

An Education Department incapable of doing the job

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BY DAVID G. SCIARRA

Policy-makers and educators have long complained about the inability of the state Education Department to manage New Jersey's public education system.

These complaints boiled over at a legislative hearing last year. Veteran Sen. Joseph Doria (D-Hudson) exploded in frustration over the failure of state education officials to respond to requests for information on how education dollars are spent. Pounding the table, Doria said he and fellow lawmakers were defrauding the public by passing laws requiring strict accountability from local school districts, only to discover later that the state had not followed up to see if districts complied with those laws.

Then something unusual happened. Legislators brushed aside the education commissioner's promise to reorganize the department, something new commissioners do. Instead, they directed that an outside management consultant be brought in to evaluate the department's problems and recommend solutions. Gov. Jon Corzine also signed on.

The evaluation, conducted by national consulting firm of KPMG, was released in late August and is available at <http://www.state.nj.us/education/genfo/audit>. This is required reading for anyone who cares about the future of our public schools.

KPMG paints a bleak picture of a dysfunctional organization, lacking any coherent direction, disconnected from outside partners critical to the education enterprise. Among the most serious problems that KPMG found are:

Absence of a credible state plan for improving public education, developed with public input, to guide the work of the department and the state Board of Education.

Little or no coordination and communication among department units.

Lack of qualified, trained staff to carry out basic functions, made worse by a large number of vacant positions.

Outmoded technology and inadequate data collection systems.

No formal staff training and established policies and procedures, creating "an institutional knowledge gap."

KPMG also documents how these organizational deficits disproportionately affect our lowest-performing schools, attended largely by poor, African-American and Latino students. KPMG focused special attention on the state's new monitoring law under which 15 districts have already been identified as needing assistance, with more in the pipeline. Yet the report finds the department lacks the leadership, staff and processes to deliver the support districts must have right now -- to improve.

Taxpayers will also be shortchanged. KPMG found the department unprepared to carry out the new CORE law, a property tax reform initiative to consolidate K-6 and K-8 districts into larger K-12 districts to achieve greater cost efficiencies.

KPMG's findings of an agency in disarray put the ball directly in Corzine's court. Without his personal commitment to tackle this festering problem, it's unlikely we'll have real change. That's why civil rights and advocacy groups are calling on him to convene a panel of educators, business leaders and advocates to chart a course of corrective action, with short and long-term objectives, based on best practices of education agencies in other states. Repairing the department demands executive leadership and sustained effort to bring resources and creative solutions to the task.

And because key legal mandates are at risk, lawmakers must not allow the KPMG report to be swept under the rug. Public hearings are essential to allow KPMG to present its findings, to press for prompt corrective action and to ensure follow-through. Senate President Richard Codey (D-Essex) and Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts (D-Camden) should empower a special joint committee to immediately begin this type of aggressive oversight.

KPMG has proven Doria correct. The state is incapable of carrying out its basic responsibilities to make sure the substantial investment in our public schools is paying off. It's time to end the charade.

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