

# Performance review set for Franklin district

BY SEUNG MIN KIM  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Following public pressure, a reluctant Franklin Township Board of Education approved spending up to \$300,000 to have an outside firm scrutinize the district to prove it is efficient and transparent.

In a 6-2 vote, with one abstention, the Somerset County district authorized the performance review to see where, if any, improvements could be made at each of Franklin's main office and at each of Franklin Township's nine schools.

"The sooner we do the performance review, the better we can match what we say about transparency to what we actually do," District Superintendent Ed Seto said this week.

Once the company is selected, it will question all district employees about their work obligations and compare it to a standard rubric to see how the district operates, Seto said. From that information, school officials can get an idea about the best and most efficient ways to run the district, he added.

The approval, which came during a special meeting Tuesday, was a victory for a vocal subset of township residents who had persistently pressured the school board for an independent review.

Township resident Phil Kramer, who heads the watchdog group Taxpayers United for Franklin, said the organization has pushed for an independent audit since August 2005, arguing that an external company could thoroughly vet the district's operations and multimillion-dollar budget.

"It's a major step forward to hopefully increasing the public's faith in the BOE and towards efficiencies that can be found in getting a better education for the kids at a better cost," Kramer said.

"Maybe they're going to find out that they're not spending enough. But my bet is, they're going to find that they're not spending it as good as we could be ... I'm certainly hopeful that they will find ways to save."

The board derived the \$300,000

cost using estimates from companies that have conducted such reviews.

In 2005, school board members refused a similar audit, arguing it was the elected officials' duty to keep itself in check, not an outside firm. But now, several members who were initially opposed the review said they are now on board, noting that public comments swayed them from their previous stances.

"Let's get on with it, let's get it done, let's allow (Superintendent Ed) Seto the tools to move forward," said board member Shirley Pietrucha. "Let's get it done so the shadows would be off and everyone would get on with their regular activity."

Still, other board members argued that paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to an outside company was unnecessary and unlikely to yield significant savings.

"We don't need to spend \$300,000," said board member Andrew Holzheimer, who voted against the measure along with

board member Eugene Unger. "I'd rather see that go back to property tax relief."

Board President Eva Nagy, who is also an officer for the New Jersey School Board Association, said such outside reviews of school districts have been rare, but noted that the state Department of Education has undergone a similar process. She, too, had initially opposed the idea.

"It's happening more and more in order to deal with the perception that (districts) are not transparent," Nagy said yesterday. "We need to do this to move the district forward."

John Calavano, the district's assistant superintendent for business, said the project should go out to bid within the next month. Once it begins, the review process should last about two months, officials said.

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