

# Editorial: Questionable education quality in East Ramapo

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*In public school and yeshiva communities, there's a fear that a weak education system won't prepare children for the future.*



(Photo: Seth Harrison/The Journal News)

Two reports, in two days, make clear that many children of East Ramapo, no matter what community they come from, no matter where they go to school, are in jeopardy from a substandard education that could rob them of a fruitful future.

On Wednesday, at the New York Board of Regents meeting (<http://link.brightcove.com/services/player/bcpid3811967666001?bckey=AQ~.AAACoBBYDYk~.vhHQ3PG5UUmyt8STj8USRX3sPxORNshh&bctid=4489370880001>), the state monitor team (<http://polhudson.lohudblogs.com/2015/09/17/east-ramapo-monitors-progress-is-being-made/>) assigned to East Ramapo briefed state education leaders on what they've learned and where they are heading in the ongoing examination of the district's dire finances and faltering education quality. Monitor team leader

Dennis Walcott explained how he's offered tips to school board members on ways to engage with the public — basically, he's teaching them how a public board should function.

On Thursday, a lohud report (</story/news/investigations/2015/09/16/east-ramapo-yeshivas/32482729/>) documented a related concern of many: That within the Hasidic community, there is growing frustration that students in the burgeoning yeshiva system (</story/news/investigations/2015/09/16/east-ramapo-yeshivas/32482729/>) fail to receive an adequate secular education. Lax instruction in math, English and social studies, parents and former students say, produces students who are poorly prepared to earn a livelihood or participate in citizenry.



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[Critics: E. Ramapo yeshivas don't prepare students in secular studies](#)

<http://www.lohud.com/story/news/investigations/2015/09/16/east-ramapo-yeshivas/32482729/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>

Concerns about East Ramapo have long focused on the imbalance of resources meted out to the public schools, and deteriorating education quality provided in the public schools. The district is run by a school board affiliated with the Orthodox and Hasidic communities; the public schools educate mostly poor children of color, many immigrants who are still learning English.

Sadly, we find, what the communities have in common most is a worry about quality education that can prepare their children for the future.

Monitor update

On Wednesday, Walcott touted the relationship he's building with the school board, and explained how he's helping board members more thoroughly understand their public role. He announced that local leaders have secured \$1 million from the state to repair leaky roofs that bring water into classrooms and can foster mold. He pledged further action, plus a full report and recommendations due in December.



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[Monitor cites progress on E. Ramapo review](#)

<http://www.lohud.com/story/news/politics/albany-watch/2015/09/18/monitor-cites-progress-ramapo-review/72396930/?from=global&sessionKey=&autologin=>

But the testimony of monitor Monica George-Fields, an expert in school turnarounds, told a starker story: She decried the district's graduation rate, and called the college- and career-readiness status of East Ramapo students "a lot more alarming." She told the Regents that the board failed to use any of this data for its intended purpose — or it seems, for anything. "They think about the district in a siloed way," George-Fields said of the board. For example, the board hasn't figured out that the abysmal test scores for students at all levels should elicit action from them.



**Dennis Walcott, who leads the monitor team assigned to the East Ramapo School district, speaks with the Editorial Board on Sept.**

1. (Photo: Ricky Flores/The Journal News)

"Most boards would ask, 'why are these scores so low?'" observed Regent Judith Johnson, a resident of the East Ramapo district. But that has never happened, Johnson said.

An examination of what's happening in local Hasidic yeshivas could explain why.

Yeshiva failings, too

A Iohud investigation, "[Critics: E. Ramapo yeshivas fail to prepare pupils in secular studies \(/story/news/investigations/2015/09/16/east-ramapo-yeshivas/32482729/\)](https://www.lohud.com/story/news/investigations/2015/09/16/east-ramapo-yeshivas/32482729/)," explained some members in the Hasidic community's growing dissatisfaction with a lack of secular education in local yeshivas.

Parents in the community, and those who have gone through the yeshiva system only to discover later their gaps in basic education, want better. "People are afraid to speak out for fear of being shunned," [Shulem Deen \(/story/news/investigations/2015/09/17/crippling-education-deen/32521635/\)](https://www.lohud.com/story/news/investigations/2015/09/17/crippling-education-deen/32521635/), a former yeshiva student from New Square, told Journal News reporter [Adrienne Sanders \(/staff/41305/adrienne-sanders/\)](https://www.lohud.com/staff/41305/adrienne-sanders/).

A forgotten 1928 state law requires that private schools provide a sound secular education and charges public school administrators with enforcement. But few school districts know about the law and it's possible that none have tried to enforce it for decades, if ever. Most religious schools in New York are Roman Catholic, which have long balanced religious and secular studies. Not surprisingly, the state Education Department is unaware of any penalties against districts for failing to track the quality of private-school education.

The very idea of government monitoring of religious schools is highly charged and raises First Amendment concerns. It's one thing for the state to require quality academic instruction and another for local officials to attempt to analyze an appropriate mix of Torah, Talmud, science and civics. In practical terms, school districts do not have the resources or training to monitor private schools. In East Ramapo, keeping track of instruction in some 80 yeshivas is simply unrealistic on many levels.

Legislators should either flesh out the law in question — and set out to provide training and funding for public districts — or wipe the law from our books.

'Neither are benefiting'

Still, it's fair to wonder about the correlation between a dearth of secular education in local yeshivas and the East Ramapo school board's questionable interest in the academic achievement of its students.

Assemblywoman Ellen Jaffee, D-Suffern, told the Editorial Board that she believed the monitor team could help educate the school board about how the public school system works "and what is required within the public schools." Some board members "come from a totally different background," Jaffee said.

Johnson told her Regents peers that the East Ramapo board's actions, and inaction, feeds community tensions. Non-public school residents "feel they are being attacked based on their religion; public-school parents feel being attacked based on their ethnicity (and) poverty," Johnson told her Regents peers. Such anger, she said, "to some degree is the result of the board's ignorance."

The concerns of Hasidic parents who have children in local yeshivas and graduates of those same yeshivas demonstrate a lack of understanding in the religious community about the content and value of a secular education.

[Eric Grossfeld \(/story/opinion/readers/2015/09/17/letter-all-children-lose-east-ramapo/32552137/\)](#), co-founder of Get Up, Stand Up: East Ramapo, said in a recent letter to the editor that "the school board is *not* benefiting nonpublic students at the expense of the public students; rather, *neither* are benefiting under the status quo."

Amid the distrust and the tussle for limited resources, that is a worrisome concern for *all* parents and *all* children.

MORE

Mark your calendars: The state-appointed East Ramapo monitor team holds a public forum at 7 p.m. Oct. 1, at the Town of Ramapo Cultural Arts Center, Main Street, Spring Valley.

Also, the monitors have launched a blog – [eastramapomonitorupdate.wordpress.com](http://eastramapomonitorupdate.wordpress.com) (<https://eastramapomonitorupdate.wordpress.com/>) – that will provide updates about their work and findings.

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Sept. 24, 2015, 6:37 a.m.