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Education Commissioner Librera Says \$6.6 Billion in State School Aid Finances Education as the 'Cornerstone' of the McGreevey Administration

"Budget Ensures that New Jersey Children Receive an Education That Prepares Them for a Successful Future"

State Education Spending Places Emphasis on Early Literacy Programs

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TRENTON — New Jersey Education Commissioner William L. Librera presented to the Senate budget committee the [details of an education spending plan](#) that finances Governor James E. McGreevey's commitment that education is the cornerstone of his administration.

"In recognition of the very high priority given to education by Governor McGreevey, we are including in the FY 2003 budget \$6.6 billion in direct aid to the state's schools," Commissioner Librera said in the first of two days of testimony before Senate and Assembly budget committees.

State aid for local school districts — the single largest item in the state budget — represents one-third of state spending for the fiscal year starting July 1, Dr. Librera told the Senate Budget & Appropriations Committee.

"In finding solutions to the \$5.3 billion deficit in the FY 2003 state budget, the Governor refused to cut a single cent to the districts, holding the line on our children's education," the Commissioner said.

"Governor McGreevey has made education the cornerstone of his administration," Librera told the Senators. "This budget reflects that commitment by providing the funding necessary to ensure that the children of this state are receiving an education that prepares them for a successful future. By leveraging existing resources to develop innovative solutions, this budget will enable schools to live within their means."

Librera said one of the central initiatives of the McGreevey Administration is the Department of Education's Early Literacy Program. "Research is clear that children who read at or above grade level by the third grade are going to have much greater success in the rest of their school years than those who cannot read by grade three," the Commissioner said.

To meet that goal, Librera said, "We have proposed an appropriation of \$10 million as the first installment of a four-year, \$40 million commitment to this very important component of our education program. If we are ever to eliminate the achievement gap, children must be able to read well at early ages." State resources will be supplemented by \$18.4 million in aid for a new federal program with the same goal called 'Reading First.'

Librera said that as support for the expenditure on early literacy, "I am currently guiding a Literacy Task Force that has been directed to develop frameworks, activities, good practices, and literacy standards for teachers from pre-kindergarten to fourth grade by September 1 this year. We want every dollar of this appropriation to be utilized as effectively as possible to help schools raise reading levels for their young students."

The Commissioner explained that as part of the \$10 million budget appropriation for early literacy, the department will begin training teachers to be reading coaches to help students, teachers, and administrators in the next school year. Librera said the literacy summit held at Rutgers University this past Friday, May 3, helped spread the word to districts about the program.

The department's spending plan also includes \$6.5 million for teacher mentoring aid, \$1 million for teacher recruitment in special needs districts, and additional funding for a technology-based system to speed up the processing of teacher certification applications "so that we can get new teachers into our classrooms."

Librera also told the legislators that starting in September, the Governor's Reading Club will underscore the importance of the Administration's literacy initiative and keep it in the spotlight.

In other budget highlights, Librera said the spending plan:

- Provides nearly \$1 billion to all the districts in the state for teachers' retirement benefits and the employers' share of Social Security payments. "While under the current fiscal crisis, we were unable to increase direct school aid, this amount represents an increase in local aid of \$71.9 million above FY 2002, and shields local property taxpayers from shouldering these costs," the Commissioner said.
- Provides \$100 million for school construction and renovation costs associated with the Educational Facilities Construction and Financing Act. This includes state debt service and increased aid for recently issued local debt for school construction.
- Appropriates \$10.3 million in increased funding for the school choice program and charter school aid to shield taxpayers and school districts from added expenses related to enrollment growth.

Librera said that court-mandated funding under the *Abbott v. Burke* parity remedy is \$512.7 million. "In looking at overall funding for the Abbott districts, total state aid for FY 2003, including the court-ordered aid, is \$3.39 billion, which is 53.6% of all public school aid provided by the state," he said.

In his testimony, the Commissioner urged the Joint Budget Oversight Committee to approve the necessary transfer of funds so that the Abbott districts' supplemental aid is not placed in jeopardy for the remainder of the fiscal year. "Many Abbott districts have not received payment for April, and now it appears the May payment is held up as well," Librera said in thanking the committee for scheduling a meeting tomorrow (Tuesday) to address this crucial issue which "is causing hardship in districts that can least afford it."

The Commissioner also assured the legislators, "This Administration is committed to ensuring that every dollar of this budget is being spent ethically and effectively. To meet that goal, we have created Fiscal Improvement Teams to be sent into districts with documented evidence of financial inefficiencies. These teams will spend 30 days evaluating and analyzing fiscal practices in the districts, and at the end of that time, will issue a formal report and a timetable for making the mandated improvements.

"To ensure the Department of Education is functioning most effectively," the Commissioner told the Senators, "we will be completely reorganized to be of more assistance to local districts and to better balance our role of oversight with our role of providing support to the districts. By making the department a more valuable resource, we can help local districts stretch dollars in this difficult year. Our focus will be on teaching and learning and on providing the technical assistance to districts to help them improve both parts of the education process."

One major change of focus will be to decentralize many of the support functions of the Department of Education into three regional offices to enable the department to deliver services all over the state. "Put simply, we will bring 'Trenton' to the school districts where we can be more helpful. By bringing the Trenton decision-makers closer to the districts, we will enable our county superintendents to provide direct answers to their districts' questions."

Librera concluded, "The combination of the budget items I have mentioned represents a responsible and effective aid budget which we believe will enable our schools to continue to provide excellent services while we weather this financial crisis together. As Governor McGreevey has stated many times before, education is the cornerstone of his Administration, and this budget is a clear reflection of that commitment."

For the full text of Commissioner Librera's budget testimony, visit the Department of Education's Web site at www.state.nj.us/education