

Hold me tight and don't let go *by Chris Neidenberg*

Despite all the pomp and ceremony of eight months ago, when the **New Jersey Board of Education** approved mechanisms for transferring the last vestige of state-imposed control to the Jersey City Public School District, Superintendent of Schools **Dr. Marcia Lyles** conceded recently that, after 29 years, "The district is still under state control."

The state board's July action generated press reports and headlines certainly suggesting that Trenton bureaucrats would immediately pull up stakes and leave the school system, including njadvancemedia.com's "**NJ ends state takeover of Jersey City's public schools.**"

An online newspaper, covering education issues throughout the state, went as far as interviewing former Republican **Gov. Tom Kean**, who helped implement state control almost 30 years ago.

But it was not the first-time media accounts and politicians' statements generated such lofty, yet off-base, prognostications.

But it was not the first-time media accounts - and politicians' statements - generated such lofty, yet off-base, prognostications

Last year, the state board technically only voted on implementing a plan to help the district regain control of the "Instruction and Programs (I&P)" component of New Jersey's Quality Single Accountability Continuum, known most famously by its acronym, QSAC.

It periodically measures school district performance throughout the state in five key areas. For schools under some form of daily state control, QSAC can be a critical factor helping determine when that will end.

Of all QSAC areas, "I&P" weighs most heavily upon the daily work of teachers and their deliverance of instruction throughout Jersey City's public schools to almost 30,000 students.

The state earlier fully relinquished control of other areas originally affected by the 1989 takeover, including "Operations" and "Personnel." Those two categories are of most importance to the school board and administrators in central office.

Even local politicians, including **Mayor Steven Fulop**, participated in festivities, such as attending the state education board's July meeting with Lyles, in trying to drive home the message: full state control seemed nearing an end.

Yet one must read the fine print in all of this prominently featuring two words, "**Transition Plan.**"

Then-Commissioner of Education **David Hespe**, in an October 2015 press release which followed an earlier state board decision beginning the process to relinquish the two other components, stated returning each remaining QSAC area to local control "will be accompanied by a robust and specific transition plan that sets forth expectations and support for the district and board of education."

Yet he warned, "If the requirements of the transition plan are not met, the state will place the district back in intervention status."

Now, the obligation to finally end all aspects of state control in the district becomes the obligation of new Democrat **Gov. Phil Murphy**, endorsed by the NJEA, and whose administration, unlike the prior, has no close ties to Lyles.

He replaced Chris Christie, a Republican whose sometimes caustic criticisms of public school teachers and their unions generated enmity throughout the state.

A state education department spokesperson did not return a request for comment, concerning the new administration's best estimate, as to when full local control might be implemented at this point, by deadline.

Lyles' earlier statement, verifying that Trenton still casts a shadow over the district after 29 years, essentially replied to the displeasure a resident expressed in seeking explanations on why state monitor **Cathy Coyle** still shuttles to and from schools and attends board meetings on the state's dime - more than five years after her assignment.

Under the QSAC law, Coyle, a former district administrator whose actions in monitoring teachers daily upsets the JCEA. is defined as "a highly skilled professional (HSP)." HSPs are tasked with working with local district personnel during state control. A district spokesperson was quoted recently in a published report as claiming Coyle is still needed during the I&P transition period.

While Lyles now acknowledges the JCPS District "**is still under state control**," a check of district promotional materials, put out about two years ago, reveals it will imply it is not under state control to fit a given moment.

For example, in a 2016 online district website promotional post outlining achievements, including the opening of the new Maya Angelou P.S. 20, the district cites as one accomplishment "the return to local control" after what was then 27 years of state rule.

Yet the passage did not further state that the New Jersey Board of Education, around that time, only voted to start the process of returning two of the three remaining QSAC areas, "Governance" and "Personnel" - just as it did for I&P.

In fact, the state board did not initiate the process for finally returning I&P until the following year - a matter which still (as of mid-March 2018) remains in limbo.

And upon issuing that October 2015 press release, Hespe approved statements which show now the state is almost two years beyond his earlier prediction regarding when all forms of control might end.

"Commissioner Hespe also established a working group that is tasked with establishing a plan for returning the final area of instruction and program that would provide full local control to the district **by as early as the end of the (2015-16) school year**," his release stated then.

While Lyles now acknowledges the JCPS District "is still under state control," a check of district promotional materials, put out about two years ago, reveals it will imply it is not under state control to fit a given moment.

*This announcement prompted the online publication, NJ Spotlight, to say in a headline, "Local Control to Jersey City Schools **by Spring (2016)** Said Mayor Fulop."*

If accurate, the mayor's reported statement means the state has fallen at least 17 months behind that prediction, given Lyles' February 2018 comment.