

# Back in good standing

Freeport district and school removed from state's 'need improvement' list

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ALBANY — Freeport's 6,800-student school district and its 1,040-student Caroline G. Atkinson Intermediate School have regained their good academic standing lost a month ago, state and local officials announced Monday.

Jubilant local school administrators said early Monday that the district had appealed low state academic ratings assigned under a new, nationally required accountability system, and that the state Education Department under Commissioner MaryEllen Elia had consented. Elia aides later confirmed the appeals ruling.

"We are proud of all we have accomplished, and we will continue to build on that success to ensure all students reach their potential," Freeport Superintendent Kishore Kuncham said in a prepared statement.

State education officials, who spoke on background, added that the appeals ruling was based on additional data supplied by Freeport after the initial ratings were issued. Freeport's upgraded status will be revised on the department's website and in other records in the months to come, those officials said.

The Freeport system and

Atkinson Intermediate were among 15 districts and 34 individual schools, respectively, in Nassau and Suffolk counties that were listed on Jan. 17 as needing academic improvement. The ratings, issued by the state in compliance with federal law, covered a total of 106 districts and 370 schools statewide.

State education authorities, asked Monday if any other school systems had won appeals, said they would need more time to check their records.

The new ranking system, one of many used over the years in an effort to boost academic achievement, complies with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, signed into law with bipartisan support in 2015.

Under the law, schools are designated as needing Comprehensive Support and Improvement if their academic weaknesses are widespread among students, or as needing Targeted Support and Improvement if their problems are more limited. Atkinson Intermediate initially was identified as a CSI school, and Freeport as a Targeted District.

Sanctions on districts and schools designated as CSI and TSI are relatively light in the first years of enforcement



Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia confers with Roger Tilles at Monday's Regents meeting.

under the new system — essentially limited to drafting improvement plans and showing yearly progress in boosting student achievement.

However, Roger Tilles of Great Neck, who represents Long Island on the state's policymaking Board of Regents, noted during a board meeting Monday that poor academic marks can have psychological and economic impacts that go

well beyond any official penalties.

"There are consequences to being placed on the lists, as many superintendents have told me, in the way a district is looked at by its residents and by those who may be thinking of moving in," Tilles said.

The state's new ratings are the first that take into account the number of students boycotting state tests, as well as

other factors such as scores in English, math and science, class attendance and success in advanced courses. That has made the ratings especially controversial on Long Island, where boycotts have swept up about 50 percent of eligible students in grades three through eight.

Federal law requires at least 95 percent of eligible students to be tested annually in English and math.

## How PSEG is powering up electronic billing

BY MARK HARRINGTON  
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PSEG Long Island, in its latest initiative to encourage customers to stop receiving paper bills in the mail and turn to electronic copies and payments, is near the end of a campaign that will switch some users automatically unless they opt out.

In an email sent in recent weeks to about 200,000 customers PSEG is showing the bare legs of a woman in an orange skirt trying on a pair of orange shoes — the PSEG color — urging customers to "Try pa-

perless billing on for size!"

The campaign tells customers they can try paperless billing, which sends them PDF versions of their bill attached to emails, includes a transition period in which recipients receive both paper and electronic bills for the next three bills. It offers customers the option of paying their bill via the email or regular mail, and says if they decide to keep paperless billing, "it's yours automatically."

But customers who want to keep their old paper bill have to take action to stop the automatic switch-over.

"Not your style?" the email says. "... Click here to keep your paper bills. You'll receive only the first bill by email."

At last year's end, 297,498 customers had enrolled in paperless billing, a sharp increase from 2013, when just 90,077 did.

Rick Kowalski, 79, of East Patchogue, said while he hasn't gotten one of the emails, he intends to opt out if he does. But he isn't happy with the way PSEG is forcing an opt-out.

"It seems a little sneaky, number one; and number two, I'd rather have something in front of me that I can make a check to,"

like an old-fashioned paper bill, he said.

Paperless billing helps the utility by reducing mailing costs and saving trees, while encouraging customers to use electronic payments. Electronic payments have also jumped from around 5 million in 2013 to just under 7 million at last year's end.

David Gaier, a PSEG spokesman, said the utility has sent out the message to some 200,000 customers.

Thus far, he said, the utility is seeing a 75 percent "adoption rate," meaning only around 25

percent have opted out.

"The reason we're doing an opt-out is that there's a lot of evidence and data . . . that the adoption rate increases significantly only if and when customers can actually experience the benefits," Gaier said.

He added PSEG has made it "very easy to opt out, with a single mouse click on the mail."

For those who don't read the email, he said, "there are notices in each of the following three monthly paper bills letting them know that they'll be moving to paperless unless they opt out."