

To: New Jersey Law Revision Commission
From: Samuel M. Silver, Deputy Director
Re.: Definition of “School District of Residence” for purposes of the Charter School Program Act as discussed in *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*, 2019 WL 2402545 (App. Div. Jun. 07, 2019).
Date: December 07, 2020

MEMORANDUM

Executive Summary¹

The New Jersey Constitution mandates that “[t]he Legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools for the instruction of all the children of the State between the ages of five and eighteen years.”² In addition to the State’s program of public education, the Legislature has recognized that charter schools “can assist in promoting comprehensive educational reform by providing a mechanism for the implementation of a variety of educational approaches which may not be available in the traditional public school classroom.”³ The establishment of these schools, according to the Legislature, is “in the best interest of the students of the state.”⁴

In *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*, the Appellate Division considered whether a municipal government was obligated to provide funding for its students enrolled in charter schools located in other school districts.⁵

Statute Considered

N.J.S. 18A:36A-12 provides in relevant part:

[...] b. The **school district of residence** shall pay directly to the charter school for each student enrolled in the charter school who resides in the district an amount equal to 90% of the sum of the budget year equalization aid per pupil, the prebudget year general fund tax levy per pupil inflated by the CPI rate most recent to the calculation, and the employer payroll tax per pupil that is transferred to the school district pursuant to subsection d. of section 1 of P.L.2018, c. 68. In addition, the school district of residence shall pay directly to the charter school the security categorical aid attributable to the student and a percentage of the district's special education categorical aid equal to the percentage of the district's special education students enrolled in the charter school and, if applicable, 100% of preschool

¹ Preliminary research for this memorandum was provided by Rabiya Khan, Student Extern to the New Jersey Law Revision Commission, Fall 2020 (B.A. cand., New Jersey Inst. of Tech.).

² N.J. CONST. of 1947, art. VIII, § IV, ¶ 1 (West, 2020).

³ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 18A:36A-2 (West 2020).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*, 2019 WL 2402545 *1 (App. Div. Jun. 07, 2019).

education aid. **The district of residence shall also pay directly to the charter school any federal funds attributable to the student...** (Emphasis added).

Background

In New Jersey, the Commissioner of Education provides approval and grants charters to charter schools under the Charter School Program Act (CSPA).⁶ These chartered schools are considered public schools that are operated independently of a local board of education and are managed by a board of trustees.⁷ The funding for charter schools is provided by federal, state, and local aid but is not equivalent to the per pupil funding of traditional schools.⁸ In recent years, the question of who is responsible for paying for students to attend charter schools in districts other than those in which the students live has been the subject of litigation.⁹

In *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*, the Piscataway Township Public School District (Piscataway) did not maintain any charter schools in the municipality.¹⁰ A number of Piscataway's resident students, however, attended charter schools located in other school districts.¹¹

On motion for summary decision, Piscataway sought a determination from the New Jersey Commissioner of Education that would relieve the municipality from "any obligation to fund out-of-district [student] placements" in charter schools.¹² The Department of Education (Department) cross-moved for summary decision and argued that "the language and history of the [CPSA], and its implementing regulations, clearly demonstrate that resident districts are responsible for paying for their students to attend charter schools regardless of the charter school's location."¹³ The matter was transmitted to the Office of Administrative Law (OAL) for disposition as a contested case.¹⁴

The Administrative Law Judge determined that the meaning of the term "district of residence" as used in N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b) was "clearly ambiguous."¹⁵ After a review of the regulatory definition of this term¹⁶ and the legislative history of this statute¹⁷ the ALJ concluded "that the interpretation that all school districts must fund their students' attendance at charter schools irrespective of location was consistent with the 'overall purpose of the CSPA', which

⁶ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 18A:36A-3 (West 2020).

⁷ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 18A:36A-3(a) (West 2020).

⁸ N.J. STAT. ANN. § 18A:36A-2(b) (West 2020).

⁹ See *Highland Park Bd. of Educ. v. Hesper (Highland Park I)*, No. A-3890-14 (App. Div. Jan. 24, 2018), *certif. den.*, 233 N.J. 485 (2018).

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at *2.

¹³ *Id.*.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.* at *3.

declares that “[a] charter school shall be open to all students on a space available basis.”¹⁸ The ALJ said that “what triggers a school district’s funding obligation is the mere fact that one of its residents is enrolled in a charter school, irrespective of location”¹⁹ and noted that the term “district of residence” as used in N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b) “is reasonably interpreted as the student’s district of residence and not the charter school’s district of residence.”²⁰

The Commissioner ultimately adopted the decision of the ALJ.²¹ Piscataway appealed, as of right, to the Superior Court, Appellate Division.²²

Analysis

The question of whether a municipal government is obligated to provide funding for its students enrolled in charter schools located in other school districts is not a new one. In *Highland Park Bd. of Educ. v. Hesper (Highland Park I)*, the Appellate Division addressed this precise issue in an unpublished decision.²³

In *Highland Park I*, the Appellate division rejected Highland Park’s argument that only the charter school’s district of residence was obligated to pay for its students to attend the school.²⁴ The plain language of N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b), according to the Court, “expressly provides that the ‘school district of residence’ must pay the charter school for ‘each student’ enrolled in the school.”²⁵ Thus, the term school district of residence, as used in N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b) “refers to the district where the student resides not the district where the charter school is located.”²⁶

Pursuant to the funding statute, the “school district of residence shall pay directly to the charter school for each student enrolled in the charter school who resides in the district...”²⁷ Although the term “school district of residence” is not defined in the CSPA, the Court in *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway* determined that “it would make no sense to interpret ‘school district of residence’ to mean ‘district of residence.’”²⁸ The Court reasoned, “[g]iven that both resident and non-resident students can attend a charter school, the term “school district of residence”

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.* at *4.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at *5.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*, 2019 WL 2402545 *1 (App. Div. Jun. 07, 2019) citing *Highland Park Bd. of Educ. v. Hesper (Highland Park I)*, No. A-3890-14 (App. Div. Jan. 24, 2018), *certify. denied*, 233 N.J. 485 (2018).

²⁴ *Id. slip op.* at 19.

²⁵ *Id.* at 16.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway*, 2019 WL 2402545 at *7. The Court noted that the term “district of residence” is defined in N.J.A.C. 6A:11-1.2; N.J.A.C. 6A:23A-15.1. The Court determined that a review of the term both in the context of the CSPA as a whole and in light of the legislative history rejected the Board’s attempt to equate the two.

logically means the district where the student resides.”²⁹ The Court noted that “[a] school is located in a district, it does not **reside** in a district.”³⁰

The Court concluded that the Commissioner correctly determined that the Department properly implemented the funding requirements of N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b) by obligating the “district of residence” and a “non-resident district” to fund their students’ attendance at charter schools. Thus, pursuant to N.J.S. 18A:36A-12(b), Piscataway was obligated to provide funding for its students enrolled in charter schools located outside its school district.

Conclusion

Staff seeks authorization to conduct additional research and outreach to determine whether the term “school district of residence”, as set forth in the CSPA would benefit from modification in response to the determination of the Court in *Bd. of Educ. of Twp. of Piscataway v. New Jersey Dept. of Educ.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* (Emphasis added).