



NJDOE News

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Commissioner Hespe to Convene School Violence Focus Group

Commissioner of Education David Hespe announced today that a focus group will convene on Friday, June 18, 1999 to discuss the issue of school violence and what additional steps local districts and the Department of Education can take to keep classrooms safe.

The group of experts will consist of county superintendents, school district superintendents, principals, teachers, pupil services staff (such as guidance counselors), representatives of education groups, school nurses, juvenile officers, members of the state Juvenile Justice Commission and students.

"Given recent events, it is important for the department to know what officials and students are thinking about this very important issue," said Hespe. "The information we glean from these discussions can be the basis of future policy decisions.

"There is nothing more important to me as Commissioner than the safety and security of children in school. It is my hope that we will be gathering some very useful information from the focus group to help us achieve our mutual goal, which is the protection of students and staff."

The focus group's activities will take two directions. In the morning session, information will be solicited from local school officials to determine what actions they are taking now to combat school violence. The Department of Education will seek to ascertain what it can do to help and support these efforts.

The discussion in the afternoon session will concentrate on the annual reporting system for incidents of school violence and vandalism. Each year, the department issues a report to the Legislature detailing the extent of violence, vandalism and substance abuse in the schools. The accuracy of the report depends on the extent and quality of the information that is brought to the department's attention. The department will be asking the focus group to suggest what can be done to get complete and consistent information.

"We need accurate and comprehensive information to develop policy at the state level to mitigate violence and vandalism," Hespe said.

Prior to the beginning of the new school year in September, instructions will be sent to all chief school administrators that will clarify the definitions used to categorize incidents of violence, vandalism and substance abuse. Hespe said the department, based on the recommendations of the focus group, will prepare the new, more precise definitions and exception criteria for distribution.

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