

## New Jersey State Board of Education

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Dr. Michael Rush

## Lakewood Public Schools Testimony

Good afternoon, thank you for allowing me to address you today.

My name is Dr. Michael Rush and I have been a resident of Lakewood, NJ for 37 years. I am a retired school superintendent, a former Assistant Commissioner of Education, a former school board member in Lakewood, a teacher, a principal and a concerned citizen among other things.

I have several issues but I will only talk about 3 of them today. However, I'd like to tell you a true story that will assist in explaining some of my issues.

In 1985, I was elected to the Lakewood Board of Education with a total number of votes at around 850. I received the highest number of votes compared to my opponents. In fact, my platform was courtesy bussing and safety due to no sidewalks. In 1988, I ran for re-election. In March of that year, prior to the April election, I was asked to meet with a very influential Rabbi. During that meeting, I was asked, "how do you feel about bussing and special education in the district"? He then asked, "how would you handle these issues specifically for my community?" I explained that I have a Master's Degree in Special Education so I would handle all issues based on federal and state guidelines and what's best for children. I also explained, Aid in Lieu in terms of transporting non-public school children. Apparently, my answers were not what he expected. I was basically told that I would not get the support of his community. I lost the election by a large margin.

I did not get a single affirmative vote from the Orthodox community. I mentioned this story to inform you that the issues with busing and special education started in 1988 and here we are, 29 years later, with the same issues but much worse. The sadness is that this will continue unless we do things differently.

Issue # 1 - The non-renewal of the Lakewood Superintendent of Schools.

The Board of Education is responsible for evaluating the superintendent at least once a year and can elect to non-renew the superintendent at the end of her contract with proper notice based on the policy. My concern is that the Lakewood Board of Education decided to non-renew the superintendent based on hearsay and the fact that she is not strong enough in their eyesight. She does not play favorites and does not conduct herself unethically handling the non-public community within the scope and spirit of the law. The superintendent's job in any district is very challenging. In Lakewood, those challenges can be multiplied 10 fold. You have a board that is controlled by a group of Orthodox men whose main interest is to take care of the needs of their community (non-public religious school students). Despite the lack of support from the board, the superintendent has grown into her job. When she became superintendent, it was somewhat difficult but I have watched her over the years and I am pleased to have her as our school leader. Lakewood students are doing better in each grade level based on programs and projects developed by the superintendent and her team of administrators, teachers and the entire support staff including paraprofessionals. As I speak to you today, the superintendent has the unpleasant task of sending 148 letters to staff members who are losing

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appropriate education and placement depending on the students' Individualize Education Plan (IEP). I also understand 192/193 which is the state funded entitlement grant. It covers Instructional services (192/193) and Evaluation and Determination (193). Having a Master's Degree in Special Education and having been employed in the Toms River Schools as a Special Education Supervisor, I know that re-evaluations are typically done every 3 years. The flat rate for re-evaluations, for non-public students is approximately \$1200 per re-evaluation. I suspect that some of the vendors of the non-publics are doing re-evaluations once a year and perhaps more. If this is happening, the additional \$1200 per student per year as oppose to the \$1200 every three years is a healthy sum being paid to the vendors through state funds (tax payer dollars). Also, I know that the district is paying for non-public preschool supplemental services(NPSSP) rent to a non-public school which also is the location of Tender Touch, who provides NPSSP. The cost is more than \$600,000. Furthermore, the district is paying for related services (OT and PT) for non-public students which is about \$200,000. Already, we are talking about nearly \$900,000 of tax payer money. This is what IDEA funding is for, however, there is not enough funding so, again, the district ~~steps~~ has to step in. The district is putting the needs of non-public related services ahead of basic education for the public-school students. Terri Sinatra, the Special Education State Monitor was non-renewed on March 30<sup>th</sup> and there is no oversight of special education programs. That's a problem within itself. Who is minding the store?

Therefore, I am asking for a complete audit of all 192/193 programs and services and a federal audit of IDEA Grants.

### Issue # 3-State Intervention

Due to the continued issues that are severely impacting the education in Lakewood Public Schools, I am requesting a complete state intervention by removing the Board of Education of its duties and having them serve in an advisory capacity. It is obvious that this board operates solely for the more than 31,000 students who attend non-public religious schools. The Board's actions, both at board meetings and beyond, i.e. speaking with the media, making unilateral staffing decisions, engaging in lobbying for vendors and non-public schools, if factual, could raise ethical questions and perhaps an investigation into the board's conduct is warranted.



# Lakewood Board of Education

200 Ramsey Avenue, Lakewood, NJ 08701

Main Office: (732) 364-2400 Fax: (732) 905-3687

Laura A. Winters, Superintendent of Schools

Regina Robinson, Interim Business Administrator

March 20, 2017

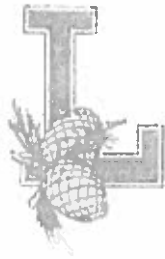
Judee DeStefano-Anen  
Interim Executive County Superintendent  
212 Washington Street  
Toms River, NJ 08753

Dear Dr. DeStefano-Anen:

It is with great sadness that I must inform you that the Lakewood School District is unable to provide its students with a "thorough and efficient" education required by the New Jersey State Constitution. The level of education that will be offered to the students of the Lakewood School District in the 2017-2018 school year, is in my professional opinion, tragically inadequate and inferior compared to the education offered to those students in wealthier towns in Ocean County and across the state.

The District must deal with a number of new expenditures and significantly less revenue, such as, but not limited to, the following;

- The absence of a \$5.6 million State Aid Advance/Revenue
- Repayment installment for the above advance
- Repayment of significant federal and state audit refunds which had been deferred in past years **\$1,099,531**
- The tuition for a newly approved charter school **\$2,128,493**
- The consortium's busing cost for the increase in mandated nonpublic school students despite flat funding in State Transportation Aid and overall State Aid for the District. **\$1,895,728**
- Increase in Health Benefits **\$2,821,605**
- Increase in Salaries **\$2,561,333**
- Increase in Tuition **\$525,357**
- Increase to School Base Budget to Title 1 Reduction **\$735,045**
- Transportation Less Salaries and LSTA **\$686,793**
- Net Changes to the Balance of the Budget **\$10,692**



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In order to cover the above, the Lakewood School District will be losing approximately 119 members of its certified teaching staff, creating average class sizes of 50 (K-12). Students throughout the district will no longer have the opportunity to participate in sports programs or after-school clubs and activities.

Summer Bridge programs that have helped our students' transition from Elementary School to Middle School and from Middle School to High School will be eliminated. Lakewood High School's summer school program will be abolished, leaving disadvantaged students unable to make -up course credits, in order to obtain their high school diploma.

In a district with few administrators, and close to 50 students in a class, there will no longer be guidance counselors in the Elementary Schools to assist those students who struggle with behavioral and emotional problems associated with children being raised in poverty. Research shows that poverty in childhood and adolescence is associated with a higher risk for poor cognitive and academic outcomes, lower school attendance, lower reading and math test scores, increased distractibility, and higher rates of grade failure and early high school dropout.

Lakewood School District's Response-to-Intervention Program, (K-2 students) which has greatly improved the reading foundational skills for our struggling students, has been eliminated, along with all of the district's Media Specialists, who have over the last few years enhanced our Content Area and Technology curricula. Mathematics and Literacy Coaching positions have been abolished, leaving our teachers with limited access to professional development and support. As if the staffing issues are not enough, teachers and students will also have to grapple with having to do more with less, as \$500,000 in educational supplies was also cut from the budget.

In my opinion, this level of education does not meet minimum adequacy standards by any means. How can the students of Lakewood be expected to compete in the labor market, with students who have had educational opportunities that have prepared them for the world around them?



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As you can see in the below charts, Lakewood has the highest percentage of people living in poverty, and the lowest per capita income – even when compared to Abbott School Districts.

## Lakewood Township Compared to the Three Monmouth County Abbott Districts:

Lakewood Township	Neptune	Long Branch	Asbury Park
Per Capita Income <b>\$11,775</b> (Lowest per Capita Income!)	Per Capita Income <b>\$31,897</b>	Per Capita Income <b>\$29,478</b>	Per Capita Income <b>\$24,282</b>
Median Household Income <b>\$38,025</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$63,881</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$48,736</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$32,459</b>
Poverty Level <b>38.8%</b> (Higher than all 3 Monmouth County Abbott Districts!)	Poverty Level <b>11.3%</b>	Poverty Level <b>17.8%</b>	Poverty Level <b>32.0%</b>

\* <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/>  
(2010-2014)

## Lakewood Township Compared to Three Neighboring Townships in Ocean County:

Lakewood Township	Brick Township	Forked River	Barnegat
Per Capita Income <b>\$11,775</b>	Per Capita Income <b>\$34,840</b>	Per Capita Income <b>\$35,023</b>	Per Capita Income <b>\$30,353</b>
Median Household Income <b>\$38,025</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$69,063</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$69,583</b>	Median Household Income <b>\$66,294</b>
Poverty Level <b>38.8%</b>	Poverty Level <b>6.1%</b>	Poverty Level <b>11.7%</b>	Poverty Level <b>8.1%</b>

\* <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/>  
(2010-2014)



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## Lakewood School District Student Information:

Average Increase in Public School Enrollment each school	2016 - 2017	-1.4% Decrease
	2015 - 2016	1.3% Increase
	2014 - 2015	3.3% Increase
Average Increase in Nonpublic School Enrollment each school year	2016 - 2017	2,500 Student Increase
	2015 - 2016	2,500 Student Increase
	2014 - 2015	2,500 Student Increase
Percentage of students currently enrolled in a K-5 Bilingual/ESL Program.	K-	60%
	1 <sup>st</sup>	61%
	2 <sup>nd</sup>	66%
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	63%
	4 <sup>th</sup>	43%
Percentage of students in the district that are English Language Learners and receiving services.	5 <sup>th</sup>	25%
		27%
Total percentage of students in the district that are English Language Learners - 27% receiving services and 53% not receiving services.		80%
Percentage of students who enter Kindergarten in the Bilingual Program.		60%

Percentage of students receiving free lunch.	100% Community Eligibility Provision (CEP)
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Percentage of in-district students with IEPs.	15%
Percentage of students placed out of district.	6%

African American	10%
Hispanic	85%
White	5%

\*Information from Realtime\*





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Lakewood is clearly a district in which poverty, poor housing, poor nutrition and other conditions affect the educational performance of its students. In fact, the Asbury Park Press published an article; *Schools unaware of lead-poisoned kids* on February 28, 2015, which stated that over 100 children in Lakewood, who were recently tested (at that time), under the age of 6 were detected to have elevated lead levels – the highest in Ocean County.

Although I recognize that no amount of money may be able to reduce the negative socioeconomic factors that cause student disadvantages, one must recognize that a sufficient base budget is needed to provide students with a thorough and efficient education.

The students of the Lakewood School District deserve to maintain the education they have had the past five years. The progress has been steady, and the graduation rate has increased from 69% to 75.3% in 2016. The climate and culture in all of the schools has steadily improved, and Piner Pride in Lakewood has returned!

The 2017-2018 school budget not only promises to decimate the Lakewood School District, it promises to destroy the lives and future of its students. It is imperative that the students of Lakewood are provided with a thorough and efficient education that gives them a fighting chance!

I am hereby requesting that the state fully fund the district in order to have an adequate base budget, and avoid violating the Constitution by not offering students a thorough and efficient education

\*I feel it is important to note that courtesy busing is not part of the 2017-2018 Lakewood School District budget.

If you would like to discuss this very important matter further, please feel free to call me at 732-905-3633. In the meantime, I cannot certify a budget that does not offer the students of the Lakewood School District a thorough and efficient education.



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Respectfully,

*Laura A. Winters*

Laura A. Winters  
Superintendent of Schools

cc: Michael Azzara, State Monitor  
David Shafter, State Monitor  
Teri Sinatra, State Monitor  
Regina Robinson, Business Administrator  
Board Members  
Marc Zitomer, Board Attorney  
Glenn Forney, Director, Office of State Monitors

Attachments: Reduction Category as of March 16, 2017