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To: President Hernandez, Vice President Aponte and The New Jersey State Board of Education

From: Christopher Emigholz
Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy
New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA)

Date: April 15, 2009

Re: ***NJBIA Support for Higher Expectations & The High School Redesign Proposal***

Good afternoon, and thank you for allowing NJBIA the opportunity to show our support for the proposed high school reforms. My name is Christopher Emigholz, the Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy for the New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA). On behalf of our 22,000 members, I wanted to explain why NJBIA believes that high school reform is needed so that all students will have higher standards and higher expectations.

Need for Higher Expectations

The 2008 NJ STEPS report, developed by the New Jersey High School Redesign Steering Committee that was co-chaired by Governor Corzine, Prudential Chairman Arthur Ryan, and Montclair State University President Dr. Susan Cole, lays out a compelling case for the need to increase rigor and standards in New Jersey's high schools, but I wanted to supplement that with some evidence from NJBIA's own research on why business needs higher standards for all students in the State regardless of where they come from. NJPRO, the nonprofit research foundation of NJBIA, recently released a report on improving the State's business climate entitled "Economic Policies and Solutions", and it found that 81% of employers said that the availability of skilled employees was the most important issue for their business – the top-ranked concern. Despite the importance of this issue to employers and the difficult business climate in New Jersey, only half of all employers were satisfied with the job that the State was doing to address this concern. NJBIA's own Business Outlook Survey also revealed that the State was not doing enough to prepare the workforce with only one-third of employers satisfied with high school graduates' readiness for entry-level jobs and less than one-third satisfied with many of the core competencies required in the workplace such as verbal communication skills, math and science skills, critical thinking skills and written communication skills. The bar must be raised in our high schools to improve the future workforce so that New Jersey can maintain its economic competitiveness.

The dramatically different levels of quality in New Jersey's schools, the institutions that develop the future workforce, serve as an example of the need for uniform higher standards and expectations. There are many high achieving schools in New Jersey that do great jobs of preparing students for college or the workforce, but it should be noted for example that approximately one in four students attend school in the former Abbott districts where achievement levels are clearly less than desired. That means that about one in four of the future workforce of the State of New Jersey will come from schools where achievement is largely lacking and workforce preparation is not what business needs. Despite many excellent examples of academic success and quality workforce preparation, the New Jersey economy cannot bear to have a significant portion of its workforce come from schools with lower standards and lower expectations - no matter how good our best schools may be.

This achievement gap in New Jersey must be addressed to satisfactorily develop our future workforce, and the best way to level this gap may be to create a culture of high expectations for ALL students. And in actuality the achievement gap is an opportunity gap, where many students are not given the chance to achieve at high levels because of low expectations and differing standards. For example, more challenging high school coursework for students has shown itself to be a potential solution to the achievement gap leading to a 13% increase in entry-level wages, while more advanced math classes can lead to an increase in the chances of completing college. Research has also shown that challenging, high-level coursework leads to increased SAT scores, less remediation in college, higher college graduation rates and increased workplace earning. Indications are that demanding coursework is even a better predictor of success than grades. The mindset of high expectations is also a critical part of increasing standards. The education association Phi Delta Kappa points out that high expectations among principals is an essential aspect to many failing schools that become successful. Teach For America, a national education reform organization, holds higher expectations for teachers as the premier reason that low-income urban and rural schools can be turned around and improve. If all students are given equal high-level chances, then all students will have better chances later on.

Specific Comments on Redesign Proposal

The dramatically increased requirements in math and science will address the need for STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) skills in the future workforce. More rigorous math and science classes will also improve the workforce's critical thinking and problem-solving skills. While all students may not enter careers requiring high-level math and science, all students will need greater technical skills, critical thinking and problem-solving in the future.

NJBIA applauds the reforms' specific inclusion of business. The mandate of an economics/financial literacy class for high school students is a great way to expose students to business and the skills that business needs. The P-16 Council that was originally proposed has not gotten as much attention as other proposed reforms and is not currently part of the regulations that you are considering, but it is very significant. The new council will allow greater collaboration between all levels of K-12 education as well as higher education and business. This should result in greater partnerships between business and education as well as more students exposed to what business needs.

NJBIA also welcomes end-of-course/content assessments to better gauge students' mastery over specific content as well as to instill greater accountability into high schools. The broader use of data in the high school redesign proposal is also a good step in the right direction, and hopefully all educators in the future will better utilize NJSMART, diagnostic assessments and even the results of the end-of-course assessments to improve instruction.

The proposed Personalized Learning Plan (PLP) is another positive innovation that will benefit New Jersey students and the future workforce. Students will be given opportunities to find the workforce development/higher education route that best fits their needs and style. The workforce does not need cookie cutter workers who all perform the same, and the PLP will allow students to have more options to get ready for their varying workforce roles.

Need for Flexibility

NJBIA believes there is a need for flexibility and multiple options in high school. To have students prepared for more rigorous workforce demands and a diverse set of jobs in the new economy, they must be able to meet higher education standards in the manner that best suits them.

NJBIA supports the flexibility that some of the reforms would allow, such as the PLP, the more flexible Algebra II and the options within the movement towards end-of-course exams. NJBIA would like to thank this Board, the State Department of Education and Commissioner Davy for raising standards while keeping some flexibility. Maintaining flexibility must also be a goal of these reforms. NJBIA believes that flexibility is an essential part of a high school education, so students can prepare for the workforce in the way that works best for them. Things like Option 2 must be preserved so that students have opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, research and other experiential learning. Flexibility must also be part of the redesigned high school to maintain the quality career and technical education (CTE) programs that are already occurring. NJBIA would hope that higher standards and quality CTE programs could compliment each other and not impede each other.

The proposed high school redesign is in the name of better workforce development, so it would be contrary to the goals of these reforms if any CTE program that is already preparing students for a job is obstructed by the pursuit of higher standards. Students obtaining career/professional certificates or licenses should gain some flexibility in meeting the higher standards. Evidence of the need to maintain CTE programs is the aforementioned NJPRO “Economic Policies and Solutions” report that highlights the great difficulty that employers have in finding technically-skilled or blue-collar workers. The report recommended expanding New Jersey’s vocational-technical schools and improving the State’s technically skilled workforce. NJBIA’s Business Outlook Survey also shows that employers are 50% more satisfied with the quality of high school students entering the workforce from county vocational-technical high schools than traditional public high schools, and a lot of that has to do with students being immersed in CTE. Despite our strong support of high school redesign, NJBIA would not want it to weaken CTE programs in New Jersey.

Implementation

High expectations of all learners are not easy, but they are a critical part of educational success and workforce development. The time for excuses and delays to this much-needed high school reform has passed. This reform will not be easy for all high schools, but ease for schools should never be the priority. New Jersey schools have the funding necessary to reach higher standards and will be able to overcome the obstacles that they will face in reaching them.

The challenges of higher standards should not be a reason to lower the standards but to better strategize and plan for the standards. The proposed phase-in of the reforms should allow adequate time to properly prepare. The new alternative high school assessment should ease some of the concerns about the outright elimination of the SRA. The alternative assessment should be for only a few students, but there still needs to be some alternative. The flexibility that has been proposed will also help ease the transition to the new high school. The high school redesign has been well thought out and needs to move ahead to support the needs of the workforce and economy.

NJBIA is a strong supporter of the current high school redesign proposal and believes it will improve the future workforce of the State. The State of New Jersey needs to expect more from all students in order to expect them to contribute to our economy as adults, and these reforms will do that. NJBIA thanks you for considering our perspective, and we look forward to working with you in the future on this and other education and workforce issues.