

**ASSEMBLY BUDGET COMMITTEE TESTIMONY FROM THE  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
DELIVERED BY  
ACTING COMMISSIONER KIMBERLEY HARRINGTON**

Good Morning Chairman Schaer, Vice Chairman Burzichelli, and Members of the Assembly Budget Committee.

I'd like to introduce Kevin Dehmer, Assistant Commissioner/Chief Financial Officer and Karin Garver, Chief of Staff

I am pleased to report to you today regarding the Department of Education's efforts to ensure all New Jersey students have access to the high-quality educators and educational experiences they deserve.

Since last fall, I have been proud to serve the students of New Jersey as Acting Commissioner and to continue the tradition of this administration in its unwavering dedication to fulfilling our obligation to prepare all students for life beyond high school.

Our approach at the Department has been simple. We make sure students are at the center of every conversation and every decision and we routinely listen to our New Jersey families, educators, broader community members and most importantly our students themselves. Finally, through our initiatives and priorities, some of which we will discuss today, we seek to continually improve how we as a Department support schools and districts to lift the voices of all of our students.

This dedication to our students is evidenced by this administration's commitment to providing funding for education. Accordingly, in the FY18 budget, the Governor has proposed for the seventh consecutive year, the highest level of state aid supporting pre-k-12 education in New Jersey's history.

In this proposed budget of \$13.8 billion for public education, no school district will receive less in K-12 formula aid than it received in fiscal year 2017. This administration has made funding education a priority as education spending now represents 39 percent of the total statewide budget – the highest in recent history.

This amount, which is an increase of \$523.2 million from fiscal year 2017, includes direct aid to schools and debt service for school construction, as well as pension, Social Security and post-retirement health benefits for teachers. Of the total funding, \$9.2 billion is direct aid to be distributed across New Jersey school districts – an increase of more than \$16.1 million from fiscal year 2017 levels. State support for school aid has increased by over 46 percent since Governor Christie took office in 2010.

Additional highlights include an increase of state aid to ensure more students have a choice of high quality education, regardless of their race, economic status, zip code, language or disability. This choice is balanced with our responsibility to tax payers and our communities that, in New Jersey, we are increasing high-quality public school options and safeguarding the public dollars being used to support our students.

### ***Charter***

Accordingly, this administration remains committed to providing expanded educational opportunities for students by increasing the number of available high-quality charter seats. On March 1, we announced that 22 charter schools were granted expansion requests as part of the charter school renewal process or through an amendment request. The fiscal 2018 budget is projected to support more than 55,000 students in charter schools. The Department also continues to maintain its high standards for public charter schools by closing schools that fail to provide a quality education. Since 2010, this administration has closed 20 low-performing charter schools for poor academic performance or organizational and fiscal issues.

## ***Choice***

This administration is proposing a total of \$55 million in Choice Aid, providing another option for parents when selecting a school that best fits their child's needs. With this funding, we expect to serve more than 5,200 students in 129 public school districts.

## ***Scholarship Grants***

Governor Christie's proposed budget also includes \$1 million for scholarship grants to allow children in chronically failing schools to attend alternate educational placements. This pilot program will create opportunities for children with no other options.

Last, the administration seeks to continue to fund at their fiscal year 2017 aid levels, all aid categories that were created over the past four years – Under Adequacy Aid, Supplemental Enrollment Growth Aid, Per-Pupil Growth Aid, PARCC Readiness Aid and Professional Learning Community Aid.

Next, I'd like to discuss some of our initiatives in greater detail.

## ***Accountability and Supports: ESSA and Performance Reports***

We are proud to report the submission of our state plan as required by the *Every Student Success Act*, which replaced *No Child Left Behind*. As it was collaboratively developed by diverse stakeholders from all over the state, we believe the plan captures the direction we in New Jersey want to take and how we intend to challenge and support all of our children.

Based on the input from our many stakeholders, we have committed to emphasizing student growth above all other measures of school performance, because a student's growth from year to year, regardless of his or her starting point, provides a clear and objective measure of how a school is supporting a student. Additionally, we maintain our relentless dedication to ensuring all students, particularly those in historically disadvantaged student groups, have equal access to high-quality educators and educational experiences. Our plan ensures that when we look at school performance, we are always checking to see if *all*, not just some or even most, students are making the progress they need to be prepared for life beyond high school.

While compliance with federal laws represents a small piece of all of the educational work we do here in New Jersey, the process of developing the plan provided an important reflection point to understand what we've done in the past and how we can learn and improve moving forward.

In particular, at the Department we have been focused on how we can improve the way in which we identify the schools that most need our support and then provide those supports in the most helpful, coordinated manner. So, moving forward, we are looking at all of our federal, state and local systems of accountability and support and determining where can we clarify, align and simplify these systems.

We heard, and I understand as a parent and lifelong educator, that communities are always looking for more transparent, usable and understandable school and district information. We want to know about the type and quality of educational experiences our students are receiving. This includes academic data as well as information about a school's culture and climate.

On April 4, we released our school year 15-16 school performance reports, with some improvements based on stakeholder feedback such as the web-based functionality and additional metrics. Over the next year, my staff and I are collecting additional feedback on these reports to make sure our parents, educators and broader communities are provided with the information they need to improve practice, make decisions, and use that information to engage in community conversations to drive helpful changes for students.

### ***Maintaining High Standards***

Clearly, providing helpful and transparent information to communities is contingent upon setting meaningful standards for all children and then being able to gauge whether a student is progressing towards those high standards. For over forty years, and throughout my entire experience as a New Jersey public school student, parent and educator, we have administered a statewide assessment to inform schools and parents about how students are progressing academically. During this long history, the annual academic check-up for students has been one part of the foundation that has made us a model of educational excellence around the country.

The reason we stand out nationally is because we have always had the courage to set high standards for all of our students, and then have sought the assessments that provide the most honest depiction of how well our students are meeting those expectations. When there has been a better way to set the standards, or a more honest way to assess, as a state, we have evolved and adjusted.

In 2016, our tradition of continually enhancing our standards and our assessment tools continued. In May, the State Board of Education adopted, in full, the recommendations of committees of educators who updated and improved our New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Additionally, in our third year of PARCC, we expect positive trends to continue, just as we saw from year one to year two, where a higher percentage of students met or exceeded expectations in nearly all subjects and grade levels, and more students participated in each of the PARCC tests. Thanks to the tremendous job done by school administrators and teachers, information from PARCC tests has been used to improve classroom instruction and to support student academic progress toward college and career readiness.

The Department continuously seeks feedback from educators on opportunities to enhance the testing experience for our students. As you might remember, last year we condensed the testing windows from two down to one and reduced the testing time and test questions. This year, based on input from educators, schools will now be able to administer PARCC mathematics assessments over the summer for students who complete Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II.

Along with setting high standards and annually assessing our students' progress towards those standards, we believe we have a moral obligation to make sure that students have an honest understanding of whether they are college- and career-ready when they leave our high schools.

Unfortunately, in years past, the state had lower expectations for students and required an assessment for graduation that did not truly provide students an

honest picture of their academic achievement. As a result, children and their families had to pay for this reality through staggering costs of remedial classes and were more likely to drop out of college. Last year, the State Board of Education adopted graduation assessment requirements that provide students what they need – an academic measure that better indicates whether students are in a position for success after high school.

### ***Conclusion***

Progress over the last few years in New Jersey has been tangible. This administration's focus on educator evaluation and preparation policies has led to higher numbers of effective teachers staying in our classrooms. Newark, Paterson and Jersey City school districts are on a strong path to return to full local control. In Camden, at the time of the state's intervention in 2013, fewer than half of students were graduating from high school. In 2016, 70% of students graduated high school in four years and the dropout rate was almost halved.

Our pride points about our students and their incredible educators and families are endless. But I cannot tell you today we are where we need to be in helping every child realize his or her full potential. Such a goal is only achieved through true engagement and rich conversations that are at all times focused first on our children, their hearts and their voices.

I am so incredibly proud and thankful for this chance to work with students, parents, educators, broader community members and you as our civic leaders. I look forward to hearing your ideas, perspectives and questions about how we can collectively ensure all of our students are receiving the high-quality education they deserve.