



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

PO Box 500

TRENTON, NJ 08625-0500

CHRIS CHRISTIE
Governor

KIM GUADAGNO
Lt. Governor

CHRISTOPHER D. CERF
Acting Commissioner

August 15, 2011

Dear Chief School Administrator:

This spring, the Department of Education partnered with Dr. Richard Bozza, Executive Director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators (NJASA), to conduct a survey of our Chief School Administrators. The purpose of this survey was to identify where the Department is providing valuable services to our districts and where we have room for improvement. In the spirit of transparency, I wanted to share those results directly with you as well as my thoughts on ways the Department can continue to improve.

On May 4, we issued a survey to all 580 superintendents, and I am grateful that 408 superintendents across the state took time to participate in this survey, an extremely high response rate. Over the last eight months, I've held meetings with superintendents from every county in New Jersey as I traveled the state. The results of this survey echoed the themes that I heard in these meetings. I am attaching the results of the survey to this letter, and I also wanted to share with you a couple of key themes that have resonated with me both in the survey and in those town hall meetings.

There are a number of areas where the Department is succeeding. On the whole, you have told us that you feel well informed in areas such as guidance around federal programs and fiscal controls, as well as guidance on provisions for support services.

However, the main takeaway for me is that our work at the Department too often strays from our number one priority: to help all students in New Jersey graduate from high school ready for college and a career. There is clearly more work that can be done to ensure the Department's efforts are more closely aligned with the goal of helping districts improve student outcomes and to better coordinate with you so that we are actually complementing your efforts. Specifically:

- You do not always feel that the Department is responsive to your needs, whether when you need technical advice or when you seek help setting goals and priorities for your district. When we do communicate with you directly, the Department's communication is not always coordinated or easy to digest.
- You often feel micromanaged, and constrained by the heavy burden of compliance which results from the combination of state and federal regulations.
- There is general consensus that QSAC is not achieving its purpose of identifying the true performance of districts or providing helpful data with which to improve.

- A number of our systems are outdated and need to be modernized. Specifically, many of you mentioned our data collection processes and other reporting systems as particularly onerous.

These are real concerns, and we have spent significant time at the Department discussing solutions. While there are no band-aid fixes to any of these issues, there are certainly steps we can take both in the short and long term to refocus on ensuring that each district has the support it needs to prepare students for college and career. Below are a few initial steps we have already taken and will continue to improve upon:

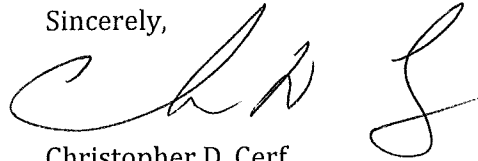
- As you know, I recently reorganized the Department around four key priorities, with the goal of helping to reorient our focus on the levers we believe most affect student performance: academics, performance and accountability, talent, and innovation.
- We agree that the Department is often very compliance focused without the necessary attention to the quality of services we provide and whether they impact student achievement. We have several initiatives underway to address this, including a thorough review of all current regulations through the Governor's Education Transformation Task Force, led by our Chief of Staff Dave Hespe.
- I have asked for a thorough audit of all of the Department's communications, both inbound and outbound, to make sure that we are tightly coordinated and that we have the right focus on customer support.
- We have already presented to the State Board a plan to streamline and refocus the QSAC process going forward, both by limiting the number of indicators as well as the reporting requirements from districts.
- We are continuing to improve our reporting and data collection processes, including the migration of the data collection processes from DOENet. Five of the eight remaining DOENet data collection requirements are in the final stages of being replaced. Plans are being developed to replace the remaining three, including District Budget and Audit Summary.

I fundamentally believe the best way for us to support high performing schools and districts, or to help turnaround our lowest performers, is not by simply issuing regulations and thinking that compliance equals student learning, but instead providing the tools and autonomy for success, and holding each of our schools accountable for performance. I want to communicate directly that while certainly a state Department of Education cannot change overnight, we are committed to making the types of cultural and functional changes that are necessary to support high-performing schools, and to intervene in schools that struggle.

The only way to improve an organization is to have an honest, fact-based picture of how those it serves believe it is performing. Just as we hold schools accountable for getting results, we must hold the Department accountable for addressing your concerns and improving our performance. As such, in order to track our progress going forward, we will be issuing this survey each year to identify where we are improving, and where we still have room to grow. I will also provide you with a status report in 3 months on the specific progress we are making based on your feedback.

I hope you will continue to share your thoughts with me, either directly or through our Executive County Superintendents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CD Cerf', written in a cursive style.

Christopher D. Cerf
Acting Commissioner

CDC:JB:pjc/broadcasts/supt survey ltr

c: State Board of Education
Richard Bozza
NJLEE Group
Garden State Coalition