

IN THE NEWS

HEMPSTEAD SCHOOL CRISIS:

SHOOTING THE MESSENGER

By EDEN LAIKIN

When Hempstead schools hired Shimon Waronker last May, his record of turning around unsafe and low-performing schools in the New York City system made administrators and parents believe he was the savior of the beleaguered district.

Waronker would bring in his team and the New American Initiative model curriculum he developed, and utilize his prior military service, to tackle the challenging assignment. But on January 9, just seven months into the \$265,000-a-year job – and after discovering and reporting to authorities what he said was illegal and unethical activity rampant in the district – Waronker was suspended with pay, and his team of experts fired. The school board said it commenced an investigation into Waronker's conduct as superintendent.

Waronker quickly filed a lawsuit against the Hempstead School District, three of its board members, and the district clerk. His lawyer, Hempstead-based civil rights attorney Frederick Brewington, said in an interview that nothing the school board did in regard to his client has "made any educational sense or had a rhyme of rationality."

"My client came in late last summer, prepared to spend four years and planned to change the environment ... to dismantle the dysfunctional culture" (in Hempstead schools), Brewington says. "What he uncovered was illegality, theft and fraud. And when he told the board to get rid of certain employees, they suspended him."

In a declaration given as part of his federal lawsuit, Waronker said:

- He analyzed the transcripts of 872 high school students and only 214 or 25 percent had the requisite credits to graduate on time. Nearly 300 hadn't attended school anywhere

"They can't expect progress when they're not making any changes."

from 20 days to 2 years and the district was still billing the state for those students.

- He asked "master teachers" he hired to apply for a \$5.4 million community schools grant because an administrator originally asked to prepare the grants, missed the state deadlines. The teachers were fired a day before they were to submit the application. The board then barred them from finishing the grant as volunteers.

- The high school principal falsified in school records the number of weapons brought into school from over 50 down to only 2.

- He uncovered theft of district property by a teacher, which led to an arrest.

- He did a thorough review of the district facilities and found: vermin infestation, mold, 1,600 students in crumbling portable classrooms, leaking roofs, graffiti, and old boilers.

- He cited examples that show the district is guilty of "educational malpractice."

"He was asked to bring his team in and he did," Brewington says. "The team reported back that the district was a 'cesspool' and they needed to clean it up. Then, the people in

the cesspool stopped the cleanup."

Later in the declaration, Waronker said: "It is also clear to me that the actions taken against me have been acts of retaliation for me taking the steps to address the mismanagement and acts that appear to be criminal in nature. What I discovered in the Hempstead School District is an abomination and a plague on those who are impacted the most, the children."

According to the district's response in Waronker's lawsuit, his suspension is predicated on investigations into seven areas: its former contract with the New American

Initiative, a nonprofit that Waronker founded before becoming superintendent (which was noted in his contract); alleged failure by Waronker to submit a Community School Grant on time; implement maintenance and repair plans to address boilers

and pipes; implement a Violence Suppression and Security Plan for middle and high schools; report to the board the circumstances involving the termination of the high school principal and the disenrollment by Waronker of approximately 300 high school students. Waronker disputed all accusations.

He asked the court to return him to his post and on Feb. 2, 2018, a federal judge rejected the request. On March 26, the Hempstead school board extended Waronker's administrative leave period until June 1.

Hempstead school officials did not respond to requests for comment, and it's unclear whether the district ever received the \$5.4 million community schools grant.

Asked if he thought it was possible for the school district to get on the right track, Brewington remains optimistic.

"Nothing is impossible," he says. "But they can't expect progress when they're not making any changes. They need to stop dealing with favoritism and politics and start dealing with reality."



Suspended Hempstead School Superintendent Shimon Waronker.



The Hempstead School Board is defending itself in a lawsuit filed by its former superintendent (Photo by Bob Giglione)