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# East Ramapo sells Hillcrest for use as yeshiva again

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(Photo: Mareesa Nicosia/The Journal News)

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East Ramapo officials have completed the \$4.9 million sale of Hillcrest Elementary School to an ultra-Orthodox Jewish group for use as a private school.

The closing, on Friday, becomes the latest chapter in the thorny history of school board actions related to the former public school building, situated on nearly 12 acres on Addison Boyce Drive in New City.

It's the second time in about four years the property has been sold to Avir Yakov by the district, where Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who send their children to private schools have dominated the school board since 2005.

The first sale, in 2010, was annulled by the state education commissioner after parents challenged the transaction, calling it a sweetheart deal for the

religious community. The school board's appraiser later pleaded guilty to a fraud-related misdemeanor.

The state Attorney General's Office charged the appraiser as part of an ongoing investigation into the contentious sales and leases of Hillcrest and Colton elementary schools to yeshivas. Avi Vardi was accused of taking a \$5,000 bribe from Avir Yakov to falsify his appraisal.

School officials haven't been charged with wrongdoing related to the deal. Allegations they were involved with the theft of public school property to benefit the ultra-Orthodox communities are part of an ongoing federal civil rights lawsuit filed by hundreds of East Ramapo residents.

The plea bargain for the Hillcrest appraiser came four months ago, about the time the school board approved the sale to the girls yeshiva for the second time.

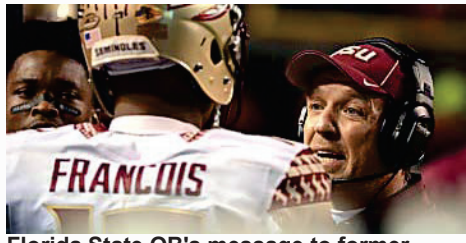
School officials announced the closing in a statement Friday and said the proceeds would be used to restore the district's reserves and "help support future public school programs." It follows the sale of Colton Elementary to another religious group in July for \$5.1 million.

Spokesman Darren Dopp indicated that board members took pains to ensure this sale "was at or above fair market value" and that the four-month gap between approval and closing was due partly to the district "endeavoring to comply with an extra level of

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anticipated scrutiny to the transaction."

"(The board) wanted to make sure that everyone looking at the transaction could see that it was handled properly," Dopp said.

The state has not been involved with the new sale and isn't involved in decisions on how proceeds are used, Education Department spokesman Jonathan Burman said Monday.

The district closed Hillcrest over parents' objections in 2010 amid incorrect projections of declining public school enrollment. Parents also have [challenged the building lease](#) to Avir Yakov.

Avir Yakov lawyer Fred Berman did not return a request for comment. An Avir Yakov employee declined to comment on the sale or the congregation's plans for the property, which is near the border of the Hasidic village of New Square.

The deal follows new [recommendations by a state fiscal monitor](#) that a state watchdog be given veto power over school board decisions to ensure financial solvency and equity for public school students.

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