



## NJDOE News

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### **DOE Launches [Secondary Education Initiative](#)**

A program to create smaller learning communities in large urban middle and high schools, increase the rigor of instruction in urban school districts and ensure that every student in those districts receives personalized attention was officially launched by the New Jersey Department of Education at a conference in East Windsor today.

The Abbott Secondary Education Initiative is a three-year project developed by a collaborative work group of teachers, principals, superintendents, academics, consultants and representatives of the Education Law Center (ELC) as a means of strengthening the academic performance of Abbott district students in grades six through 12.

"One of the biggest challenges we face in urban secondary education is that the sheer size of the student population in many of the middle and high schools makes it very difficult for the children to succeed," said acting Commissioner of Education Lucille E. Davy, who opened the conference.

"Despite the best efforts of the teachers and administrators, too many kids simply fall through the cracks if nobody has sufficient time to pay attention to them. The results of that are the unacceptably high absenteeism and drop-out rates and unacceptably low achievement and graduation rates that we see in so many of our Abbott high schools," she said.

"The project we are launching today is designed to turn that trend around. I commend all the people from inside the Abbott districts themselves and from other districts, academia and the advocacy and consulting organizations who have recognized this problem and come together with a long-term plan and a commitment to address it," acting Commissioner Davy said.

All the Abbott districts are involved in the initiative and will be establishing planning committees to meet the three goals of the plan.

Fourteen districts have volunteered to pilot the small learning communities and academic rigor aspects of the program.

During the course of each year, there will be four opportunities for representatives of all 31 Abbott districts to receive updates on the progress of the various aspects of the project in different districts.

Under Phase I of the program, four districts – Jersey City, Elizabeth, Orange and Bridgeton – will develop plans to transform their high schools into smaller learning communities, designed to create a more rewarding learning environment for students and teachers and ensure that students have stronger connections to the school and the community.

"The 'smaller learning communities' concept doesn't involve moving students from large buildings to small buildings," acting Commissioner Davy explained. "The focus is more on developing closely-knit groups of teachers and students within the school so children with challenges or who need extra help or encouragement don't get lost in the system."

It is anticipated that with the assistance of national consultants and other highly-skilled professionals, these four districts will be able to reconfigure their secondary schools by September, 2006.

The information they develop through this experience will be used to set standards and procedures for the remaining Abbott districts to plan for smaller learning communities and personalization by the start of the 2008-09 school year.

Meanwhile, 10 additional districts will be actively working to increase the academic rigor of the instruction provided in grades six through 12, so that students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade are prepared for high school and high

school graduates are ready for post secondary instruction.

This will involve focusing attention on better middle grade preparations for high school English I and Algebra I and the elimination of "soft" or non-rigorous courses that fail to prepare students for the content and skills tested on state assessments.

"We are cheating our kids every time one of our ninth graders can't read or understand a high school text book or one of our high school graduates has to take remedial courses in order to be able to do college work," acting Commissioner Davy said. "The adults have the responsibility to make sure we teach the children what they need to know."

The ten districts in this part of the pilot program are Pleasantville, Vineland, Gloucester City, Salem, Millville, Camden, Asbury Park, Trenton, Irvington and Burlington City.

Today's launch featured presentations by the representatives of the two consulting organizations retained by DOE to guide the project: *High Schools That Work*, the Southern Regional Education Board's best-known school-improvement initiative, and *First Things First*, a component of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

Acting Commissioner Davy noted that the Abbott Secondary Education Initiative is part of DOE's overall effort to redesign and refocus high schools to prepare students to meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace.

Earlier this week, New Jersey Education Summit on High Schools brought some of the state's most influential leaders together in Princeton to address this challenge.

For more information, please contact the Department of Education Public Information Office at (609) 292-1126.