

A VOICE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

Immigrant, Ller heads council of superintendents

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Lorna Lewis, a Long Island school administrator and educator with nearly 40 years' experience, was sworn in Wednesday as the first woman of color to preside over the New York State Council of School Superintendents, which represents more than 800 top education leaders statewide.

Being a pioneer in her career field is nothing new for Lewis, who over the past decade has emerged as the first black female educator on the Island to take charge of two predominantly white school districts. She is now completing her sixth year in the 4,790-student Plainview-Old Bethpage district, after spending five years in the 1,700-student East Williston system.

Lewis, who came to New York from Jamaica as a teenager in the early 1970s, believes that her success in running high-achieving suburban districts conveys a message that people need to hear in a time when immigration is a political hot button.

"Immigrants do come to this country, and they do make a contribution," the former mathematics and science teacher said. "It's an honor to be a voice for public education."

On Wednesday evening, Lewis took the oath as president of the state superintendents' council for the 2018-19 school year. The ceremony will be held at a meeting in upstate Cooperstown of the group's executive board and delegates.

The Albany-based council, which traces its origins to an earlier group founded in 1883, provides research, professional training and advocacy for public education. Lewis is the seventh superintendent from Nassau and Suffolk counties to serve as the council's president in the last 20 years.

At the Cooperstown meeting, Lewis in her acceptance speech repeated, with a variation tailored for her educational colleagues, the poet Emma Lazarus' words inscribed on a plaque within the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:



Plainview-Old Bethpage schools chief Lorna Lewis is the new president of the state superintendents council.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled children yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to our schools and we will bring out the giftedness in all."

Lewis, now in her 60s, spent her childhood in Jamaica's capital of Kingston. She was raised by an aunt who was a schoolteacher and principal, and who instilled in her a passionate belief that a solid education was the sure route to upward mobility.

Lewis still remembers the words of a song she memorized in school, with lyrics by Desmond Dekker, a popular Jamaican singer-songwriter:

Labor for learning before you grow old,

Because learning is better than silver and gold.

Silver and gold will vanish away,

But a good education will never decay.

At age 16, Lewis enrolled at Fordham University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in

physics. She went on to obtain a master's degree in the same subject from Rutgers University and a doctorate in science education from Teachers College, Columbia University.

In 1979, Lewis began teaching math and science at Collegiate School, an exclusive prep academy in Manhattan where students included the children of composer Andre Previn, violinist Itzhak Perlman and acting director Lee Strasberg. She later took a series of administrative jobs on Long Island, including science chair in Rockville Centre, science director in Uniondale and deputy superintendent in Three Village.

At the state level, Lewis has served as co-chairwoman of a curriculum committee for the superintendents' council, and as an outspoken critic of some state educational policies. Last year, she contended that high failure rates on a Regents geometry exam had created a situation where students "are being discouraged from moving to a higher, more challenging level of math."

State officials have responded that such exams are written largely by teachers themselves.

"She is a superstar among superintendents," said a former employer, William Johnson, the schools chief in Rockville Centre. Johnson, widely regarded as one of the region's foremost educational innovators, was president of the state council in 2001-02.

As chief administrator in Plainview-Old Bethpage, Lewis steered her district through a rocky financial situation during her first year in office, taking a temporary pay freeze and negotiating a partial freeze with the local teachers' union. Her salary for 2018-19 will be \$298,700, according to state records.

District voters approved a \$49.8 million bond issue in 2014 that was used for renovations and improvements including roof and window replacements, air conditioning, auditoriums and tennis courts. Meanwhile, increases in annual budgets have allowed the local high school to expand daily schedules from eight periods to nine.

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CORRECTION

Oyster Bay Town Councilwoman Rebecca Alesia recused herself and Councilman Anthony Macagnone abstained Tuesday on a resolution to pay former Town Supervisor John Venditto's legal fees in a civil case. Their actions were incorrectly stated in a story Wednesday.

THIS DATE IN HISTORY

1838 Britain's Queen Victoria was crowned in Westminster Abbey.

1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie, were shot to death in Sarajevo — an act which sparked World War I.

1939 Pan American Airways began regular trans-Atlantic air service with a flight from New York for Marseille, France.

1968 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Uniform Monday Holiday Bill, which moved commemorations for Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day and Veterans Day to Monday, creating three-day holiday weekends beginning in 1971.

1978 The Supreme Court ordered the University of California-Davis Medical School to admit Allan Bakke, a white man who argued he'd been a victim of reverse racial discrimination.

2013 Tens of thousands of supporters and opponents of President Mohammed Morsi rallied in Cairo, and both sides fought each other in Egypt's second-largest city of Alexandria, where two people were killed and scores injured.