



## NJDOE News

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### **Department of Education Gives Green Light to \$800 Million For Over 400 Facilities Construction and Repair Projects in Abbott Districts**

In the three months since Governor Christie Whitman signed the \$8.6 billion school facilities improvement legislation into law, the NJ Department of Education has helped the 30 Abbott districts develop five-year facilities improvement plans and given the green light for over 400 projects totaling \$800 million.

The emphasis on expediting project approval in the Abbott districts has focused on addressing the most pressing health and safety issues. The facilities staff of the Department of Education has personally inspected over 400 projects, with 100 percent of approved costs covered by the state. All of the approved projects have been forwarded to the NJ Economic Development Authority (EDA), which is responsible for issuing the construction bonds and overseeing project management. The EDA has retained a management consulting firm to assist with this unprecedented undertaking.

"The rapid turnaround of these facilities projects in the Abbott school systems demonstrates that the needs of the children in these districts are our top priority," said Gov. Whitman. "I am particularly pleased by the unprecedented spirit of cooperation between the administrators of the Abbott districts and the Department of Education which is spurring such tremendous progress."

NJ Department of Education Commissioner David C. Hespe noted that the \$800 million in facilities funding for the Abbott districts is an "important achievement at the 90 day mark, but it only begins to tell the story of all that has been achieved since the bill was signed into law back in July."

"There have been hundreds of hours devoted by the DOE facilities staff to assisting the Abbott districts in developing and refining the analysis of their facilities needs over the next five years," said Hespe. "All of this work was done while staff was also reviewing 699 applications for retroactive funding of facilities projects from 220 school districts, processing 78 requests for waivers to allow school bond referenda this fall, and providing Long Range Facility Plan training to over 570 non-Abbott school districts."

The school facilities law authorized funding for projects that commenced after September 1, 1998, and the DOE plans to announce the list of projects eligible for retroactive funding in November.

Hespe said that 23 of the non-Abbott school districts had received department approval to hold school facilities bond referenda this fall. The total cost of these referenda, if approved by the voters, would be \$434,345,641, with some \$133.2 million of that amount being committed as the state's contribution toward local property tax relief.

"We are encouraged that 17 of the 19 school referenda authorized through the waiver process have received voter approval over the past two months," said Hespe. "Those construction bond approvals will soon be following the Abbott projects and be sent to the EDA for contract review and funding."

The Legislature directed the 570 non-Abbott districts to submit their proposed Long Term Facilities plans by December 15, 2000, and the Commissioner commended the school districts for working so collaboratively with his facilities staff.

"The training sessions for the hundreds of non-Abbott school districts have been very well received all across the state, and the software that guides districts through the process of filing the report is making the process as thorough, but painless, as possible," said Hespe.

"There was also considerable effort devoted to developing the Long Range Facility Plan regulations, which have now been issued and are available on the department's website," he added.