



NJDOE News

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Hespe Says Law Center's Criticism of School Construction Review Process Lacks Credibility

Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe today labeled "false and irresponsible" a report by the Education Law Center that is critical of the Department of Education's handling of the five-year school facilities plans submitted by the state's Abbott districts.

"What we are undertaking in New Jersey is unprecedented and enormous in scope," Hespe said. "We have a responsibility to the children of the Abbott districts. It is one we take seriously and will honor. But we also have an obligation under the law to make sure tax dollars are spent responsibly. The process we have established provides the level of detail we need to make sure that obligation is met.

"This is just another in a long line of flawed reports generated by the Law Center for the sole purpose of generating controversy and fostering discord," asserted Hespe.

Hespe termed it "utter hypocrisy" on the part of the Law Center to accuse the department of using "one-size-fits-all formulas" and implying it has made a final decision to reject \$2 billion in proposed Abbott facilities. "They know that's not the case," the commissioner said. "By any definition, a 'preliminary' approval is not a 'final' decision ... and the Law Center knows it.

"The purpose of the preliminary approval process is to identify discrepancies and narrow areas of disagreement so our dialog with the districts can be focused. That is the whole point of the process, which was designed at the outset to be a collaborative undertaking, and it has worked extraordinarily well. Our discussions with the districts have been cordial and productive.

"What we have approved to date represents a mammoth investment in the infrastructure needs of the Abbott districts," Hespe said. "And it is twice the amount in facilities needs identified by the Supreme Court in its Abbott ruling two years ago."

The commissioner also faulted the Law Center for ignoring the requirements established by the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act, which was signed into law by Governor Christie Whitman on July 18. "No decision could be made on the five-year plans submitted by the Abbott districts until the provisions of the law were settled," Hespe said. "We are under a legal obligation to adhere to the standards set by law. To accuse us of acting arbitrarily and employing delaying tactics is patently false. Again, the Law Center knows better."

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