



**Coalition for our Children's Schools
Planning and Building Community Schools in New Jersey**

Commissioner of Education William L. Librera
Monday October 28, 2002,

Greetings to members of the Coalition for Our Children's Schools, the Paterson Education Fund, the New Jersey Multi-City LISC, the Education Law Center, and participants in this very comprehensive conference on planning and building community schools.

With the passage of the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, \$8.6 billion is being distributed to school districts across the state as part of the largest, most comprehensive school project nationwide. The act established a new K-12 school facilities construction and financing program through the Department of Education and the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (EDA) for all school districts.

The Department of Education works on the front end of the school facilities process. It is responsible for the educational components of the school building. Our facilities staff members work with local districts on school design.

The primary role for the Office of School Facilities is to act as facilitators and advocates for the children in all 615 school districts to ensure the delivery of a thorough and efficient education, as defined by the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The office is responsible for reviewing the district's facility needs for educational adequacy. The office's focus is to determine whether the district's school facilities projects conform with the facilities efficiency standards and the area allowances per full-time equivalent (FTE) student and determine the eligibility of proposed projects for state funding. It should be noted that the office does not support the direct construction of school facilities projects.

Once the department has pre-approved a district's project, it goes to the Economic Development Authority (EDA). The authority manages all of the steps in the construction process.

Since the school construction program addresses facilities needs in both Abbott and non-Abbott districts, all districts are required to submit every five years a Long-Range Facilities Plan (LRFP) which is reviewed by the office. The state provides 100% of an Abbott district's approved school facility costs. All other districts are funded at 115 percent of the district's state aid percentage.

As required by EFCFA, all New Jersey school districts must submit a Long-Range Facilities Plan that incorporates enrollment projections, an inventory of all existing school facilities needs in the district and a plan to satisfy those needs for a five-year period. The office provides the highest priority to the safety and security of school facilities when evaluating plan submissions for approval to ensure that all students are educated in a safe and supportive environment.

Since the enactment of the EFCFA, the DOE has reviewed and approved more than 1,720 projects. The facilities office continues to work with districts to ensure that projects are approved in a timely fashion to facilitate school renovation and construction projects.

The office has approved 732 school facilities projects in Abbott districts as follows:

- 403 health and safety projects of the 434 schools in the 30 Abbott districts, with approximately 260,000 students; for a total of \$650 million.
- 247 predevelopment applications for the planning and design of school facilities projects in Abbott districts; and,
- 82 schematic approvals for school facilities projects.

The office has substantially completed work on the LRFPs for nearly 600 school districts. The LRFP's in all of the Abbott districts are completed.

In the first two years of the school construction program, the deficiencies of the process design in the law have created bottlenecks that have hampered the start of projects that have been approved by the DOE in some cases two years ago. The number of state agencies that are involved in the steps of the process creates a communication logjam.

Alfred T. McNeill, CEO of the New Jersey Schools Corporation, created by Governor James McGreevey to

coordinate the stages of the stalled process, has identified the top priorities as purchasing land and securing state approvals for new schools. There are 140 school projects currently in the works that have not acquired sites.

McNeill said that the site acquisition and construction process will accelerate once the state agencies have better avenues for communication through the Schools Corporation. The Department of Education, which is just one of the state agencies involved, will give whatever support it can to the Schools Corporation to assist in expediting this process. This is a high priority for the DOE.

When the Legislature passed the historic Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act in July of 2000, not only did the legislators launch the largest funded school construction program in any state's history, but they showed a vision of school construction that links modern facilities with students' academic achievement, as well as to the overall improvement of our urban communities and the state's economic health.

Therefore, we are not just interested in building the facilities of the past. There are new and exciting concepts for creating schools that meet 21st century educational needs, facilitate achievement of the Core Curriculum Content Standards, enable the school to house essential non-academic services, draw the community into the school's center in support of the children, and stimulate neighborhood growth in positive ways.

We have had our problems getting the process in place to move school construction projects along. This administration inherited a backlog that had already been created in the first year under the facilities act. We are working diligently with our partners at the EDA to streamline and facilitate this important process. We have seen the logjam move and we intend to accelerate the movement even more.

Schools are not just structures, they are hubs and centers of communities. The more involved the school is as the community center, the more educational value you can build into the school. We are beginning to see plans in Abbott districts that have creatively incorporated the concepts of community schools. Union City has approval for a school design with six science and technology labs, rooms for art and music, an applied technology lab, and a health center that connects with the community through the city health department. The community school planning is also evident in its community library with an outdoor lecture patio.

New Brunswick is to be commended on its vision and its proactivity in promoting redevelopment throughout the city. The Lord Stirling Community School was built through a unique partnership within the city. The two entrances to this school symbolize the integration of the school into its community. One entrance faces Rudman Street that opens onto the residential neighborhood for which Lord Stirling Community School is the neighborhood K-8 school. Its other entrance opens onto George Street, which is a vital commercial corridor in the heart of the city with all of its resources available to the new school.

The construction and financing of the \$27.8 million total cost of this school project was accomplished through a partnership of the city, the school district, and the New Brunswick Development Corporation. This full-service facility with cafeteria, full gymnasium, and auditorium is a testament to what we can accomplish with creative thinking, visionary planning, dynamic leadership, and community collaboration.

Quality schools require a partnership with the community that involves greater collaboration, more inclusive planning, and enhanced stewardship. Even after the structure is completed, the school district's work must continue so that the building houses a dynamic, educationally stimulating environment for its students and so that families and the community are incorporated into the life of the school. Inclusive community facility planning will lend itself to making a new school a true community school.

If we can create school communities that are hubs for family activity, our students will have a much better chance for success. I have encouraged every district to take the time to brainstorm and dream of how the people in its community can benefit from linking its neighborhood community services to the construction of a new school. The learning environment must extend outward to take advantage of the full range of the community's resources.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, "The most successful schools of the future will be integrated learning communities, which accommodate the needs of all the community's stakeholders."

Governor McGreevey has often stated how important the school construction program is to the health of the entire state. Having the opportunity to build 21st century schools in communities like New Brunswick and Union City will help us to prepare the workforce needed in the high-skill jobs in New Jersey. By providing our own well-educated workforce, the state will attract new high-skilled jobs and enjoy the economic prosperity our workers will be equipped to produce.

Governor McGreevey has also made an even broader commitment through his school renaissance zone initiative. It will use existing state resources to leverage private sector investment to revitalize neighborhoods surrounding newly constructed schools in targeted districts. This will not only help preserve the state's large capital investment in school facilities, but it also will stimulate broader revitalization in our cities, older suburbs, and

rural areas. I will be working in consultation with the Departments of Community Affairs, Transportation, and Environmental Protection, the Economic Development Authority, and the new Schools Corporation.

Our commitment is firm and the Governor and I look forward to sharing many more exciting design approvals, groundbreaking ceremonies, and school dedications with our Abbott districts. If you have questions, I would be happy to take them.