

IN OUR OPINION

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Our Epps verdict: No contract renewal

The Jersey City school district was led to believe that a decision on the future of Jersey City Superintendent of Schools Charles T. Epps would come this week.

There is no decision by the state Department of Education on whether Epps should continue to lead the state's second-largest school district beyond next June 30, the expiration date of his current contract.

State Commissioner of Education Lucille Davy's decision on Epps was being put off because of a recent state decision to return "governance" powers to the local Jersey City school board. The commissioner wants to first discuss Epps with the local school trustees.

This rationale is a bit puzzling. The question of local control stems from recommendations as a result of an audit done of troubled school districts, including Jersey City.

The state reported that Jersey City did not score well in the areas of Instruction and Program, Personnel, and Operations Management. This covers much of what a school board does.

Jersey City's board received high marks for finance, yet it is the state that really controls the district's financing. It seems that local control is an illusion — and so is any decision on Epps.

Finance control for Epps is the infamous Londongate, where he went to an overseas conference several days early and let taxpayers pick up the tab for extras. Epps allowed the question of his reimbursements to linger for about three weeks before taking action.

There were also questionable overtime payments to maintenance workers and painters that embarrassed the school board.

In 2005, the superintendent decided to take on another full-time job by running and winning an Assembly seat. Two school trustees said Epps lost credibility with them because he promised to retire as superintendent the June after being elected. He never did.

As a state legislator, Epps hired four school district employees to part-time jobs on his Assembly staff — blurring the lines between his two public roles.

He also cut a donation check from his Assembly campaign war chest to school board member Jeff Dublin. This was a clearly inappropriate act, because school board members evaluate Epps's performance as superintendent.

It is the opinion of this newspaper that Epps has already stayed too long. Students' test scores remain among the lowest in the state. Public confidence in this man has evaporated. Replace him before entertaining any thought of returning control of the district to the Board of Education.