

Department of Education Announces Rollout of Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) to Turn Around State's Lowest-Performing Schools

Six RACs Will Work with More Than 250 Priority and Focus Schools Statewide to Implement Turnaround Strategies Beginning in September

For Immediate Release

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Trenton, NJ – Continuing the Christie Administration’s commitment to turning around the state’s lowest performing schools, the Department of Education today announced the launch of seven Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) that will work with schools identified as Priority and Focus Schools through the state’s new school accountability system. The RACs have already begun trainings for over 500 staff from Priority and Focus Schools and will be on-the-ground working with schools beginning in September.

“Failure is not an option for our lowest-performing schools, and so we are making a huge investment in them by providing expert educators to work every day, on the ground, to implement proven school turnaround strategies,” said Commissioner Chris Cerf. “With flexibility from No Child Left Behind, we are able, for the first time, to prioritize our resources on the schools that need them most. We are thrilled that we have been able to hire some of the best educators from New Jersey and across the country to assist in this work.”

The Department of Education has selected Executive Directors for the seven RACs, and complete staffing for the RACs will be announced by the end of August. Based on the needs of the region, each RAC will consist of approximately 10-15 experts ranging from instructional experts to data experts. Though the original plans called for the development of seven RACs, one region in the northwest part of the state contained only five Focus Schools, so that region will merge into one larger “northern” region bringing the total number of regions to six.

To date, the Department has received more than 1,000 applications for the RAC staff. The rigorous interview process has consisted of performance tasks including presenting a professional development session, observing a teaching video and providing feedback, developing an action plan for low-performing schools based on mock reviews, and developing an analysis of student, school, and district level data.

In addition, the Department announced today the hire of Dr. Tracey Severns as the Deputy Chief Academic Officer, who will be instrumental in the implementation of both the RACs and the Common Core State Standards. Dr. Severns brings more than 25 years of experience as a superintendent, principal, and teacher in New Jersey, and most recently was awarded the National Distinguished Principal of the Year Award for 2011 for her work in Mt. Olive. Over the past several years, Dr. Severns has presented to principals and teachers across the state on ways to improve instruction, including the use of data. Dr. Severns will work closely with Chief Academic Officer Penny MacCormack, who was recently selected as the Superintendent of Montclair, during her transition through November 1.

“Penny has done an extraordinary job in setting a vision for school turnaround and both launching the RACs and building a model curriculum to help teachers across the state implement the Common Core State Standards,” said Commissioner Cerf. “We are grateful for her contribution and now turn to implementing a sustainable school turnaround strategy.”

Though the RACs will begin working with schools in September, significant work has already begun to implement turnaround strategies in Priority Schools. The Department conducted school reviews of each Priority School in the spring, which is one of many resources being used to develop customized school interventions. In addition, the Department has reviewed principal placements and curriculum for each Priority School, requiring changes where necessary. This week, over 500 leaders and teachers from Priority and Focus Schools will undergo three intensive days of training by RAC staff before the start of school.

The RACs will be working with schools in the following two categories. A list of individual Priority and Focus Schools can be found at the following link: <http://www.nj.gov/education/news/2012/0411rac.htm>.

Priority Schools

A Priority school is a school that has been identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years, or any non-Title I school that would otherwise have met the same criteria. There are 75 Priority Schools. The types of Priority Schools are—

1. **Lowest-Performing:** schools with the lowest school-wide proficiency rates in the state. Priority schools in this

- category have an overall three-year proficiency rate of 31.6% or lower.
2. SIG school: schools that are part of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

Focus Schools

A Focus School is a school that has room for improvement in areas that are specific to the school. As part of the process, Focus Schools will receive targeted and tailored solutions to meet the school's unique needs. There are 183 Focus schools. The types of Focus schools are—

1. Low Graduation Rates: High schools with a 2011 graduation rate lower than 75%.
2. Largest Within-School Gaps: schools with the largest in-school proficiency gap between the highest-performing subgroup and the combined proficiency of the two lowest-performing subgroups. Schools in this category have a proficiency gap between these subgroups of 43.5 percentage points or higher.
3. Lowest Subgroup Performance: schools whose two lowest-performing subgroups rank among the lowest combined proficiency rates in the state. Schools in this category have an overall proficiency rate for these lowest-performing subgroups of 29.2% or lower.

The RACs will be working with schools to implement the following eight turnaround principles in the coming year.

1. **School Climate and Culture:** Establishing school environments with a climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations;
2. **School Leadership:** Ensuring that the principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort;
3. **Standards Aligned Curriculum, Assessment and Intervention System:** Ensuring teachers have the foundational documents and instructional materials needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted;
4. **Instruction:** Ensuring teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students;
5. **Use of Time:** Redesigning time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning;
6. **Use of Data:** Ensuring school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture;
7. **Staffing Practices:** Developing the skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers; and
8. **Family and Community Engagement:** Increasing academically focused family and community engagement.

Details of RAC locations and leadership:

Region 1 & 2

Counties: Bergen, Morris, Passaic, Sussex, Warren

Office location: Paterson

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 50

Executive Director: Scott Rixford

Bio: Mr. Rixford was most recently the Network Turnaround Officer (NTO) working with School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools in Newark. Prior to this role, he served as the superintendent of Woodland Park and was formerly an assistant superintendent, principal, and teacher in Paterson, NJ.

Region 3

Counties: Essex, Hudson

Office location: East Orange

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 72

Executive Director: Gayle Griffin

Bio: Dr. Griffin was most recently the Network Turnaround Officer (NTO) working with School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools. Prior to this role, she served as the executive director of the Office of Innovation and Change, assistant superintendent, and associate superintendent in Newark. Dr. Griffin also previously served as a turnaround principal in Pittsburgh, PA.

Region 4

Counties: Hunterdon, Mercer, Somerset, Union

Office location: Trenton

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 41

Executive Director: Tim Capone

Bio: Mr. Capone was most recently the turnaround principal at Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, DE. Prior to this role, he served as the principal and assistant principal in schools in Georgetown and Bridgeville, DE, and as a teacher in both Cambridge, MD, and East Hanover, NJ.

Region 5

Counties: Middlesex, Monmouth, Ocean

Office location: Neptune

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 33

Executive Director: Mario Barbieri

Bio: Dr. Barbieri was most recently the Network Turnaround Officer (NTO) working with two School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools in Newark. Prior to this role, he served as superintendent of Bethlehem Township, principal and assistant superintendent in South Plainfield, assistant principal in Wanaque, and teacher in Union Township. In addition, Dr. Barbieri has taught undergraduate education courses at Bloomfield College and Raritan Valley community college and graduate courses at Kean University and Seton Hall University. Dr. Barbieri has also mentored new administrators through the New Jersey Leaders to Leaders program.

Region 6

Counties: Burlington, Camden

Office location: Camden

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 27

Executive Director: David Hardy

Bio: Mr. Hardy was most recently the founding principal of Achievement First East New York Middle School in Brooklyn, NY. Prior to founding the school in 2009, Mr. Hardy served as dean of students at Achievement First Bushwick Middle School, a curriculum support specialist for Miami-Dade County Public Schools, and Language Arts chair, reading coach, and teacher at Madison Middle School in Miami, FL.

Region 7

Counties: Atlantic, Cape May, Cumberland, Salem, Gloucester

Office location: Clarksboro

Number of Priority and Focus Schools: 35

Executive Director: Bob Bumpus

Bio: Mr. Bumpus most recently was an Executive County Superintendent for the New Jersey Department of Education. Prior to this role, he served as a superintendent in Woodstown-Piles Grove Regional and Cumberland Regional School District, and held positions ranging from supervisor of curriculum and instruction, assistant principal, and teacher in Kingsway Regional, Woodstown, and Pittsgrove Township.