



## NJDOE News

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### **Commissioner of Education William L. Librera Testifies Before Senate Budget Committee; Reports on Education Accomplishments and Outlines FY2004 Spending Plan**

#### ▶ [Commissioner's Testimony](#)

Commissioner of Education William L. Librera highlighted the myriad education accomplishments by the McGreevey Administration over the last year in his testimony to the Senate Budget Committee today on the proposed \$8 billion in state education aid to New Jersey's public schools, which comprises one-third of state spending in the Fiscal Year 2004 budget.

Commissioner Librera cited the strong early literacy programs, consolidation of Abbott resources, enhanced opportunities to attract and retain quality teachers and a continued emphasis on promoting multiple and diverse paths to success for all New Jersey students, among the accomplishments by the administration during the past year.

"As the Governor has said repeatedly, this is not the budget we wanted to submit, but we are confident that this budget will enable school districts to weather the year with some belt tightening, creative solutions, innovative programs and cooperative agreements," Commissioner Librera said.

"We will do whatever we can to provide districts with the resources of our department and generate funding sources for programs outside the department," Librera said. "Even in this tight budget climate, the state and the school districts have created new programs, launched new initiatives, passed referenda, renovated buildings and generally moved ahead this past year."

Commissioner Librera reinforced the Governor's unwavering commitment to education throughout his testimony. In looking forward to fiscal year 2004, Commissioner Librera told the committee that state funding was not decreased in any of the 616 school districts statewide and that three out of every four districts is seeing an increase in state aid.

Unlike last year, state funding was not held even in this year's proposed budget, Librera said. Rather, the budget proposes a \$200 million increase for 2004 — approximately \$97 million to go toward debt payments for new school construction and an additional \$100 million increase in direct aid to communities for public education.

That fact alone, Commissioner Librera said, is emblematic of Gov. McGreevey's commitment to education in New Jersey.

Although the 119 wealthiest school districts received the same funding as last year, Librera said 454 school districts received increased funding this year. In addition, Abbott districts will receive \$50 million of the \$100 million in direct school aid.

"No school district in our state will receive fewer dollars in formula aid than it did this past year," Librera said.

During his budget address, Commissioner Librera also focused on the many educational accomplishments of the McGreevey Administration's first year in office. Chief among them, the Commissioner said, are early literacy initiatives, reforms in Abbott implementation and a host of other educational initiatives designed to improve both learning and testing in New Jersey.

#### **EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVES**

During his testimony, Commissioner Librera reiterated the DOE's progress in the McGreevey Administration's central initiative: the early literacy program. The initiative is based on clear research that concludes children who read at or above grade level by third grade will have much greater success for the duration of their school years, Librera said.

Among the programs implemented in the last year that address the early literacy initiative are: Reading First, Reading Coaches, and the Governor's Book Club (found online at the following address: <http://www.state.nj.us/bookclub/>).

In support of the Reading Coach initiative, the DOE has proposed an appropriation of \$9 million as the second installment of a four-year, \$40 million commitment by Gov. McGreevey to the program. Last summer, the department trained 30 reading coaches who, in turn, worked with teachers and students in 80 schools across the state.

Commissioner Librera said state literacy resources will be supplemented by approximately \$20 million in aid for the new federal Reading First program, which has the same goal as the state programs. As Librera testified, DOE has already seen evidence that such early literacy initiatives as previously mentioned are succeeding, especially in high poverty areas.

More than 60,000 students throughout the state and 1,500 teachers are participating in the Book Club, which encourages children to, as Gov. McGreevey has said at many a public appearance, "Turn off the TV and start reading for fun."

### **CHANGES IN ABBOTT IMPLEMENTATION**

Commissioner Librera testified that the DOE last year consolidated all functions of the Abbott implementation mandates into one division. In order to assess the status of the reform process that began five years ago, the DOE has required all Abbott districts to submit a three-year operational plan to the DOE by July 15 of this year.

That plan, Librera said, will include an evaluation of the first four years of Abbott implementation. The DOE intends to use this information to simplify the Abbott budgeting process for the 2003-04 school year while at the same time incorporating the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act.

Librera also updated the DOE's decision to petition the state Supreme Court to grant flexibility in previous Abbott mandates. The DOE has closed the funding gaps, Librera said, and now the priority is to close the achievement gap between students in disadvantaged schools and their counterparts throughout the state.

The FY04 budget provides \$142.4 million in the DOE and \$114.5 million in the Department of Human Services to continue the expansion of Abbott preschool programs, Librera said. For the 2003-04 school year, the DOE projects an enrollment increase in Abbott preschool programs of 15.5 percent, from 36,465 to 42,135, which represents more than 80 percent of all Abbott-eligible 3- and 4-year-olds.

"The Abbott preschool program is showing great promise for helping children to have early success in school," Librera said. "The coordination of these programs is yielding increased Abbott preschool enrollment. It also enables us to ask the New Jersey Supreme Court to allow the Abbott districts to focus their resources on early literacy and mastery of the Core Curriculum Content Standards."

### **CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

Commissioner Librera said continued professional development for teachers statewide remains a top priority of the McGreevey Administration. The budget includes \$2 million for teacher mentoring aid. According to national statistics, about 40 percent of teachers leave the profession in the first five years. The DOE and McGreevey Administration are determined to change such statistics, Librera said, through the mentoring process.

The Administration is also steadfast in its support of National Board Certifications for teachers in the state. Librera said there is a total of \$850,000 budgeted to assist this goal — \$500,000 in direct services and \$350,000 in grants.

The DOE has worked hard over the last year to streamline the backlog in teacher certification, the Commissioner testified. A technology-based system is close to completion and it will speed up the process to teachers can get into the classroom as quickly as possible.

The teacher shortage, Librera said, is one the DOE and McGreevey Administration takes very seriously. In order to properly address the issue, Librera said the DOE is helping districts through the NJHIRE database on its Web Site. Two years ago, the state provided incentives for preschool teachers in the special needs districts. This year's budget proposes \$619,000 to continue the commitment made to those teachers.

### **OTHER POSITIVE REFORMS**

Commissioner Librera addressed several other successful initiatives during his testimony before the Senate Budget Committee. They included: the New Jersey Performance Assessment Pilot Project, the new NJASK3 (third grade) and NJASK4 (fourth grade) assessment tests, the revision of the Core Curriculum Content Standards, a continued emphasis on professional development for teachers, career academies and the Network of Schools

sharing of best practices.

The Commissioner also addressed the continued need for safe schools, character education through the New Jersey Character Education Partnership initiative and Gov. McGreevey's creation of the New Jersey Schools Construction Corporation, a subsidiary of the Economic Development Authority.

Librera said since the July 2002 inception of the Schools Construction Corporation through December 2002, 145 of the 239 school districts that would have received no state funding under the prior school construction law have submitted one or more construction projects and have been approved to receive almost \$550 million in state funds in the form of debt service aid or grants. This represents 45 percent of the total \$1.2 billion in approvals through December 2002, Librera said.

Not lost in the Commissioner's testimony was a continued emphasis on providing the Department's mission: Providing diverse and multiple paths to success for all the state's children.

"I have listened with Governor McGreevey to the teachers of this state in a series of teacher town meetings over the last year," Librera said. "The input is extremely valuable for helping us fine-tune our professional development initiatives and to improve conditions for teachers in classrooms so that they can be as effective as possible in raising student achievement."

"We have found some of the most effective educational support can come through professional networks that do not require the expenditures of state funds."

For more information about any of the programs addressed or any other issue, please contact the DOE Public Information Office at (609) 292-1126.