



## **NJDOE News**

**Contact: Bob DeSando**

**609-633-9788**

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### **Commissioner Hespe Says State Will Move Forward With Priority School Facility Projects**

Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe said today that the state will move forward with priority school facility projects in the spring of 2000. The Department of Education's plan was outlined in a special presentation by the commissioner to the State Board of Education at its regular monthly meeting in Trenton.

"Many school districts, both Abbott and non-Abbott, are in serious need of safe and adequate classroom facilities," Hespe said. "To address these needs, Governor Whitman has proposed legislation that will provide assistance to all districts for facilities construction. However, it is unlikely that the Legislature will consider the issue until later this year.

"Until the matter is resolved by the Legislature, the department is not in a position to approve the five-year facilities plans that have been submitted by 25 of the 30 Abbott districts and total \$7.3 billion," Hespe added. "So the department has developed a mechanism to move specific priority projects forward pending legislative action and our approval of the five-year plans."

The commissioner said the highest priority will be given to those projects that are necessary to protect the health and safety of students, involve upgrading the electrical system or serve preschool students. In addition, they must involve an existing building that will remain in use, and the local district must agree that these projects should move outside of its five-year plan.

The second tier of priority projects will focus on those that were submitted to the department for review prior to filing of the district's five-year plan. They must be consistent with the five year-plan and, in the opinion of the district, should move outside of the five-year plan.

"This initiative represents a mammoth undertaking, both administratively and fiscally, by the state," Hespe said. "It is unprecedented in scope and will benefit our children for decades to come."

The commissioner informed the State Board that the \$7.3 billion cost estimate for the 25 five-year facilities plans submitted by the Abbott districts is a "raw total" that will likely result in a working number of between \$5.5 billion and \$6 billion once reporting errors, duplications and other technical deficiencies in the plans are corrected.

"Still, even the working number is three times greater than the estimate furnished by the Vitetta Group, which conducted a comprehensive assessment of facility needs in the Abbott districts for the department," Hespe noted. The projected cost provided by the consultant was \$1.8 billion, exclusive of soft costs.

Once the results of the study were known, the department asked each Abbott district to develop a five-year facilities plan to address the needs identified by the Vitetta Group. The commissioner asked the districts to submit five-year plans by January 1999 so construction could begin in the spring of 2000. Most of the plans did not arrive until well after the deadlines, and some are still outstanding.

While it may be some time before a final cost projection is determined, Hespe said there is no doubt it will be significantly higher than the Vitetta estimate. So the department is moving forward now to prepare for what will inevitably be a much larger school construction program.

"We are hiring staff and retaining consultants to move these projects forward in spite of practical difficulties stemming from the scarcity of qualified applicants due to current and anticipated construction needs throughout the region," Hespe said.

Although legislative action on the Whitman administration's school construction proposal may not come until the end of the year, Hespe said the department has already begun its review of the five-year plans submitted by the Abbott districts.

The preliminary review will be followed by a dialogue and conference with the district. A final review will then be conducted based on local input. The district will be advised of the department's findings and given another opportunity to comment before the department makes its final determination. Hespe said he anticipates that the

last step in the process, actual approval of the plan, will occur after the legislation authorizing the construction program is enacted into law. But he said the department wants to be in a position to move ahead with the final stage as soon as legislation is passed.

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