

What do audits of Paterson, other districts really reveal?

By IRENE STERLING

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My favorite scene in my favorite movie, "The Wizard of Oz," has Toto pull the curtain surrounding the "Great and Powerful" Wizard of Oz to reveal a tired, old con man. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!" he yells. The New Jersey Department of Education's latest action surrounding the audits of four school districts across the state is an example of the same misdirection.

While the DOE's press release on the audits raises alarm, a close reading of the four audits reveals a different picture.

In fact the DOE's press release might just as easily have read "Audits reveal less than 3 percent questionable spending. DOE should review information management software."

In fact, the \$15 million decried in the DOE headline represents a tiny fraction of the amount audited: in Jersey City, 0.25 percent; in Newark, 0.48 percent; in Paterson 0.1 percent and in Camden 2.3 percent. But that wouldn't produce shocking headlines, would it? It wouldn't undermine the support for urban school children so that a new funding formula can be based on under-funding their needs, would it?

Now, I am not condoning misspending by local school districts.

In my role as president of the Paterson Education Fund, I raise private dollars to help improve Paterson's public schools. I can't raise the \$500 million dollars that Paterson students require to provide them with a "thorough and efficient" education. That's the constitutional role of state of New Jersey.

I want the state of New Jersey to assure that school districts use the resources wisely and efficiently so our children get the education they need.

I want to see the proper resources in classrooms and needed services available to students. The Department of Education, which runs the state operated school districts, is directly responsible for doing so in Paterson, Jersey City and Newark.

So what should the Department of Education do about the audits?

The audit reports are instructive. In all four cities the information technology is faulted. The software being used for information and fiscal management is cited.

Each of the four districts uses a different software system to manage critical functions.

Each of the systems has limitations described. Each district is cited for not properly training the needed staff to operate the systems properly.

And many of the items cited in the audits would disappear if an adequate, robust, and properly used software system were in place.

It occurs to me to ask the following questions. Why does the DOE, which operates the districts, implement four different information and fiscal management systems? Why does it permit the use of blind systems that cannot interact with other critical components to be used? Why doesn't the DOE standardize the operations so that it can monitor IN REAL TIME, rather than play "gotcha" after the fact?

After all, I can order a book from Barnes and Noble and track its route from the warehouse to my home by UPS. You can use satellite monitored GPS systems to tell you when your car needs an oil change.

The DOE's answer to clearly definable systems failure is to send a fiscal monitor into Paterson. The press release doesn't say what powers the monitor will have or what instructions he has been given.

Now, the new monitor assigned to Paterson, Mark S. Kramer, could be helpful if he comes with the authority to implement a state of the art information and fiscal management system, train the staff and provide the hefty amount of money it will take to do so while protecting the funds needed for the children's classrooms.

The question is, will he?

For the sake of our children, I hope the monitor comes with solutions. If not, Toto will have to pull the curtain another time.

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