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July 23, 2012

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons

FROM: Christopher D. Cerf
Acting Commissioner

SUBJECT: Program Update

I am writing to report on several important developments related to our efforts to support your work in improving New Jersey's schools. Earlier this year, New Jersey was one of the first ten states to receive a waiver from the US Department of Education under No Child Left Behind. In exchange for this waiver, we developed a new school accountability system that more accurately measures school performance using both growth and proficiency on state tests. Most importantly, it also gives the large majority of districts far greater flexibility while focusing the state's resources towards improving our lowest-performing schools.

This is a fundamental shift in the theory of action of the state Department of Education. Rather than allocating our resources across every school in the state, we believe that we should empower high-performing districts with greater freedom to run their schools with less state interference. However, for the lowest-performing five percent of schools in the state, and the ten percent of schools with the largest in-school achievement gaps or lowest-performing subgroups, we intend to play a much more intensive role in helping those schools implement the eight turnaround principles identified by the federal government.

As part of this effort, we have developed seven Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) to ensure that we have on-the-ground support from expert educators to help these schools improve. In addition to better aligning state resources, we have also sought outside resources to help improve our ability to support these schools without having to divert resources away from other programs that we offer to schools across the state. Last month, we announced \$490,000 in grant funding from Startup: Education and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation to help us provide training to the expert educators in our RACs and to scour the country to identify successful school turnaround models.

Today, I am pleased to announce that we are entering into a partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to provide even more support to this effort. This partnership, which will be funded through a grant from the Broad Foundation of \$1.5 million, will help us to do two things. First, CCSSO will provide resources to help us continue to recruit the best and most talented educators from within New Jersey and across the country to be part of our RACs. Second, CCSSO will help to leverage their experience and expertise to help us enhance our supports to low-performing schools and to help us identify successful public school models for possible replication within the state.

For those of you who are not familiar with the organization, CCSSO is the non-partisan,

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professional organization that supports state education Commissioners across the country, similar to the way the Association of School Administrators supports Superintendents in New Jersey or the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association supports school leaders. CCSSO currently works with 49 of the 50 states and their board of directors is comprised of representatives from Massachusetts to Utah. Given their extensive relationships, CCSSO is an ideal partner to help us identify successful interventions for schools that have shown evidence of turning around in other parts of the country. Too often in education we try to reinvent the wheel and develop school programs from scratch rather than learning from our counterparts. For example, we will take a close look at state programs like the Achievement School District in Tennessee or the Recovery School District in Louisiana to see if there are lessons for New Jersey that will help us support continuous improvement in our struggling schools.

Race to the Top

In a related vein, I'd also like to report on the progress we have made in deploying the \$38 million we received in federal Race to the Top funds. As you recall, we are distributing half of these funds to districts across the state, while spending the other half on state-directed work. In both cases, however, our goal is to make sure that these resources are expended in a manner that aligns directly with the achievement-centered framework of our NCLB waiver.

With respect to the \$19 million we are distributing to districts, over the past several months we have overseen a comprehensive process with the 322 districts participating in at least one of the five following eligible project areas: Transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), STEM Education, an Instructional Improvement System, Teacher Evaluation, and Charter School Development. We have worked with districts on enhancing their plans in order to ensure the funds are used in the most effective manner to help them achieve the goals for their schools outlined in their applications. The funds spent directly by the state will be used for the creation and enhancement of systems necessary to support the work of districts in the project areas.

Some additional details on the five project areas and the ways in which we and districts are utilizing these funds are as follows:

1. Transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- *State-level work:*
 - As one of the 45 states to adopt the Common Core State Standards, we are developing the NJ Model Curriculum which will be in alignment with the CCSS. More on the NJ Model Curriculum can be found here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/modelcurriculum/>.
 - The Department completed the creation of the NJ Model Curriculum for Math and ELA at the end of June 2012 and we are currently in the process of creating aligned assessments.
- *District-level work:*
 - Districts are investing in professional development designed to help teachers:
 - understand the new content requirements of CCSS;
 - develop engaging lessons designed to meet the CCSS;
 - create formative assessments to assess student progress on the CCSS and State Learning Objectives (SLOs);
 - build out full units of lessons; and
 - to facilitate lesson planning aligned to SLOs.
 - Districts are also investing in the technology necessary to carry out the professional development.

2. Instructional Improvement System (IIS)

- *State-Level Work:*
 - As part of our commitment to supporting the continuous development and improvement of our educators, the Department is investing in development and rollout of an online

Instructional Improvement System (IIS) that will serve as a platform for teachers, administrators, and district staff to access content standards, NJ model curriculum, formative assessments, and standards-aligned instructional resources. The IIS will be a tool to drive instructional improvement, collaboration and student achievement.

- The Department will also make sub-grants to LEAs to support training, implementation, and sustainability of the system in districts.
- *District-Level Work:*
 - Districts plan to use the funds to upgrade their technology infrastructure, to increase their bandwidth, and to provide training on the use of the system.

3. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Education

- *State-Level Work:*
 - In conjunction with the transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the Department will be using funds to for the creation of model curriculum and assessments aligned to the CCSS and NJ CCCS.
- *District-Level Work:*
 - Districts are investing professional development to support the transition to the CCSS curriculum and assessments, with a specific focus on Science and/or Math curriculum along with Technology and Engineering.
 - Districts are also dedicating funds towards content-driven professional development led by the Progressive Science Initiative (PSI) or Progressive Math Initiative (PMI) and are budgeting funds for the necessary technology to implement this PD.

4. Educator Evaluation Systems

- *State-Level Work:*
 - Furthering the goal of ensuring all students are served by highly effective educators and that we are creating a system to provide every educator the feedback and support needed to continually improve upon their practice, the Department announced this week the selection of the 24 districts that will be receiving funds to participate in the second year of the teacher evaluation pilot and the first year of the principal evaluation pilot. You can read the press release about this work here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/news/2012/0717eval.htm>
- *District-Level Work:*
 - In preparation for the state-wide rollout in the 2013-2014 school year, districts are dedicating a substantial amount of funds towards the creation and implementation of new teacher evaluation systems. Funds are being used for training on the evaluation and framework and ongoing support for evaluators and coaches. Additionally, some districts are spending their funds on training for all teachers in the district on the teaching practice framework, standards of effective practice, and how they will be evaluated.
 - Districts are also dedicating funds towards introductory and overview sessions to engage stakeholders and provide information on the framework, while gathering feedback on how to customize the observation instruments and plan the implementation for their schools.

5. Charter School Development

- *State-Level Work:*
 - The Department is investing in strengthening its oversight and accountability of charter schools across the state.
 - You can read more about the schools approved to open this fall and our new Performance Frameworks for charter schools here: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/news/2012/0716chart.htm>
- *LEA-Level Work:*
 - A small number of charter schools are participating in the RTTT and are using funds for professional development and training of future school administrators, the development of enrichment programs and supporting data-driven instruction.

The chart below outlines the number of LEAs participating in each of the project areas and the amount of funds dedicated:

Project Area	State Funding Committed	LEA Detail	
		LEA Funding Committed	LEAs Participating in the Project Area
1. Transition to the CCSS	\$5,667,672	\$4,279,421	91
2. Instructional Improvement System	\$6,303,819	\$1,156,587	23
3. STEM	Funding included in project area #1	\$1,769,556	25
4. Teacher Evaluation	\$3,850,752	\$11,252,117	251
5. Charter School Development	\$2,003,626	\$223,141	9

We all know there is no silver bullet for improving-low performing schools, eliminating the achievement gap, or creating the perfect evaluation system. We at the Department of Education are committed to continuing to research and implement the best solutions to address these issues based on experience of our colleagues here in New Jersey as well as those from around the country. In our NCLB waiver application, we presented a clear and transparent plan to improve our lowest-performing schools and I encourage you to read that plan closely, as it lays out our vision to invest in and support our public schools. I also encourage you to read more about our educator evaluation pilot programs and the work districts are undertaking as part of Race to the Top. All of these efforts will strengthen the foundation of our public schools and I am grateful that in a time of fiscal constraints we have been able to find additional resources to help us in these efforts.

As always, thank you for the tireless work you and your colleagues do on behalf of our students. I am confident that if we as a state work together, we can prepare all New Jersey students, regardless of background, for success in college and career.

Best wishes for a safe and enjoyable summer.

CDC/bm

C: State Board Members
 Senior Staff
 Executive County Superintendants
 Executive County School Business Administrators
 Lee Group.