact with the public.

“This oversight structure may not have all the powers we sought through our legislation, but it is certainly better than no oversight at all,” he said.

State Sen. David Carlucci, an Independent Democratic Conference member who represents the East Ramapo district, said the Walcott-lead team will be much more extensive than Greenberg’s report, with monitors working day-to-day on the ground with the school board, guiding them in the right direction.

 “[Walcott’s] expertise and knowledge and wisdom in the field will be a huge benefit,” he said.

If the board refuses to accept the guidance, the commissioner will then be able, under education law, to take authoritative action, he said.

Yossi Gestetner, community advocate and co-founder of the Orthodox Jewish Public Affairs Council, said he’s in favor of the monitoring of government bodies, but was concerned it’s not enough.
The state can do as many studies as it wants, but major change won’t occur unless the state looks tat the funding formula, he said. “The state should fix the disastrous state-funding formula which shortchanges East Ramapo annually by $25 million.”