



State of New Jersey

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
PO Box 500
TRENTON, NJ 08625-0500

CHRIS CHRISTIE
Governor

CHRISTOPHER D. CERF
Acting Commissioner

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To: Charter Leaders

As we kick off a new school year, I wanted to update you on the work that the Department is undertaking to build a strong and high-performing network of charter schools as a critical component of our quality public school options across the state.

The promise of charter schools is that they will offer parents another high-quality public school alternative, especially for children whose needs are not being successfully met elsewhere. Every bit as "public" as traditional schools managed by local districts, charter public schools are tuition free, open to all, and committed to providing equal access to quality education to any child who wishes to attend. (If oversubscribed, admission is determined by lottery.) To accomplish this mission, charter schools are granted additional autonomy to innovate. In exchange, the Department of Education must set a high bar for accountability and ensure that these schools are fulfilling their promise of improving student achievement and serving all students.

On the whole, charter schools in New Jersey are achieving at high levels. In a presentation to the State Board of Education earlier this year, we shared results from the 2009-10 school year which showed not only that charter schools are outperforming districts in the aggregate in cities like Newark, Camden, and Jersey City, but that charter schools in those districts are performing higher when students are broken out by grade level and both socioeconomic status and race. Preliminary results from the 2010-11 school year show continued growth in student achievement for charter schools overall.

However, not all charter schools are serving students at the levels they deserve. At the Department, we take the exchange of autonomy for accountability very seriously. Over the last several months, we have made increasing the number of students in high-quality charter schools a top priority. Under the leadership of the new Director of our Charter Schools Office, Carly Bolger, we have completely revamped the new school selection process, the charter renewal process, and the ongoing oversight framework. This year, we closed two charter schools that were not getting the job done for students.

Just as we must focus on quality, we must also focus on equality of access for all students. We must ensure that charter schools serve all students, regardless of background, with a focus on the underserved students most in need of options. The Department is providing additional guidance to charter operators about the student application and enrollment

processes to ensure that the application procedures not only comply with the law but also fulfill the spirit of equal access for all students, regardless of background.

I wanted to share with you some specific details about our enhanced accountability systems, including the new school selection process, charter renewal process, and ongoing oversight framework.

New school selection process

This year, the Charter Schools Office aligned their selection process to best practices identified by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA). This included setting clear benchmarks around predictors of school success including a research-based academic program with a proven history, experienced school operators, high expectations for all students, a well rounded board of trustees, and a strong capacity to implement the program. These components, along with a number of others, were reviewed through a several stage process including an intensive interview with the evaluation committee.

The very first bar that a charter applicant must clear is that the school has a high likelihood of providing an excellent education. We are confident that all of the schools we approve will be successful. Once these schools open, we will be vigilant in ensuring that each school is aware of the standards they are expected to meet and we will monitor closely their progress toward meeting or exceeding these standards. To insure that the pipeline of quality applicants is robust, we are now devoting resources within the charter department to identify successful and replicable models and operators from around the country and encouraging them to apply.

Renewal process

The Department has also developed a new renewal process focused predominantly on whether the charter school has demonstrated academic achievement for its students. We have also greatly increased the transparency of this process by providing all applicants clear criteria by which they will be evaluated. A copy of the new renewal application can be found at the link below.

<http://www.state.nj.us/education/chartsch/app/renewal/>

During the renewal process, the Department will focus on three main areas: demonstrated student achievement, fiscal and organizational viability, and capacity of school leadership and the board of trustees to sustain that progress in the coming charter term.

In evaluating student achievement, the Department will look at trend lines of a school's performance, including:

- Proficiency rates on state-wide assessments
- Mean scale score on state-wide assessments
- School-wide growth over time on state-wide assessments
- Comparisons to the state average
- Comparisons to the charter school's host district
- Comparison to demographically similar charter and traditional schools

- Graduation/drop-out rate
- Student retention rate
- Student progress as measured using student growth percentiles (when data is available)

In addition, the Department will evaluate the school's recruitment and enrollment processes, to ensure that the school is accessible to all students, actively targeting the highest-need student body, and that the school does not have any screening criteria that would discourage any qualified student from attending the school. A school's enrollment policy will be considered when awarding charter renewals.

As charter schools come up for renewal, our team will work closely with charter operators to make sure they understand both the process and the criteria for renewal.

Monitoring and oversight

This year, the Department will implement a comprehensive accountability framework to guide ongoing engagement with charter schools – not just those up for renewal.

First, the Charter Schools Office will enter into new charter agreements with all new approved applicants and successful renewal schools. The charter agreements will set forth common terms and conditions for operating charter schools in New Jersey and will contain school-specific accountability plans for achievement. These will ultimately serve as the basis for charter renewals.

Second, the Department will engage in more frequent evaluations during the charter term. Each year, the Department will review the progress of each school based both on Annual Reports and the criteria outlined in the renewal process. By having a constantly updated picture of a schools' performance, the Department will better be able to encourage high-performing schools to grow and share best practices, and to intervene or close persistently struggling schools.

Charter schools serve a critical need in New Jersey not only by providing high-quality options for students where they otherwise do not exist, but also by serving as laboratories of innovation.

We are committed to supporting the expansion of high-quality charter schools that serve unmet needs across the state. In return, we will require charter schools to demonstrate continuous academic achievement and a commitment to equal access.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to Carly Bolger with any questions, and I wish you the best of luck heading into the new school year.

Sincerely,
Acting Commissioner Chris Cerf