



**Christie Administration Moves Forward to Turn Around Lowest-Performing Schools in the State, Provide Targeted Support for Improvement, and to Reward Successful Schools**

***Department announces final list of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools as part of state's new accountability system***

**For Immediate Release**

**Contact:** Justin Barra  
Allison Kobus  
609-292-1126

**Date:** April 11, 2012

**Trenton, NJ** - The Christie Administration today announced the final list of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools as part of its new statewide accountability system developed through flexibility from No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The Department of Education will invest heavily in the state's lowest-performing schools (Priority Schools) and provide targeted supports to schools with specific achievement concerns (Focus Schools) to ensure all students are on track for college and career readiness. For the first time, these school designations were developed by taking into account both growth and absolute proficiency to provide a more complete picture of school performance and the needs of individual schools.

"We are entering a new age of school accountability in New Jersey, one that frees high-performing schools from state interference and defines a stronger investment from the state to turn around pockets of persistent academic failure," said Acting Commissioner Chris Cerf. "No longer can we stand on the sidelines when our schools are not preparing students in New Jersey to graduate from high school ready for college and a career. There is a moral imperative for the state to take a stronger role in persistently failing schools and to work collaboratively with communities and districts to give all students a fair chance."

In February, New Jersey was one of the first states in the country to receive a waiver from certain provisions of NCLB. Most importantly through this waiver, schools are no longer subject to the antiquated NCLB accountability provisions and sanctions required for not making Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP). Instead, the Department has developed three categories of schools based on a three year average of growth and proficiency. In New Jersey's waiver application submitted on November 14, 2011, the state developed a draft list of priority, focus, and reward schools using preliminary data for illustrative purposes only. Today, the Department is releasing a final list using final test scores and graduation rates from the 2011-12 school year.

**Priority Schools**

A Priority school is a school that has been identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years, or any non-Title I school that would otherwise have met the same criteria. There are 75 Priority Schools. The types of Priority Schools are—

1. Lowest-Performing: schools with the lowest school-wide proficiency rates in the state. Priority schools in this category have an overall three-year proficiency rate of 31.6% or lower.
2. SIG school: schools that are part of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

**Focus Schools**

A Focus School is a school that has room for improvement in areas that are specific to the school. As part of the process, Focus Schools will receive targeted and tailored solutions to meet the school's unique needs. There are 183 Focus schools. The types of Focus schools are—

1. Low Graduation Rates: High schools with a 2011 graduation rate lower than 75%.
2. Largest Within-School Gaps: schools with the largest in-school proficiency gap between the highest-performing subgroup and the combined proficiency of the two lowest-performing subgroups. Schools in this category have a proficiency gap between these subgroups of 43.5 percentage points or higher.
3. Lowest Subgroup Performance: schools whose two lowest-performing subgroups rank among the lowest combined proficiency rates in the state. Schools in this category have an overall proficiency rate for these lowest-performing subgroups of 29.2% or lower.

**Reward Schools**

A Reward School is a school with outstanding student achievement or growth over the past three years. There are 112 Reward Schools. The types of Reward Schools are—

1. Highest-Performing: schools that are the highest-performing in the state, in terms of school-wide proficiency, subgroup proficiency, and graduation rates.
2. Highest-Progress: schools that have high levels of student growth, measured using their median Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) over time.

Beyond these three categories, the vast majority of the 2,500 schools in New Jersey will not be categorized as Priority, Focus, or Reward Schools. In these schools, districts will have autonomy over the necessary investments and supports to sustain strong performance or strengthen areas for improvement. Beginning in the 2012-13 school year, the Department will develop individual growth targets for each school and subgroups within that school and will report those targets in a new School Performance Report. These new School Performance Reports will also include measures of college readiness and comparison to peer schools across the state. School Boards will be required to have public discussions on the findings of these reports to ensure transparent communication about school performance. Through these new School Performance Reports, district administrators and educators will have unprecedented actionable data to drive their improvement efforts.

## Interventions and Supports

As part of the development of this new accountability system, the Department of Education is undergoing a fundamental shift from a system of oversight and monitoring to service delivery and support. Over the past year, the Department has been developing seven field-based RACs staffed with expert school improvement teams that will work directly with Priority and Focus Schools to improve student achievement. These RACs will be on the ground and ready to support Priority and Focus Schools by September 2012.

The interventions necessary for Priority Schools and the supports required for Focus Schools will be different based on the individual needs of the schools. Because Priority Schools have low school-wide achievement, interventions will address school-wide concerns. By definition, Focus Schools have targeted areas of weakness in the school, such as specific subgroup performance. The state's supports in those schools will be much more targeted to the specific area of weakness.

"Unlike under NCLB, where all schools received the same consequences regardless of their performance challenges, we now have the ability to target our interventions to areas of need," said Acting Commissioner Cerf. "When schools have targeted problems we need to develop targeted solutions rather than develop one-size-fits-all improvement plans."

After completing individual school reviews to identify the needs of specific schools, the RACs will work closely with district and school leadership to implement eight proven federal turnaround principles. Those principles are:

1. **School Climate and Culture:** Establishing school environments with a climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations;
2. **School Leadership:** Ensuring that the principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort;
3. **Standards Aligned Curriculum, Assessment and Intervention System:** Ensuring teachers have the foundational documents and instructional materials needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted;
4. **Instruction:** Ensuring teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students;
5. **Use of Time:** Redesigning time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning;
6. **Use of Data:** Ensuring school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture;
7. **Staffing Practices:** Developing the skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers; and
8. **Family and Community Engagement:** Increasing academically focused family and community engagement.

Although the RACs will focus on schools as the main unit of change, significant collaboration will take place with school districts to ensure cohesive, sustained improvement. Interventions in Priority Schools will be closely monitored and will continue for a three-year period, providing schools the time needed to implement required changes and demonstrate improvement in student achievement. Priority Schools that fail to implement the required interventions or fail to demonstrate required improvement in student academic achievement may become subject to state-ordered closure, replacement, or other action.

"Through dedicated and focused state investment, we are hopeful that we can provide every student in the state with the same opportunities to succeed in life," said Acting Commissioner Cerf. "But let me be clear: we will be impatient if schools are unwilling or unable to improve, and we must be willing to close or use any other means necessary to give students assigned to those schools better options."

Reward Schools will be recognized for either high overall performance or significant growth over the past three years through public recognition and will have the opportunity to share successful practices with educators across the state. Reward Schools that received Title I funds may also be eligible for financial rewards through Title I funds.

A full list of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools can be found here:

<http://www.nj.gov/education/reform/PFRschools/>

An overview of the Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) can be found here: <http://www.nj.gov/education/rac/>