

# Senator Sweeney's School Consolidation Bill...Regionalization as Cover for More Segregation

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"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves." Matthew 7:15

Public schools in New Jersey are some of the best in the nation according to some rankings. Yet New Jersey's poorest and most racially isolated districts are being left behind. Senator Sweeney's consolidation bill will only make it worse. And predatory serial segregationists are already lining up to feed at the public trough.

New Jersey's political leadership has done nothing to address the deeply damaging and shameful reality of school segregation in New Jersey. Governor Phil Murphy, a former member of the national board of the NAACP, has failed to take advantage of an historic opportunity handed to him by a landmark school segregation lawsuit brought against the state of New Jersey by civil rights groups in 2018.



The Murphy administration has not only *not* reduced school segregation, it has enabled it to flourish by permitting majority white districts to secede from majority Black and brown districts through a campaign of racialized and unconstitutional "deregionalizations" during his administration. For decades, a group of majority white suburban districts across the state have lobbied to terminate their send-receive relationships with majority African American and Latino districts. New Jersey courts have correctly and consistently struck down these secession attempts on the grounds they would increase racial segregation and thus violate New Jersey's constitution. Recently, however, a group of highly paid lawyers and consultants led by attorney Vito Gagliardi of the firm Porzio, Bromberg, and Newman have delivered a string of secessionist victories for their clients by circumventing the courts and relying on a compliant State Department of Education.

The legislature has also done nothing to address this problem. Senate President Steve Sweeney has championed a bill intended to promote and incentivize the consolidation and regionalization of public schools. This would be a laudable goal if its purpose was expanding



opportunity and racial and economic inclusion. But its stated goals are about “efficiency,” “cost savings” and “fiscal improvement”.

While language was added ostensibly to guard against increasing racial segregation, it is simply not enough in a state as diverse and hyper-segregated as New Jersey’s with predatory segregationist prowling the land.

A bill for regionalization that does not explicitly require affirmative goals for poverty deconcentration and racial inclusion will inevitably be used to increase segregation in the name of “efficiency,” “cost savings” and “fiscal improvement.”

This is not just theoretical. The same gang of highly paid consultants and lawyers responsible for the recent wave of secessionist breakaways across the state are already racking up fat contracts through taxpayer funded feasibility studies.

Vito Gagliardi has bragged that he helped write Senator Sweeney’s bill while assuring his clients that it will not impede their segregationist plans. Gagliardi promised Absecon (a majority white district seeking to secede from majority Black and brown Pleasantville High School), “there is nothing in (Sweeney’s) bill that affects what we are talking about here. [Nothing] inhibiting a change like the one you are looking to make.”

Gagliardi boasts of his secessionist prowess proclaiming he “handled the only school dissolutions in state history where regional districts were dissolved.” His partners Richard Gripp and Peter Carter of Statistical Forecasting LLC advertise their role in helping majority white school districts to “deregionalize” or “terminate...sending-receiving relationship” all over the state of New Jersey. And their track record backs up their bold claims. In 2015, Gagliardi and his team succeeded in pulling the majority white Merchantville schools out of majority Black and brown Pennsauken, and just last year, with the full support of Governor Murphy’s Education Commissioner, they triumphed in splitting majority white Maywood from majority Black and brown Hackensack. Now they are working to withdraw Absecon from Pleasantville, turning Pleasantville into a 100% minority



school district in clear violation of New Jersey law. Gagliardi and Statistical Forecasting appear to be involved in every de-regionalization case in the state of New Jersey today.

Gagliardi and his cabal need to be investigated and stopped before they do more harm to our state and our children. And the Sweeney bill needs to be significantly amended to prevent it



from being used to fund more segregation and to enrich segregationist law firms and consultants. Gagliardi has already snagged the lucrative contract for the Salem County pilot project shepherded by Sweeney and funded entirely by a state grant to explore creating a single unified county school district. But Gagliardi has made it clear the Salem contract hasn't changed his secessionist stripes, assuring anxious white parents and taxpayers not to expect "countywide opportunities" in Salem County, just "certain sections."

There is nothing in the current version of the Sweeney bill to guard against the Gagliardi gang and others who would distort its purpose to do the opposite of what it appears intended to do. Gagliardi knows this. That is why he reassures clients that the bill not only won't hinder their secession plans but it even has "a new mechanism for school districts wishing to withdraw from an existing regional or consolidated school district."

Senator Sweeney's bill for school consolidation appears well intentioned and even noble. Regionalization could even be a powerful path toward greater inclusion and one meaningful way to begin to reduce segregation and the deep concentrations of poverty that have done so much to set our state back, inhibit opportunity for millions of children and cost property taxpayers billions of dollars.

We have to take Senator Sweeney at his word that he wants full inclusion and an end to the shame of school segregation. But to do that, his bill needs to be purged of segregationist loopholes and, more importantly, amended to include language that affirmatively requires goals for desegregation and poverty deconcentration as its primary purpose.

When Gagliardi petitioned the state to allow Merchantville to secede from Pennsauken and join Haddon Heights he promised "there will be no negative racial impact". Today we see his promises proved false and deeply destructive. Today, thanks to Vito Gagliardi and his crew, Senator Sweeney's home town high school is more segregated than it's ever, its poverty rate higher, its performance ranked lower and its students more cut off from opportunity than ever before.