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Commissioner Hespe Proposes Continuing the Transition to Local Control By Giving Jersey City School Board Power over Fiscal and Budget Issues

Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe today recommended to the State Board of Education that the Jersey City School Board be given control over the district's budget and finances.

The Jersey City school system, the second largest in New Jersey, has been under state control since 1989. In acknowledgement of the academic strides made by the district since state takeover, last July Commissioner Hespe and the State Board of Education established a framework for the gradual devolution of school governance to the Jersey City community. With the concurrence of the State Board and Commissioner, the state superintendent overseeing the district agreed to refrain from using his veto power over curriculum and policy matters, thereby giving the Jersey City Board of Education control in these two areas.

"The Jersey City Board of Education, under the leadership of its former president, Gregg Butterfield, exercised power over curriculum and policy matters successfully," said Commissioner Hespe. "The board clearly demonstrated progress in its decision-making abilities. But the board has recently undergone a significant transformation. As a result of the school election, a third of the board's members are new, as are its president and vice president. In addition, the work done with the community by the previous board leadership clearly indicates that the community supports a return to local control but is concerned and wants the process to incorporate safeguards to prevent backsliding.

"The continued gradual devolution of authority that I am proposing today reflects this need for slow movement while allowing the state to continue to monitor the ability of the board to responsibly govern the district at even higher levels of authority. We are optimistic that the board will establish a working relationship among its members, and we will see high-level leadership emerge."

In addition to this continued devolution of authority to the board, the commissioner recommended the establishment of a 13-member transition team to develop and recommend a blueprint for the final stages of returning Jersey City schools to local control. The team will be appointed by the Commissioner and serve in an advisory capacity. It will submit its plan to the Commissioner and State Board by November 1, 2000. This team will assist the district board of education in galvanizing community support and commitment and bring a diversity of views and experience to developing a blueprint for the final stages of the transition.

The Commissioner will select the team's chairperson. Members will include two representatives of the Jersey City Board of Education, two members from the business community, a representative of the local teachers' union, a representative of the local association of school administrators, one support staff representative, one representative of the mayor, two representatives from the higher education community and three civic/community leaders. The director of the Department of Education's Office of State-Operated Schools, the state district superintendent and the Hudson County superintendent will participate in the meetings as non-voting members.

"The transition team will recommend a timetable for return to local control, activities that must occur along the route, benchmarks to measure progress, and specific strategies to solidify community involvement and support during and after the transition and to protect against backsliding," Hespe said. "Legislation will be required in order to implement the final stages of that transition plan. We would like to see that legislation in place by the end of the year.

"The key to success in Jersey City is strong, positive leadership at the district and school level," the Commissioner noted. "The state cannot make this happen by fiat. It can only foster leadership. The district must have positive leadership to be effective, and those leaders must seek community input and support. It is our hope that the transition team's plan will assist the district administration and board in developing this capacity in Jersey City.

"The school board of a state-operated district, as it transitions to local control, has a special responsibility to the children, the community and the state. Public scrutiny of its actions will be intense, and public confidence must be priority."

The Commissioner said he believes that the best way for the board to demonstrate its leadership capacity and its commitment to integrity and accountability is by developing enhancements to the district's code of ethics and professional responsibility.

Hespe said that is the reasoning behind a stipulation that a more rigorous code of ethical conduct be adopted by the school board as a condition of the board exercising expanded authority. Although the Commissioner will furnish the board with sample codes of conduct and provide guidance regarding desirable enhancements to its existing code, the board itself will propose what changes it wishes to make and the penalties for violations. Upon the Commissioner's approval, the board will administer the code. The Commissioner will also have the power to enforce the code and hear appeals.

To provide the board with greater resources, the commissioner will designate a liaison to the board as well as a higher education representative. These individuals should be allowed to participate in board discussions, but they would not be able to vote.

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