



State of New Jersey
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Governor

KIM GUADAGNO
Lt. Governor

CHRISTOPHER D. CERF
Acting Commissioner

November 18, 2011

Dear District Superintendents and Charter School Leaders:

On Monday, the New Jersey Department of Education submitted an application to the federal government seeking to waive certain provisions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) beginning in the 2012-13 school year. A copy of our complete waiver application can be found at the link below. I wanted to share a couple of thoughts with you on our reasons for applying for the waiver, as well as the development of our new accountability system.

<http://www.nj.gov/education/grants/nclb/waiver/>

NCLB remains an important piece of legislation because it put a renewed focus on student achievement and accountability in K-12 education and highlighted the needs of typically underperforming student populations. However, the law suffers from some significant flaws, including its failure to give credit for progress and its one-size-fits-all approach to labeling schools as failing. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced in September that he will consider proposals from states seeking to waive provisions of NCLB if they indicate a strong commitment to improving student performance, reducing the achievement gap, and turning around underperforming schools.

Accountability systems do not exist for their own sake but as part of an overall strategy to advance student learning and ensure that children graduate from high school ready for college and career. In developing our waiver application, we outlined a new accountability system that will focus on helping all schools constantly improve, while focusing our resources on turning around the lowest performing schools in the state.

In developing a new accountability system, the Department will create three tiers of schools, which will be identified using both growth and absolute proficiency:

- **Priority Schools:** The Department will identify the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools across the state using proficiency, growth, and graduation rates. Any non-Title I school that would otherwise meet the same criteria will also be designated as a Priority School.
- **Focus Schools:** The Department will identify at least 10 percent of Title I schools as Focus Schools. These schools will be selected from Title I schools that are not categorized as Priority Schools and will be identified based upon achievement gaps between subgroups and low performance or graduation rates among particular subgroups. Any non-Title I school that would otherwise meet the same criteria will also be designated as a Focus School.

www.nj.gov/education

- **Reward Schools:** The Department will identify Reward Schools based on high proficiency levels or high levels of growth, including progress toward closing achievement gaps. This will allow for a range of schools from across the state to attain Reward status, regardless of their absolute starting point.

We present additional details on the methodology for identifying these schools in the application, and I encourage each of you to take a close look at the accountability section. As part of the application, the federal government required states to develop a list of which schools would fall into each category, if the list was run today. In order to develop that list, where possible we used several years of data, up to and including data from the 2010-11 school year. We also used graduation rates using the newly required federal methodology for calculating graduation rates. We have been working with each of you on those graduation rates over the last several months, and will announce those new graduation rates in the coming weeks.

However, note that these lists are preliminary only, and will have no consequences or rewards for schools. We will develop an official list of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools for next school year using 2011-12 data.

Led by the Department's new Regional Achievement Centers, we will work with districts to create customized interventions to turn around Priority and Focus Schools, based on their individual needs. Unlike in NCLB, there will not be a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, but instead we will target state resources and support to address the specific struggles of these schools.

Though the Department will focus its interventions on the roughly 200 Priority and Focus Schools, the waiver allows for considerable flexibility to districts in supporting all of the non-categorized schools throughout the state. Where things are going well, we believe that districts should have the flexibility to support those schools as they see fit.

The waiver application does present a plan to ensure that all schools continue to improve in two ways. First, we will develop and publish new school performance reports for every school in New Jersey to replace the current bifurcated School Report Card and NCLB Report Card publications. Among other data points, the reports will include progress towards closing achievement gaps, comparison to "peer schools" with similar demographics, performance on state tests over time, and additional college and career readiness data points. These public reports will help districts focus on areas of low performance in their districts. Second, we will encourage all schools to take advantage of professional development and other support opportunities available for Priority and Focus Schools.

In addition, we will also identify Reward Schools that are demonstrating strong performance or high growth. These schools will be eligible for financial rewards, and we will present opportunities for these schools to share best practices so that their successes can help improve performance across the state.

The new accountability system is one component of the plan to improve performance across the state. In the application, we also present a detailed and comprehensive plan to act in two other areas:

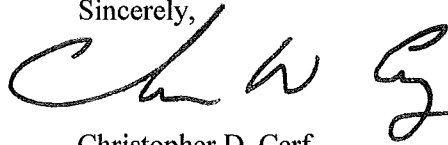
1. Implementing college and career ready expectations for all students, including a detailed implementation plan for the Common Core State Standards in K-12 ELA and math; development of model curriculum in corresponding grades; and rollout of assessments tied to the Common Core State Standards through the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Consortium.

2. Supporting effective instruction and leadership by developing and implementing statewide teacher and principal evaluation systems that take into account both student outcomes and effective practice.

I appreciate all of the suggestions that you submitted over the last seven weeks as we developed this application. We received hundreds of comments from districts, parents, and teachers through this process. A number of the proposals in this application came directly from those suggestions.

I encourage you to take a close look at the application, which presents a coherent vision for how the state Department of Education will help all schools constantly improve and turn around persistently low-achieving schools. We are confident that this application is one more step to ensure that all students in New Jersey, regardless of birth circumstance, graduate from high school ready for college and career.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ch D Cerf". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ch" and last name "Cerf" being the most prominent parts.

Christopher D. Cerf
Acting Commissioner

CDC/gm