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February 8, 2012

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons

FROM: Christopher D. Cerf, Acting Commissioner

SUBJECT: Teacher Evaluations

Over the past five months, we have begun the effort to develop a more fair, consistent, and learning-centered teacher evaluation system that will help all teachers, regardless of experience, continuously improve their practice. In August, we announced the selection of 11 districts that volunteered to pilot a new teacher evaluation system through the Excellent Educators for New Jersey (EE4NJ) pilot program. These 11 pilot districts, along with 19 struggling schools in the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program, have been developing and implementing a robust evaluation system and sharing lessons learned with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). I applaud both the administrators and educators in these districts for leading the development of an evaluation system that will provide meaningful data and feedback to teachers and ensure we are focused on achievement growth for all of our students. The work of these educators is laying an important foundation as we work towards full implementation of a new evaluation system statewide in 2013-14.

These pilot districts have worked to develop a local evaluation system based on the following guiding principles:

- Teachers should never be evaluated on the basis of a single consideration such as test scores, much less a single test, but on the basis of multiple measures that include both learning outcomes and effective practice, with 50 percent associated with each.
- Where applicable, the component of the evaluation based on “learning outcomes” should include, but not be limited to, progress on objective assessments such as NJ ASK. In untested grades and subjects, for example, student progress might include a focus on student work or locally- determined criteria.
- To avoid penalizing teachers who work with our highest-needs students, learning outcomes should be based on student progress and not absolute performance.
- To give teachers meaningful information to help them develop, the new system will differentiate teacher effectiveness using a four-tiered rating system, including “ineffective,” “partially effective,” “effective,” and “highly effective.”

- Districts should provide a direct link between the results of the evaluation and professional development opportunities to help teachers at all levels continuously improve.
- To assure consistency and fairness, plans should address inter-rater reliability of observers.
- Any personnel consequences connected with evaluations remain a matter of local decision and applicable state law, and are not an element of the pilot program.

During the past five months, these districts have met with both successes and challenges in developing this system. We have established formal feedback channels at the district and state levels to ensure that we hear continuous updates from educators in these districts as they struggle with new challenges and embrace new opportunities. In addition, we have partnered with Rutgers University to provide an external evaluation of the pilot, with an interim report expected by the end of this school year.

As we talk to educators in these pilot districts, the comment we hear most frequently is that they are grateful to be participating in the development of a new statewide evaluation framework and in decisions at the local level. This speaks to our commitment to working with educators on the development of this new evaluation system. We have already heard from a number of teachers and principals that they have been more engaged than ever before in meaningful conversations about their performance.

This is not to say that these districts have not faced challenges. We've learned that the selection of a research-based teacher practice framework and the trainings associated with that framework require significant time. In addition, we are continuing to work with districts to develop ways to measure student performance in untested subjects and grades.

The purpose of this pilot program is to identify challenges, find solutions, and make improvements along the way so that our ultimate system will be as strong as possible. We have just begun, but we will spend significant time to make sure that we take the lessons learned from this first year and provide all districts with the guidance they need for successful implementation.

Plan for 2012-2013 School Year

As we prepare for statewide rollout in all districts and all schools in the 2013-14 school year, I want to provide some additional guidance on what districts will need to do next year to ensure they are ready to implement a new framework in all schools for all teachers. Over the next several months, we will begin developing state regulations to start the process of statewide implementation. But we wanted to get information to you now as you are planning for next school year.

The outlines for 2012-13 were shaped by lessons learned from our pilot districts, advice from our statewide Evaluation Pilot Advisory Committee (EPAC), national research and national models that have been tried across the country.

In the 2012-13 school year, each district will have two options for preparing for full implementation. Regardless of the option chosen, we will work with every district to make sure they are building their capacity and establishing the conditions for successful implementation in all schools in 2013-14.

First, we will make funding available for up to 30 districts to participate in a new pilot of our evaluation system. Next year's pilot districts will build on the lessons learned in the first year of the pilot, and will help us continue to refine our plans for a strong statewide system. By March 2012, we will release a notice of grant opportunity with full details of the pilot and the application process.

Second, districts not participating in the pilot will be required to take a number of steps to prepare for full implementation in the 2013-14 school year. These districts will have the option to pilot the new evaluation in some or all of their schools in the 2012-13 school year, but must meet the following milestones during the 2012-13 school year:

- Formation of a District Advisory Committee to ensure stakeholder engagement by November 2012;
- Adoption of a research-based observation framework and rubric that includes at least four differentiated levels of performance by January 2013 (a waiver process may be available for districts that can show their current or newly developed framework meet the criteria);
- From January 2013 through August 2013, test and refine observation frameworks and rubrics to prepare for full implementation in the 2013-14 school year; such testing and refinement may include, but is not limited to, learning from the following:
 - Having Principals utilize the tool in an informal observation and report their experiences
 - Soliciting feedback from teachers and other stakeholders on how the tool can best inform professional growth
 - Collaborating with neighboring Districts and researching national practices around implementation and training
- Thorough training of teachers on the teacher practice framework by June 2013;
- Thorough training of observers that ensures fair and consistent application of the framework by August 2013; and
- Completion of progress reports on these milestones in January and July of 2013

Several funding sources are available for the 2012-13 school year. These funding sources include:

- Notice of grant opportunity for new pilots (up to 30 more districts);
- General fund (unreserved fund balance from 2011/12 and newly designated 2012/13 funds);
- Title IIA funds (from 2011/12 and 2012/13);
- Race to the Top funds (minimum district allocations will be published in early February);
- School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds; and
- Title IA funds

To assist in building your district's budget for 2012-13, attached please find additional detail on and examples of expenditures related to the implementation a new evaluation framework.

Reforming evaluation systems is now a national priority with significant improvements occurring across the country. We are proud that New Jersey is leading the charge while implementing these changes in a thoughtful way that will ensure that they have a positive impact in classrooms. The stakes are high, as it will ultimately touch every teacher and every student in our state. Again, I commend the work being done in our pilot districts and SIG schools this year. We must now incorporate the lessons learned so we can develop the best system possible for all New Jersey teachers and students.

We have already made great strides in developing a more meaningful evaluation system over the past five months, and we remain confident that all districts will be ready to implement a new evaluation system in all of their schools in 2013-14. Next month we will provide a more detailed update on the evaluation system requirements, milestones and funding opportunities for the 2012-13 school year, as well as details around a forthcoming principal evaluation pilot. In the interim, please do not hesitate to reach out to your Executive County Superintendent with questions and suggestions.

CDC/PS/m/Division of Teacher and Leader Effectiveness/Peter Shulman/EE4NJ Announcement2_8_12.doc

Attachments

c: Members, State Board of Education
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