

George Junior Republic Union Free School District

Website Transparency

MARCH 2022



OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER
Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller

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Report Highlights

George Junior Republic Union Free School District

Audit Objective

Determine whether the George Junior Republic Union Free School District's (District) website provided the public with transparent and comprehensive financial information.

Key Findings

Although District officials maintain a website, certain financial information was either not posted or comprehensive, resulting in a lack of transparency. This limits the community and other interested parties from readily accessing and reviewing documents to make informed decisions.

Officials did not post the following information they were required to include on the District's website:

- External audit reports
- Original and final annual budgets, and
- Board meeting minutes

Key Recommendations

- Ensure that required and helpful financial and administrative information is posted to the District's website in a transparent and comprehensive manner.

District officials agreed with our findings and recommendations and indicated they have initiated or planned to take corrective action.

Background

The District, a special act school district, was created by the New York State Legislature in 1908 and is located on the grounds of the William George Agency for Children, a private residential housing facility in the Town of Freeville in Tompkins County. The District provides educational services for the residents of the housing facility and students bused from area school districts in grades 7 through 12.

The District is governed by a Board of Education (Board), composed of seven members, two appointed by the New York State Education Department Commissioner and five appointed by the Board of the William George Agency for Children. The Board is responsible for the general management and control of District finances and educational affairs. The Superintendent of Schools (Superintendent) is the chief executive officer responsible for the District's day-to-day management under the Board's direction. The Business Coordinator oversees the Business Office and maintains financial records and prepares financial reports.

The Superintendent is responsible for the overall content of the District's website.

Quick Facts

2020-21 Budgeted Appropriations	\$8,994,156
Enrollment	190

Audit Period

July 1, 2020 – August 31, 2021

Website Transparency

School districts operate to provide public education services for students. The public's right to know the process of decision making and to review the documents leading to actions is basic. Access to such comprehensive information should not be difficult for the public to obtain.

School districts are required to post certain information on the school district's website to help enhance the public's access to basic information. Further, a school district following best practices and guidance should use its website as another tool to communicate its financial position and condition.

How Should School District Officials Provide Comprehensive Financial and Administrative Information Transparently to the Public?

School district officials can provide comprehensive financial records and other information to the public in a transparent manner by making the information available on the school district's website. Information should be shared with the public in a complete and clear manner and be prominently displayed on the school district's home page or be easy to locate on the website.

Officials are required to post certain information on a district's website while other information is not required to be posted but can provide greater transparency when shared with a district's taxpayers. Information officials are required to post to the school district's website include audit reports, corrective action plans (CAPs), the original and final annual budgets, any board-adopted written multiyear financial plan and any other information a district's board determines must be made available on the district's website.

In addition, community members and other interested parties may find other documents helpful in evaluating the budget and keeping them informed. Such documents may include planning documents, budget-to-actual results, board agendas and meeting minutes, newsletters, press releases or other materials on school district operations. Lastly, contact information for the board and how to obtain records should be made available so that the public and interested parties have a way of contacting the board directly or reviewing records.

Financial and Administrative Information Was Not Posted on the District's Website

While officials maintained a website, none of the required financial information, such as the most recent external audit report or the original and final annual budgets, was posted to the website as of our initial visit on July 20, 2021. Audits are an integral part of the District's system of checks and balances and provides accountability to the public. The budgets provide a detailed plan of the District's budgeted appropriations (proposed spending) and means of financing (estimated revenues and reserves).

...[N]one of the required financial information... was posted to the website as of our initial visit. ...

In addition, other helpful information, like the Board members' names and contact information, meeting agendas and minutes and budget-to-actual reports, was not posted. Board meeting agendas and minutes were required to be posted per Board policy and provide the public with information about the Board's decision-making process. Budget-to-actual reports that include actual revenue and expenditure information provide support for budgetary estimates and help the community and any other interested parties understand the District's budget status. The website did contain information on the process to request records, but did not provide the Board members names or contact information.

Officials did not conduct any internal audits during our audit period or create and adopt a written multiyear financial plan; therefore, nothing was posted on the website for these items. Because a comprehensive written multiyear financial plan helps officials and the public see the impact of fiscal decisions over time and the effect on District priorities and goals, we encourage the Board to develop a multiyear financial plan and post it to the District's website.

On July 24, 2021, during our field work, officials attempted to correct the deficiencies by posting the 2020-21 fiscal year Board meeting minutes and draft packets,¹ which included some of the required financial information and a list of the Board members without any contact information. However, the financial information that was posted was not easily located on the website. Instead of being displayed under the "District Documents" drop-down menu or its own header, such as "Financial Information", it was included within the Board draft packets under the header "Board Members." Furthermore, the financial information still lacked the final approved 2020-21 budget and monthly budget-to-actual reports.

Because officials did not provide and post comprehensive financial and administrative information the community and other interested parties are limited from readily accessing information and reviewing documents to make informed decisions.

The financial information that was posted was not easily located on the website.

What Do We Recommend?

The Superintendent:

1. Should ensure that all required and helpful financial and administrative information is posted to the District's website in a transparent and comprehensive manner.

The Board:

2. Should prepare, adopt and post a written multiyear financial plan to the District's website.

1. Draft packets are sent to Board members prior to the official monthly Board meetings and include the meeting agenda and various financial and other reports.

Appendix A: Response From District Officials

The George Junior Republic Union Free School District

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March 18, 2022

Ann C. Singer, Chief Examiner
Statewide Audit
State Office Building, Suite 1702
44 Hawley Street
Binghamton, New York 13901-4417

Dear Ms. Singer:

The George Junior Republic Union Free School District is in receipt of the findings and recommendations outlined in your Draft Audit Report: George Junior Republic Union Free School District Website Transparency 2021M-212. An exit conference to review the draft findings of the audit was held between the Comptroller staff and the District on February 24, 2022. The District would like to thank the Comptroller staff for their diligence, professionalism and courtesy in conducting their duties associated with this audit.

The George Junior Republic Union Free School District has reviewed the report of examination regarding our District website and agrees with the findings of the audit. This audit response to the draft findings will also serve as the Corrective Action Plan, or CAP.

Key Findings:

Although District officials maintain a website, certain financial information was either not posted or comprehensive, resulting in a lack of transparency. This limits the community and other interested parties from readily accessing and reviewing documents to make informed decisions. Officials did not post the following information they were required to include on the District's website:

- External audit reports
- Original and final annual budgets, and
- Board meeting minutes

Key Recommendations:

Ensure that required and helpful financial and administrative information is posted to the District's website in a transparent and comprehensive manner.

Corrective Action:

The District is in the process of bringing a newly designed page to our website to be fully implemented May 01, 2022. Once that is fully online, the page will include all financial information in an easily accessible location in one folder. Folder will include

- Original or final annual budgets
- External audit reports
- Budget-to-actual reports with revenue and expenditure information
- Board Meeting Agendas and Minutes
- Board members' names and information about how to contact them

I appreciated the opportunity to review these findings with officials from the Comptroller's Office and have reviewed them with district personnel. Although the district did make an attempt to correct much of these items during the course of the audit, I feel confident that the district will make the necessary adjustments to how we post school budget information to ensure that our community can more readily access such.

Sincerely,

Sonia L. Apker

Superintendent of Schools

Cc: Patrick Perry, Board of Education President

Anita Fowler, School Business Official

Appendix B: Audit Methodology and Standards

We conducted this audit pursuant to Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article 3 of the New York State General Municipal Law. To achieve the audit objective and obtain valid audit evidence, our audit procedures included the following:

- We interviewed District officials to gain an understanding of the process for approving, finalizing, posting and maintaining certain financial information on the District's website and reviewed the administrative permissions of six employees with access to the website.
- We reviewed District policies to gain an understanding of the information required to be posted to its website.
- We created a hypertext markup language (HTML) file that was a snapshot of the District's website on August 4, 2021 to provide a single date of reference during audit testing.
- We reviewed the District's website on July 20, 2021, August 4, 2021, and November 16 and 24, 2021 to determine whether the District was providing the public with transparent and comprehensive financial information. We looked for the Board draft packets and meeting minutes for 2020-21 fiscal year and the financial data included within (after District officials posted them on the website on July 24, 2021), budget documents (original proposed and final annual), a multiyear financial plan, budget-to-actual reports of revenues and expenditures, the 2018-19 fiscal year external audit and CAP, and any internal audits and CAPs, if available. We selected this financial information to be included in our audit because of the historical risk related to the lack of transparency of this financial information to the public.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

The Board has the responsibility to initiate corrective action. A CAP that addresses the findings and recommendations in this report must be prepared and provided to our office within 90 days, pursuant to Section 35 of General Municipal Law, Section 2116-a (3)(c) of New York State Education Law and Section 170.12 of the Regulations of the Commissioner of Education. To the extent practicable, implementation of the CAP must begin by the end of the next fiscal year. For more information on preparing and filing your CAP, please refer to our brochure, *Responding to an OSC Audit Report*, which you received with the draft audit report. The CAP should be posted on the District's website for public review.

Appendix C: Resources and Services

Regional Office Directory

www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/pdf/regional-directory.pdf

Cost-Saving Ideas – Resources, advice and assistance on cost-saving ideas

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Fiscal Stress Monitoring – Resources for local government officials experiencing fiscal problems

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/fiscal-monitoring

Local Government Management Guides – Series of publications that include technical information and suggested practices for local government management

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Planning and Budgeting Guides – Resources for developing multiyear financial, capital, strategic and other plans

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/resources/planning-resources

Protecting Sensitive Data and Other Local Government Assets – A non-technical cybersecurity guide for local government leaders

www.osc.state.ny.us/files/local-government/publications/pdf/cyber-security-guide.pdf

Required Reporting – Information and resources for reports and forms that are filed with the Office of the State Comptroller

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/required-reporting

Research Reports/Publications – Reports on major policy issues facing local governments and State policy-makers

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/publications

Training – Resources for local government officials on in-person and online training opportunities on a wide range of topics

www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government/academy

Contact

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www.osc.state.ny.us/local-government

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