



NJDOE News

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Abbott School Management Teams Will Be Provided Intensive Training and Technical Assistance

Commissioner of Education Vito A. Gagliardi, Sr. today announced that an intensive training program will be launched later this month for Department of Education and school personnel responsible for the implementation of whole school reform in the Abbott school districts.

The Commissioner also disclosed that the NJ DOE will hire an independent consultant to undertake a four-year study of whole school reform implementation in New Jersey. A request for proposal is scheduled to be issued no later than next month. The study will detail the progress and scope of implementation efforts to date and determine the impact of whole school reform (WSR) on student achievement.

The actions follow the release of a [whole school reform implementation study](#) that was prepared by the George Washington University (GWU) Center for Equity and Excellence in Education, Arlington, Va., and commissioned by the NJ DOE. Researchers from GWU surveyed or interviewed 492 persons actively involved with New Jersey's whole school reform initiative, which is the largest of its type in the nation.

"What we are attempting to do in New Jersey is unprecedented," said Commissioner Gagliardi. "Never before has such a massive undertaking been implemented so quickly and on such a large scale. The George Washington University study confirms what we believed, that while significant progress has been achieved, there is more work to be done, especially in the area of training."

The NJ DOE hopes to facilitate training for members of School Review and Improvement Teams over the summer and local district staffs, including School Management Teams, in September.

Dr. Gagliardi said the GWU study underscores the importance of collaboration if whole school reform is to succeed in improving the academic performance of youngsters in the Abbott districts. "No amount of technical assistance from the state will turn things around unless the districts are committed to making whole school reform work," the Commissioner said. The GWU study stresses "the need of NJ DOE staff and district administrators to work together in order to build their individual and institutional capacity to support schools in the implementation of WSR."

Demonstrating the department's commitment to make whole school reform work, Dr. Gagliardi said he has established an Evaluation Oversight Advisory Board to review the scope of the proposed four-year whole school reform study. The board will also review the GWU study and two previous WSR studies (one by Rutgers University and the other by Seton Hall University) to determine commonalties and make recommendations for possible corrective actions. Neither of the previous studies was commissioned by the NJ DOE.

Serving on the board will be representatives of the Abbott superintendents, state-operated school district superintendents, county superintendents, Education Law Center, Department of Human Services, Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, New Jersey Education Association, New Jersey School Boards Association, whole school reform developers and the New Jersey Federation of Teachers. NJ DOE members will have expertise in the areas of standards and assessment, finance, whole school reform and early childhood education.

"The department has been, and will remain, open to any and all positive recommendations that will help improve educational opportunities for disadvantaged children," Dr. Gagliardi said.

Under a 1998 state Supreme Court order, whole school reform must be implemented in every elementary and secondary school in New Jersey's 30 Abbott, or special needs, districts. A total of 378 schools have already adopted a WSR model. The remaining 56, all secondary schools, will start whole school reform programs this September, bringing the total to 434. Every school has a School Management Team (SMT) that is the building-based planning and decision-making authority. The SMT consists of the school principal, parents, teachers, support staff and community representatives. A School Review and Improvement (SRI) Team, which includes program and fiscal staff from the NJ DOE, support the SMTs. The SRIs operate out of the department's three regional Program Improvement Regional Centers.

The GWU study concludes that the dictates of the state Supreme Court in its 1998 *Abbott v. Burke* ruling created

tremendous obstacles for the Department of Education and made implementation of whole school reform extraordinarily difficult.

The staff of the NJ DOE faced "formidable obstacles," the study states, most notably the "short timeline between the Abbott decision (May 1998) and the beginning of the 1998 school year."

"For the most part, (the NJ DOE) staff have had to learn new ways to think about and do their jobs while actively working to assist schools in the implementation of WSR," the study states. "It is highly likely that the time-intensive struggle to develop this capacity has impacted the smooth implementation of WSR at school levels."

Other "formidable obstacles" confronting the NJ DOE included efforts to change its role from monitoring to providing technical support and the "challenging task of translating the Abbott decision into a well-defined series of action steps."

The GWU study acknowledges Abbott schools and districts also faced high hurdles. "WSR asks Abbott schools and districts to do something different, namely, to manage for results," the report states. The compressed court-imposed timeline limited their "capacity to take on more responsibility for managing schools." The School Management Teams, the researchers found, had little time to learn how to supervise budgets and choose school reform models.

"Individual school reform is a daunting undertaking when one considers the limited success schools have had over the past thirty years in improving the academic achievement of high poverty students," the study states. "WSR strives to scale up reform in over 300 Abbott schools...This is by no means an easy task!"

The study recommends that the financial ramifications of the court's decision need further analysis. However, the researchers emphasized that they were *not* suggesting current Abbott funding levels are inadequate. "The reporting of insufficient funds may mean that districts and SMT members need further training in budget development and reallocation of resources," the study states. "SMTs self-rating of progress made on implementing zero-based budgeting was very low and is another indication that this may be an area where the state should focus assistance."

A total of \$2.9 billion is allocated in the proposed state budget for the 2001-02 fiscal year for the 30 Abbott districts. The funding level is higher than it has ever been and 49 percent of the entire amount of state education aid scheduled to be distributed. The FY02 budget also includes an additional \$248.7 million for potential supplemental aid requests by Abbott districts. Total supplemental aid allocations may be more or less than the \$248.7 million budgeted, depending on the actual need determined through the school budget approval process. Annual funding for the Abbott districts, including the \$248.7 million budgeted in FY02 for supplemental funding, has risen by \$1.3 billion since 1994-95.

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(**Note:** A copy of the GWU study is available from the Office of Public Information.)