



**More must be done for failing schools**

**For Immediate Release**

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As New Jersey's chief state school officer, I am faced daily with the challenge of how to improve our lowest-performing schools.

Last week, we released report cards for every school in the state, detailing their academic performance. While the news continues to be positive for the vast majority of the state, thousands of our students attend schools that are putting them further and further behind their peers.

This should give us pause. The very premise of public education is that schools will provide all of our children, regardless of birth circumstance, with an equal shot at life. Turning around our lowest-performing schools has been a bedrock of the Christie administration and an area where we have worked closely with President Obama. But how do we do that?

First, these schools need appropriate resources. In New Jersey, we have met that goal. Compared with the state average, the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in the state spend more money per student, have lower student-teacher ratios and have teachers with more experience and higher salaries. In spite of these resources, which are among the most generous in the country, less than a third of students in these schools are at grade level.

Years of research have demonstrated it is not just how much money you spend, but how well you spend it that matters. Just as spending thousands of dollars on the wrong treatments won't cure a sick patient, so too spending millions of dollars in ways that are not aligned with student achievement will not help our students improve.

Second, schools need the right types of support. Beginning in September, we will have expert educators working with our lowest-performing schools through new Regional Achievement Centers. Using the best research available, the RACs will work daily to implement interventions in these schools in areas ranging from instruction to use of data to school climate and culture.

We are hopeful that with these resources and the support of expert educators, these schools will experience a dramatic transformation. However, the education of our children is too important to let another generation of students pass by if these schools are either unwilling or unable to improve. For the first time in New Jersey, we need to be honest that if a school has the resources and support it needs and is still persistently failing its children, we need to consider even more aggressive interventions.

This week, pending approval from the state Board of Education, we will receive small grants and enter into a partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers to provide training to educators in our RACs and to scour the country to help us strengthen our efforts for schools that do not improve. Those solutions may include pairing the school with proven public school leaders, giving the educators in the school increased autonomy from the district, or even closing down the school and creating a better option for the students — which research has shown to have worked in other parts of the country.

Some would say we should not put such effort into these schools. They will say these schools are low-performing because of poverty, and that until we fix community and family issues, we can't do much better in the schools.

Of course, poverty matters. And of course, it affects a child's experience in schools. But rather than allowing these circumstances to be used as an excuse for inaction, we should redouble our efforts as educators to make sure we do everything in our power to provide great options for these students. We have too many examples of schools and great teachers overcoming the constraints of poverty to believe we can't do any better.

I refuse to work within a system that accepts that the circumstance into which a child is born should determine his outcome in life. And I refuse to believe that great public school teachers cannot make a difference in a child's life.

Let's work together over the next several years to give all students in New Jersey equal opportunities for success, and let's hope that the support of expert educators in our RACs will help to turn around low-performing schools.

But let's also be honest that our children are the most important resource we have, and that we must be ready to do whatever we can to give them a fair shot.