

Urban Educators Say of New State Reform Efforts: Get real

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When several of New Jersey's government and business leaders recently made a bold promise to re-make the state's public high schools, the foot soldiers at Orange High School could be forgiven a weary sigh.

Not that they disagree with initiatives like boosting math and science requirements, creating new tests, or remodeling huge high schools into smaller, more-manageable units.

It's just that Orange High School, as well as dozens of other urban high schools across New Jersey, is already trying to make those changes as part of the state's last high school reform push.

And at a school where only half the students pass any of the state tests on the first try -- and just one-quarter pass math or science -- teachers and staff are worried less about new initiatives than current demands.

At a staff meeting in Orange the week after the announcement, one topic was a list of students failing to attend small-group sessions designed to foster progress. Teachers said one student ran away from home at the start of the year, while another hadn't been seen for months.

"We're just starting to scratch the surface," said Carolyn Letsche, a business teacher coordinating one of several small communities being forged at the school. "They want us all to be guidance counselors, and I'm not sure every teacher is equipped for that.

"But one of the reasons I took this job is I wanted to prove it could be done," she added. "Maybe not to the level they say, but it can be done."

AN UPDATED MODEL

Gov. Jon Corzine and education leaders, spurred on by the business community, are pressing to reform what they call an Industrial Age model that is no longer working. Following a newer model, embraced in two dozen other states, they are looking to enhance technical skills by requiring students to take courses in biology, chemistry, algebra and geometry.

The reception has been less than enthusiastic, however, in urban districts deemed in need of special assistance by the state Supreme Court's *Abbott v. Burke* school equity rulings. Similar reforms were pressed on those districts several years ago, with only limited success.

Some educators and leaders of the Education Law Center, a Newark group already battling the Corzine administration over funding for the Abbott districts, have questioned where these reforms stand in the wake of the new proposal.

They have said the reforms under way will suffer unless the state provides districts with much-needed help, but so far, state officials said no additional money would be made available. State Education Commissioner Lucille Davy is to meet with Abbott educators today to discuss the plan.

"These large high schools need the resources and innovation more than they need all the standards and tests," said Stan Karp, a veteran high school teacher leading the law center's advocacy effort in high school reform.

"I'm not saying the concerns are not legitimate, but it can't be one size fits all," he said. "This can't be just about what the top needs."

In Long Branch, another of the Abbotts, superintendent Joseph Ferraina lauded the goals but also echoed concerns about the challenges his teachers face.

"If it was only academics, I'd feel okay, but there is so much more we're dealing with these days," he said. "Yes, it's realistic, but what will it take to do it?"

The challenges are similar at Orange High School, where more than half the 1,100 students are from low-income families, according to state data.

Chemistry teacher Charles Osborne is quick to point out success stories, including one recent graduate who had his college chemistry requirement waived after passing a test. But requiring every student in the school to pass such a test -- as Corzine's plan calls for by 2011 -- would be a sea change.

Fewer than half the state's high schools even require chemistry now, and most of the students who take it at Orange High School do so in a broader science course, Osborne said. To ratchet that up is possible but will take a lot of time and training, not to mention equipment and labs, he said.

"To get every kid there, you would need an enriched program where you could really control their time," Osborne said. "We don't always have that."

Still, Orange was one of the districts chosen to pilot the Abbott initiative and is further along than most. The school has made significant progress in instituting one of the initiatives: splitting its students into small communities.

College-bound sophomore Ashley Meredith and freshman Le'Andrea Johnson, friends in the performing arts community, said the smaller groups have made a difference in breaking down barriers with teachers. They also have no problem with tougher math and science standards or new statewide tests. But they know the challenges are daunting. Ashley talked about one of those new tests, in biology, which she'll be taking next month.

"Yeah, we have already gotten the worksheets on that, and the teacher is starting to talk about it," she said. "When I see these tests, I can freak out a little."