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## **OUR CHILDREN OUR SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN**

*Minutes to April 10, 2007 Meeting with Commissioner Davy*

### **Participants**

#### ***Representing the State***

Donna Arons, Special Assistant to the Commissioner, NJDOE  
Lucille Davy, Commissioner, NJDOE  
Jessica deKonninck, Director of Legislative Services, NJDOE,  
Fruqan Mozun, Assistant Counsel to the Governor

#### ***Representing OC/OS (endorsers of the Letter of March 6, 2007)***

Dennis Brunn, SEOC  
Rosie Grant, PEF  
Susan Gubar, BlueWaveNJ  
Jerry Harris, NJBIC\*  
Lesley Hirsch, ELC  
Thomas Puryear, NAACP of the Oranges and Maplewood  
Cynthia Rice, ACNJ  
Daniel Santo Pietro, HDANJ  
Kathleen Witcher, NAACP State Conference, NAACP-Irvington  
*\*Facilitating on behalf of OC/OS*

### **Overview**

The meeting occurred at the New Jersey Department of Education, 4<sup>th</sup> floor conference room, from 1:00-2:30 pm on Tuesday April 10, 2007. The purpose was to discuss the Department's recent reorganization, specifically as it relates to functions formerly conducted by the Abbott Division, plans for a management audit of the Department (and its relationship to JR3 which required an evaluation), and efforts by the Department to engage stakeholders in policy and programming moving forward.

### **Discussion**

Jerry Harris opened the meeting by providing a brief history and overview of Our Children/Our Schools (OC/OS) and reiterating the purpose of the meeting. Each member introduced him/herself and we began to ask questions which we had previously emailed to the Commissioner. What follows are the questions and notes from the ensuing discussion:

#### ***a) What changes have been made to the NJDOE organizational chart since it was approved by the State Board of Education in its March meeting?***

Two offices have been renamed, including the Office of Abbott Services

The Divisions of Finance and Field Services are now a direct report to the Commissioner and to the Special Assistant.

#### ***b) In operation, how will the changes you have proposed to the NJDOE organization support high levels of achievement and reduce the achievement gap in New Jersey (e.g.,***

**how will division of departmental functions across divisions be addressed)?**

The purpose was to improve the organization of our staff and work internally. There were some dramatic changes to upper management.

The Department also wants to see better coordination across the divisions.

The Deputy Commissioner will have no other responsibilities except to coordinate and integrate the work of the various different divisions. Willa Spicer is the DC, and will act as educational coordinator in the Department.

Eliminated the Abbott division because the Department did not think that it was the most efficient way to address the needs of kids in need across the district. It created an Abbott v. non-Abbott schism. The Department wants to break down Abbott v. non-Abbott walls.

There are changing demographics in New Jersey and there are more and more poor children living in the other districts.

The Department will work with districts differently because of the varying levels of need in (this applies to both Abbott and non-Abbott districts). Student performance varies widely in the Abbott districts. In some, achievement is rising because the districts were "doing what they needed to do to make a difference." Others are not up to par, but are on the right track. The last group has flat or declining achievement levels. In those struggling Abbott districts the Department needs to interact with them "in a very different way," implying that the support they would receive would be a great deal more intensive.

There are better and worse districts in general and better and worse Abbott districts. The Department needs to differentiate the way it interacts with them. The Department needs to better utilize its resources to bring different levels of intervention to bear. NJQSAC is a first important step in determining the needs of districts for Department support.

There will still be an Abbott services office. The Commissioner recognizes that there are still "services" that need to be provided especially to Abbott districts. (*When pressed, however, the Commissioner did not specify which if any services would be administered or overseen out of the new Abbott Services Office.*)

***c) How do you plan to use the departmental evaluation (required under JR3) to ensure that the NJDOE is structured to most effectively and efficiently meet its goals? (Asked after e below during the meeting itself.)***

Commissioner Davy did not interpret the legislation as requiring a top-to-bottom review of the department.

The state bidding process is time-consuming and the legislature wants us to have this completed in 6 months.

*In response to our offer to go back to the Legislature with her and request more time:*

The Commissioner would not agree to go back to the Legislature for more time.

It seems premature for a comprehensive evaluation. So much of what the Department does has not yet been done for the first time. For example, the first round QSAC evaluations will not be done until June. The Department is working on a funding formula. No one can know what it needs to do our job until it has done some of these tasks the first time.

*In response to questions about the qualifications of the firms who were invited to bid:*

Commissioner Davy would not talk about the firms' qualifications because the bidding is still incomplete.

*In response to question about stakeholders receiving advance notice, and data driving the reorganization:*

With regard to P-3 and other policy issues, the Commissioner stated that her 18-month tenure and meetings with stakeholders – including some organizations represented at the table – qualify her to understand what changes were needed.

The Commissioner has met with SEOC and been very accessible over all.

The Commissioner plans to take the audit results seriously and use them to inform further improvements to the Department. There will be a stakeholder engagement period after the report is in and before the findings are presented to the Legislature. *(OCOS estimates that any process would have to take place in late-June to early July.)*

***d) What are the expected impacts and outcomes of the changes you made to the Department? Specifically, how will the changes improve the DOE's ability to accomplish its goals? Specifically, please describe the formation/status change of offices and divisions including early childhood, facilities, research, Abbott, and district and school improvement.***

Before the reorganization, there were three different groups in the Department who were working in a completely un-coordinated way on early literacy issues. The Commissioner wanted to coordinate and integrate those efforts.

She will oversee cross-divisional teams on such issues as equity and secondary education reform. *(Need to know what other cross-divisional teams she is charged with creating and what resources she will have to support them.)*

Penelope Lattimer is heading up the Division of District and School Improvement. She has impeccable credentials and has had years of experience as an educator and administrator in Abbott districts.

***e) Under the reorganization plan, who will be responsible for the work that was previously conducted by staff of the Division of Abbott Implementation? How will this improve implementation of the Abbott remedies?***

The question is not what resources can be added to what exists already but rather what is happening with existing resources.

If the Department finds it necessary, we are open to asking whether there are additional programs that can be brought to bear.

Irvington did not have a curriculum that was aligned to the standards until recently and did not maintain copies of curriculum at the central office.

The State will keep trying to do a better job. The Commissioner acknowledged that the Department didn't live up to its responsibility in the state takeover districts. There was no state takeover. She stated that OC/OS and other Abbott stakeholders need to hold the districts accountable locally.

Penelope Lattimer named James McBee director of the Office of Abbott Services. He previously worked in the Abbott Division.

Office of Abbott services will take the lead in bringing the various technical services available under the Division of District and School Improvement together for the Abbott districts.

Other staff include: Linda Morse, director of School and district improvement services; Diane Sconyers, director of policy and planning; Mary Jane Curbinsky (sp?), language and literacy; Jacqueline Jones, early childhood.

Still looking for an Assistant to the Commissioner in charge of research and evaluation.

**f) How do you plan to improve the quantity and quality of the Department's interaction with key stakeholder groups?**

Parent involvement is critical. Commissioner Davy recalled speaking with Steve Block about this issue 10 years ago. It will require consciousness raising on both parts: districts and parents.

Commissioner Davy considers herself to have been a grass-roots activist in the early days.

It is important to have stakeholders engaged.

The Commissioner spoke with Penelope Lattimer; they are both concerned about parent involvement in the urban districts. Both "sides" need work: the districts and the parents need to learn how to communicate with one another.

Any one of the OC/OS groups should feel free to call Jessica deKonnink on NCLB to discuss NCLB, state bills (especially pending bills), and other issues related to legislation.

The Commissioner invited Jerry to reach out to her on OC/OS' behalf. Each party can reach out on its own of course too. *(On OC/OS behalf, Jerry indicated that we would each continue to reach out on our own, but that we would also like a dialog with the Department as a collective entity that is concerned with common issues. What we are asking for is "to be in the kitchen" in the decision making phase and not be called upon ex post facto.)*

*Suggested that NJDOE resume holding regular public hearings to inform the public.*

*In response to a direct question about the DOE's intent to dilute Abbott:*

"Let's be clear. There is no intent to dilute Abbott. We also have to remember that we are working within the confines of a state budget that is not limitless." New Jersey's

commitment to urban education is “unparalleled.” Even New York’s current efforts pale in comparison to the amount of money New Jersey puts in to urban education and the high quality preschool we have. “The plan is to provide that Abbott quality for every child in the state.” We are bringing about some very substantial change in secondary education.

***Final remarks***

The Commissioner invited OC/OS to send a delegation to a school funding stakeholder meeting on April 25 at 3:30 in the same room. The first meeting is anticipated to provide an overview of what has happened to date. It is considered to be the first in a series. Included to date are ELC, GSC, the educational associations (PSA, ASA, NJEA), and some vocational interests. The Department is looking to be as open and transparent as possible in developing the funding formula.

***Next Steps***

Send official record of meeting to Commissioner.

Send OC/OS delegation to the April 25 meeting.

Prepare for public participation in the rollout of the Departmental evaluation.

Send Commissioner information about relevant groups to be included in high-intensity intervention districts (Irvington, Camden, Asbury, for example)