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April 11, 2012

TO: Chief School Administrators  
Charter School Lead Persons

FROM: Christopher D. Cerf, Acting Commissioner

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ch D Cerf".

SUBJECT: Notification of LEAs regarding Regional Achievement Centers and Reward, Priority, and Focus status

Through New Jersey's waiver from provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Department of Education has developed a new school accountability system to replace certain provisions of No Child Left Behind. Most importantly, schools will no longer be subject to the mandated interventions associated with failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Instead, the Department has identified three categories of schools based on a combination of both growth and proficiency - Priority Schools, Focus Schools, Reward Schools – in order to more fairly categorize school performance and to provide flexibility and more targeted supports and interventions where needed.

In the state's ESEA waiver application dated November 14, 2012, we developed a preliminary list of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools for illustrative purposes using preliminary 2010-11 data. Attached, please find the official list of Priority, Focus, and Reward schools developed with final 2010-11 school data. This information, as well as technical information on the methodology, can also be found at: <http://www.nj.gov/education/reform/PFRschools/>

As outlined in our ESEA waiver application (which can be found at: <http://www.nj.gov/education/grants/nclb/waiver/>), the Department is undergoing a fundamental shift from a system of primarily oversight and monitoring to service delivery and support. Over the past year, we have been developing seven field-based Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) staffed with expert school improvement teams that will work directly with Priority and Focus Schools to implement proven turnaround principles and dramatically improve student achievement. These RACs will be operational and ready to support Priority and Focus Schools by September 2012.

Reward Schools will be recognized for either high overall performance or significant growth over the prior three years. Reward Schools that received Title I funds may also be eligible for financial rewards through Title I funds.

Beyond these three categories, the vast majority of the 2,500 schools in New Jersey will not be categorized as Priority, Focus, or Reward Schools. In these schools, districts will have autonomy over the necessary investments and supports to sustain strong performance or strengthen areas for improvement. Beginning in the 2012-13 school year, the Department will develop individual growth targets for each school and subgroups within that school and will report those targets in a new School Performance Report. These new School Performance Reports will also include measures of college readiness and comparison to peer schools across the state. School boards will be required to have public discussions on the findings of these reports to ensure transparent communication about school performance. Through these new School Performance Reports, district administrators and educators will have unprecedented actionable data to drive their improvement efforts.

This memo outlines the criteria for identification of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools; the development and implementation of the RACs; and initial information for districts with Priority and Focus Schools as they prepare for the 2012-13 school year. More information on the RACs can be found on the Department's website: <http://www.nj.gov/education/rac/>

### **Definition of Priority, Focus, or Reward Status**

New Jersey's ESEA waiver application includes a detailed methodology for identifying Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools. Below is a short definition of each category.

#### **Priority Schools**

A Priority school is a school that has been identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years, or any non-Title I school that would otherwise have met the same criteria. There are 75 Priority Schools. The types of Priority Schools are—

- Lowest-Performing: schools with the lowest school-wide proficiency rates in the state. Priority schools in this category have an overall three-year proficiency rate of 31.6% or lower.
- SIG schools: schools that are part of the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program.

#### **Focus Schools**

A Focus School is a school with significant but focused areas of concern in student performance over the past three years. As part of the process, Focus Schools will receive targeted and tailored solutions to meet the school's unique needs. There are 183 Focus Schools. The types of Focus Schools are—

- Low Graduation Rates: high schools with a 2011 graduation rate lower than 75%.
- Largest Within-School Gaps: schools with the largest in-school proficiency gap between the highest-performing subgroup and the combined proficiency of the two lowest-performing subgroups. Schools in this category have a proficiency gap between these subgroups of 43.5 percentage points or higher.
- Lowest Subgroup Performance: schools whose two lowest-performing subgroups rank among the lowest combined proficiency rates in the state. Schools in this category have an overall proficiency rate for these lowest-performing subgroups of 29.2% or lower.

#### **Reward Schools**

A Reward School is a school with outstanding student achievement or growth over the past three years. There are 112 Reward Schools. The types of Reward Schools are—

- **Highest-Performing:** schools that are the highest-performing in the state, in terms of school-wide proficiency, subgroup proficiency, and graduation rates.
- **Highest-Progress:** schools that have high levels of student growth, measured using their median Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) over time.

The Department used a number of factors in the development of these lists. They include:

### **State Assessments**

The proficiency rates used to determine Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools are based on 3-year averages of state assessment data, from the 2008-09, 2009-10, and 2010-11 school years. Every test-eligible student is included in all proficiency rates. A subgroup must have an average of 30 test-eligible students and make up 5% of the test-eligible student body to be included.

### **Student Growth**

The lists of Priority, Focus, and Reward Schools take into account that some schools or student subgroups exhibit very high levels of student growth over time. For high schools, high growth is determined using school-wide HSPA proficiency changes over time. For elementary/middle schools, high growth is based on median Student Growth Percentiles (SGP) over the past three years of assessments. Schools with high growth cannot be classified as Priority Schools. Subgroups with high growth cannot be classified as a school's lowest or second-lowest performing subgroup for purposes of Focus School designations.

### **Graduation Rates**

Each school's 2011 4-year cohort-adjusted graduation rate is used. The Department will report final graduation rates for the state, district, and schools in the coming weeks using the new federally mandated 4-year cohort adjusted graduation rate.

### **Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) information**

Seven RACs will be deployed across the state to provide targeted support to Priority and Focus Schools beginning in September and to provide training and support that can also be utilized by non-categorized schools. Each RAC will be led by an Executive Director for Regional Achievement, a master educator who will oversee a team of instructional and content-area specialists whose sole job will be supporting student improvement in Priority and Focus Schools.

Starting this September, RAC teams will partner with Priority and Focus School staff to execute comprehensive School Improvement Plans aligned to the eight turnaround principles that are widely known to drive student achievement in challenged environments:

- **School Climate and Culture:** Establishing school environments with a climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations;
- **School Leadership:** Ensuring that the principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort;
- **Standards Aligned Curriculum, Assessment and Intervention System:** Ensuring teachers have the foundational documents and instructional materials needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted;
- **Instruction:** Ensuring teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students;

- **Use of Time:** Redesigning time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning;
- **Use of Data:** Ensuring school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture;
- **Staffing Practices:** Developing the skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers; and
- **Family and Community Engagement:** Increasing academically focused family and community engagement.

The interventions and supports necessary for Priority and Focus Schools will be different based on the individual needs of the schools. Because Priority Schools have low school-wide achievement, interventions will address school-wide concerns. By definition, Focus Schools have targeted areas of weakness in the school, such as specific subgroup performance. The state's supports and interventions in those schools will be much more targeted to the specific area of weakness.

Although the RACs will focus on schools as the main unit of change, significant collaboration and communication will take place with school districts to ensure cohesive, sustained improvement. It is the Department's intention that all School Improvement Plans will be developed and implemented collaboratively with district leadership.

If interventions are implemented faithfully, the Department believes that each Priority and Focus School should achieve sustained, positive growth in student achievement that dramatically narrows the achievement gap and sets schools on a trajectory for preparing all students for college and career.

### **RAC Interventions**

Quality School Reviews (QSRs) will be performed in each Priority and Focus School to evaluate the school's current performance and determine the school's needs in connection with each turnaround principle. QSRs for Priority Schools are underway and will be completed by the end of this school year. QSRs for Focus Schools will take place this fall.

Based on the findings from this review, RAC teams will work in conjunction with school and district leaders, educators, and families to develop comprehensive and individualized School Improvement Plans based on the unique needs of the school.

Specific, differentiated interventions for all eight turnaround principles have been identified.

Examples of interventions include:

- Removal or reassignment of the school principal in select Priority Schools;
- Required professional development focused on the eight turnaround principles for school leaders and educators;
- Implementation of NJDOE model curriculum and unit assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards;
- Hiring full-time specialists (e.g. culture and climate specialist, data specialist, literacy specialist, mathematics specialist) to be embedded in schools.

Interventions in Priority Schools will be closely monitored and will continue for a three-year period, providing schools the time needed to implement required changes and demonstrate improvement in

student achievement. Priority Schools that fail to implement the required interventions or fail to demonstrate required improvement in student academic achievement may become subject to state-ordered closure, replacement, or other action.

Focus School interventions will continue for a minimum of two years, at which time a school could exit status if all requirements for improvement are met.

### **Next steps for LEAs with Priority and Focus Schools**

The Department is committed to proactively sharing information about the RACs. A webinar will be held on April 18 from 3:30 – 4:30 PM to provide LEA leadership with additional information about the RACs and their role with Priority and Focus Schools. In order to ensure that the webinar is most useful, please submit questions about the RACs in advance to: [RAC@doe.state.nj.us](mailto:RAC@doe.state.nj.us). Details for accessing the webinar will be sent directly to LEAs with Priority and Focus Schools.

RAC staff will meet with LEA leadership prior to the start of the school year to share more information about RAC interventions and initiate conversations about Priority and Focus School Improvement Plans, which will include plans for professional development.

Additionally, principals and school leadership teams of Priority and Focus Schools should plan to attend RAC training from August 13 – 15. LEA leaders are welcome and encouraged to attend. Training will be provided by RAC staff members and various national and local experts. Training will be paid for by the NJDOE.

While the Department will provide additional information in our webinar and in one-on-one follow-up conversations, below is some preliminary information regarding the use of Title I funds, principal leadership, curriculum, and school staffing to begin a conversation in the coming weeks.

### **Title I**

Title I LEAs with Priority and Focus Schools will be required to set aside funds in an instructional programs reserve and sign an assurance that those funds will support RAC supports and interventions taking place in Priority and Focus Schools. The exact allocation of funds will be determined in collaboration with LEAs in the coming months. Funds set aside in this reserve may be used for the following items:

- Hiring of a data, climate and culture, math, or literacy leader;
- Technology upgrades to support Common Core-aligned curriculum and formative assessments;
- Other items aligned to the eight turnaround principles identified in the ESEA waiver.

LEAs will also be required to sign a preliminary assurance in September that they will faithfully implement School Improvement Plans for each Priority and Focus School. RAC staff members will then work with Priority and Focus Schools and LEAs to develop individualized School Improvement Plans that will be submitted by the end of October. These plans will serve as the schools' Title I school-wide plans.

NOTE: Pending approval of the required assurances, LEAs will receive all other Title I funds on schedule. Additionally, all schools not classified as Priority or Focus will submit Title I school-wide plans according to the regular LEA schedule.

### **Principal Leadership**

As part of the “School Leadership” turnaround principle, the Department will work with the Chief School Administrator and administration during the spring of 2012 to ensure that all Priority School principals or proposed principals are capable of leading the school turnaround. Generally, principals in place for three years or longer will need to be replaced.

In order to qualify as a “turnaround principal candidate” an individual must demonstrate high levels of competency in the follow areas:

- The principal works to develop a shared vision and aligned goals which drive the development of the school improvement plan and resource allocation;
- The principal ensures a culture of continuous improvement and accountability for performance;
- The principal is focused on the continuous improvement of teaching and learning through the monitoring of effective classroom instruction aligned to state standards for learning;
- The principal provides frequent and quality feedback for improving teacher effectiveness;
- The principal effectively uses staffing practices including teacher evaluation, tenure decisions, and targeted professional development for improving teaching and learning;
- The principal ensures that time is effectively used to meet student and teacher learning needs;
- The principal ensures that teachers have time for collaboration resulting in improved school climate and student achievement;
- The principal leads the effective use of summative and formative data to continuously improve the climate and culture of the school;
- The principal leads the effective use of summative and formative data to continuously monitor and make appropriate adjustment to instruction in order to improve achievement and close achievement gaps;
- The principal works to increase academically focused family and community engagement.

All Priority School principals will receive rigorous, ongoing professional development over the course of three years.

### **Model Curriculum**

Priority Schools will be required to implement a Common Core State Standards aligned literacy and math curriculum this fall. Schools that do not have an NJDOE-approved curriculum will be required to implement the NJDOE’s model curriculum, which will be available in the late spring of 2012. RAC staff will work with district and school leaders to design implementation plans. LEAs with Priority Schools will sign an assurance that a Common Core aligned curriculum is in place or being implemented this fall.

### **School Staffing**

Priority Schools will be required to identify existing staff or hire new staff who will spend a majority of their time supporting specific turnaround areas:

- A Data Leader will work in collaboration with RAC staff to ensure school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning, as well as climate and culture;
- A Climate and Culture Leader will work in collaboration with RAC staff and school leadership to establish a school environment with a climate conducive to learning and a culture of high expectations;
- A Literacy Leader will work in collaboration with RAC staff to improve literacy instruction; and
- A Mathematics Leader will work in collaboration with RAC staff to improve mathematics instruction.

We look forward to working closely with you to implement this new state-wide accountability system. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to your Executive County Superintendent, who can provide additional information.

CDC/PM

Attachments

c: Members, State Board of Education

Senior Staff

Executive County Superintendents

Lee Group

Garden State Coalition of Schools