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Achieve Inc. Finds NJ Assessment Program 'Rigorous and Reasonable' - Makes Recommendations for Review of Core Curriculum Content Standards -

An intensive, year-long evaluation of New Jersey's curriculum standards and assessments by Achieve Inc., an independent, nonprofit organization that supports standard-based education, has concluded that the state's assessment program is one of the strongest it has examined. It also offered recommendations as to how New Jersey could strengthen its Core Curriculum Content Standards.

"Here in New Jersey, we have created academic standards that reflect a lot of hard work and are the best we've ever had. Now we need to make them better—for the sake of our students and the future of our state," said Gov. Christie Whitman. "That's why New Jersey is one of a handful of states that have asked Achieve to come in and critique our standards."

"Achieve has given us high praise—particularly in regard to our assessments. Where we need to improve, Achieve has been clear and specific in its recommendations," said Gov. Whitman.

"With this report in hand, we can take the next step in the evolution of our standards. We can keep what we have right, improve those things that lack the clarity or the rigor they should have, and make certain that our assessments and our standards complement each other," said the Governor. "I want to thank Art Ryan of Prudential for his leadership in this area. The Achieve report will enable us to make our standards and assessments even better."

Measuring Up: A Standards and Assessment Benchmarking Report for NJ details the in-depth evaluation by Achieve of the quality, rigor and alignment of New Jersey standards and assessments in language arts literacy and mathematics, which were benchmarked against the best available models in the world.

Commissioner of Education David C. Hespe welcomed the feedback and said it would be extremely helpful as the Department of Education embarks on its mandatory review of the Core Curriculum Content Standards and how well they are measured by the state's 4th, 8th and 11th grade assessments. The review is required by code and conducted every five years.

"This is a process, not a product," Hespe noted. "There is no single set of universal standards or assessment instruments that we can take off the shelf and put to use in New Jersey. Our standards are designed to make sure all New Jersey students enter college or the work world with the knowledge and skills required for success. But they were designed to give local school districts the ability to align their curriculum to the standards in the way they believe is best. The standards and frameworks were not intended to be a statewide curriculum.

"The standards review process will allow us to reexamine the line between clarity and rigidity," Hespe added. "There is a need for consistency, but there is also a need for flexibility. We must be prepared to adapt when changes are warranted."

Achieve's review found that, overall, New Jersey's assessments are "extremely strong, some of the strongest the reviewers have examined in the three years Achieve has been using this (benchmarking) process."

According to the Achieve report, a student who does well on New Jersey's assessments "can reasonably be said to have mastered important knowledge and skills. This is a commendable finding -- one that we have shared with few states.

"We believe the standards and particularly the tests now go a long way toward driving instruction and achievement in a positive direction, and we believe they can go much farther in the next round," the report concluded.

Among Achieve's findings are:

- New Jersey's assessments in language arts literacy and mathematics are rigorous, reasonable and model good classroom instruction. They not only measure basic knowledge, but also higher level skills such as reasoning and critical thinking.
 - New Jersey's English and mathematics standards contain important strengths. They are straightforward and jargon free.
 - The standards have room for improvement in their clarity and specificity when compared to the best standards found in other states and nations.

"Research indicates that a standards-based education is the most thorough and efficient way to provide equitable educational opportunities to all children," said Arthur F. Ryan, Chairman and CEO of Prudential and a member of the Board of Directors of Achieve Inc. "*Measuring Up* presents recommendations that the state should seriously consider as it seeks to raise student achievement and ensure that all New Jersey children master the skills they need to live productive adult lives."

Established in 1996, Achieve Inc. is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and business leaders to help states develop educational standards that compare favorably with successful models used in other states and high performing nations and assessments that accurately measure student achievement against those standards. Achieve works primarily with states and serves as a clearinghouse and resource center on education standards, testing and accountability. A copy of Achieve's report on New Jersey can be accessed at the organization's website: www.achieve.org.

Commissioner Hespe announced that the department has engaged the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to conduct an independent external evaluation of New Jersey's science and social studies standards. "We will continue to work with independent evaluators to make New Jersey's standards and assessment program the best in the nation."

Commissioner Hespe also cautioned that "we should keep in mind as we pursue initiatives to improve our schools in New Jersey that our education system is currently one of the best in the nation. This point was driven home by a report released last week entitled *Measuring Up 2000* from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, which gave the state one of only a few A's given nationally for how well the state prepares students for college."

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