



## **Christie Administration Announces Return of Control of Operations and Personnel to Jersey City Schools**

*Commissioner Establishes Working Group to Create a Plan to Return Local Control to Jersey City Schools*

**For Immediate Release**

**Contact:** Michael Yaple  
David Saenz

**Date:** October 7, 2015

609-292-1126

**Trenton, NJ** – The New Jersey State Board of Education today acted on the recommendation of Education Commissioner David Hespe in returning the areas of operations and personnel to local control of the Jersey City School District. Commissioner Hespe also established a working group that is tasked with establishing a plan for returning the final area of instruction and program that would provide full local control to the district by as early as the end of the school year.

The state's school monitoring system – called the New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum, or NJQSAC – is the framework that evaluates districts in five areas of management: operations, personnel, governance, fiscal management, and instruction and programming. State-operated districts that demonstrate functionality in each of the five areas of NJQSAC can regain local control. Jersey City already had governance and finance returned to local control, and today's State Board action returns local control in the areas of operations and personnel.

"This has been a long time coming, but we're seeing the kind of success, particularly under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Marcia Lyles, that is pointing toward a new beginning for the community," said Commissioner Hespe.

The working group established by Commissioner Hespe will include practitioners, school experts and members of the school community, to explore the return of local control in the remaining area under state control, instruction and programming. Commissioner Hespe said the working group would be tasked with creating a plan to address the area of instruction and programming.

The return of each area of local control will be accompanied by a robust and specific transition plan that sets forth expectations and support for the district and board of education. The commissioner reiterated that all transition plans that are developed and approved by the department will focus not only on improving efficiency and effectiveness in operations and academics but also building capacity and accountability in the community to ensure that progress continues and that the abuses that led to state takeover never reoccur. If the requirements of the transition plan are not met, the state will place the district back in intervention status.

"It is clear that community engagement is an important driver of student achievement," said Commissioner Hespe. "If our overarching concern is what is best for the children of Jersey City, then improved community engagement, involvement and decision making must be our goal."

Jersey City became the first state-intervention district in New Jersey after the Kean Administration enacted legislation in 1988 authorizing the state to assume control of failing school districts. State takeover of Jersey City schools occurred the following year.

Judge Kenneth Springer, the administrative law judge who paved the way for the 1989 takeover, described in a 75-page [ruling](#) a system where patronage and nepotism ran rampant in Jersey City schools. The judge also observed that the learning environment was "polluted with the insidious message that school officials lack confidence in the children's abilities. That message is conveyed in many subtle ways, including a curriculum designed for low cognitive functioning, acceptance of poor performance on basic-skill tests and the defeatist attitude, implicit in the testimony of some defense witnesses, that urban children are inherently unruly or disinterested in education."

The report noted numerous fiscal problems, and described that local school officials did nothing to "stop the plundering" of more than \$1 million from the district's self-insured prescription and dental plans. It also found "extreme negligence" of facilities; in one case, describing a teacher valiantly trying to teach a class with "water pouring down the wall" of her classroom. In making the decision to return additional areas to local control, the

department examined the monitoring report that led to the original take over to ensure that all salient issues have been systematically addressed.

More recently, however, the school community has marked a number of accomplishments in school governance and academic achievement. For instance, the district:

- Established a comprehensive, district-wide strategic plan, which is monitored on a regular basis, to provide direction on issues ranging from academics to parental involvement.
- Was the first district in New Jersey to set aside a day for all students in grades 8 to 12 to take the PSAT/SAT at the same time. The district covers the expense of the college-entrance exams.
- Increased Advanced Placement participation, which allows students to earn college-level credits, by approximately 10 percent over the past three years. The number of students receiving a passing grade of 3 or higher has also increased by approximately 10 percent in the same time.
- Increased the integration of technology in the schools. Children have access to Chromebooks and other technologies, and they have blended learning opportunities that combine traditional teaching with online and digital learning.
- Opened Innovation High School last year, providing students with programming on science, technology, engineering and math. New Jersey City University is providing professors to support the school's curriculum.
- Implemented the "Breakfast after the Bell" program so children don't go to class hungry.
- Engaged stakeholders, from parents to the business community. Created an Office of Family and Community Engagement. Formed partnerships with organizations such as the Liberty Science Center to provide opportunities to enrich student learning opportunities. Entered into a partnership with the Panasonic Foundation to support systemic reform in the district.
- Decreased the dropout rate and suspension rate. The dropout rate decreased by 66 percent over the three-year period ending in the 2014-15 school year. Over the same time, there was a 38 percent drop in the number of suspensions.
- Started the Leadership Institute in order to have individuals prepared to fill vacancies that may occur in school leadership positions.

"Everybody in the community understands enormous challenges remain, such as tight budgets, high poverty rates among families, aging facilities and a lack of space for preschool programs," said Commissioner Hespe. "Yet it is heartening to see that the Jersey City school community continues to move in a positive direction."