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For Release: June 19, 2002

Education Commissioner Librera Proposes Changes in State's Takeover Law

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TRENTON – Education Commissioner William L. Librera announced today that New Jersey's law authorizing the Department of Education to take over troubled school districts has not worked as intended and that he will immediately launch a corrective course of action aimed at enacting new legislation that will enable the state's three largest school districts to return to local control.

The Commissioner said the department's efforts will be redirected toward assisting local school officials to build the local capacity to increase student achievement and better manage their affairs.

"We will shift the emphasis in the department's intervention from one of 'command and control' to a collaborative effort designed to build local capacity so that the local school district can govern well," Dr. Librera said. "The Department of Education will maintain a better balance between assistance and monitoring."

The Commissioner released a [32-page Executive Summary](#) prepared by a team of four Rutgers-Newark professors at the Institute on Education Law & Policy that concluded that the state's 1988 school takeover law "seems ill-conceived and poorly executed." The team, headed by Paul Tractenberg of Rutgers University, also concluded, "State operation of school districts in New Jersey has lacked direction and coherence."

[The Tractenberg report](#) makes a series of recommendations that were endorsed the Commissioner. They call for the creation of a "clear and specific system of standards and benchmarks by which districts will be assessed" as the state develops the local capacity to return the schools to local control.

In 1989, New Jersey became the first state in the country to take over a school district when the department took over the Jersey City School District. Paterson was taken over in 1991 and Newark followed in 1995. "The takeover legislation intended to authorize an intervention that would be temporary in nature," Librera said. "The State of New Jersey is still in control of those three districts."

The Commissioner said a Working Group in the Department of Education will begin immediately to identify a new approach to the return to local control based on the models identified in the Tractenberg report as best practices. Gordon MacInnes, assistant commissioner for Abbott Implementation, will create the group, composed of educators experienced in urban schools, particularly Abbott schools.

[The Commissioner's Action Plan](#) also sets out a goal to integrate the department's Abbott implementation, including court-ordered mandates, with the department's responsibilities under the state takeover law.

Librera also recommended that he will appoint four non-voting liaisons to each school board in the takeover districts. The Commissioner's Action Plan also addresses the status of contracts held by the state district superintendents in Newark and Paterson, which are scheduled to expire later this year. The plan calls for conducting a national search for candidates and a review of the finalists by the local school boards. The Commissioner pledged to recommend only candidates who have demonstrated an ability to lead large urban districts.

The Working Group will deliver its final report to the Commissioner on October 1, 2002. The Commissioner will then prepare recommendations for the Legislature and the State Board of Education.

For a copy of the Executive Summary and the full report, visit www.state.nj.us/education