



## **EXPANDING EDUCATION OPTIONS & INNOVATION**

### **DESCRIPTION**

Expanding educational alternatives within New Jersey's school system is critical to better prepare students for the specialization, diversity and complexity of today's and tomorrow's workforce.

Educational alternatives and innovations currently exist in New Jersey, but are not sufficiently promoted and financially supported, especially given their value in workforce development. Strengthening education options allows schools to better shape instruction and the learning environment to meet students' needs. Producing students with diverse interests and greater awareness of the number of real world options and career opportunities is beneficial to the business community and its diverse personnel demands, as well as all students. Augmenting public and private school choice, curriculum innovations and education partnerships should be a goal.

### **BACKGROUND**

Choice within the public school system has been expanding. There has been movement in many school districts to create smaller schools, more specialized schools and schools-within-schools. Examples of this trend are career academies, magnet schools and smaller learning communities within larger schools. These trends can be seen in many larger urban school districts like New York City as an attempt to reform the schools. This approach allows for more individual attention and a more focused education to fit individual student needs.

Public school choice also includes vocational schools and charter schools. New Jersey has 60 schools in 21 county vocational-technical school districts that educate approximately 30,000 students. They have 44 full-time career academies and 800 approved career and technical programs that have contributed to New Jersey's workforce. They have even garnered national attention. Eighteen of the 36 New Jersey high schools named to the top 500 in the nation are county vocational-technical schools. Vocational schools are fast becoming models in preparing high school students and adults for college and the careers of the 21st century.

Charter schools are public schools operated independently of local school districts. They educate approximately 15,000 New Jersey schoolchildren with roughly two-thirds of them qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. They are subject to most regulations and laws as traditional public schools, except for certain facility and leadership requirements. They are also founded on the core concepts of accountability, choice and innovation.

Private school choice on the other hand, is being threatened. Existing non-public schools have been closing in urban areas at an alarming rate, and recently they have begun closing and consolidating in suburban areas as well. These schools have operating costs one-third to one-half that of their comparable public schools and cost the State very little compared to public schools.

Options within school curricula and programs also have a history in New Jersey. From 1995 through 2003, NJBIA fought for technology education because it is an important part of workforce development, and in 2003, succeeded in making technology education part of the core curriculum content standards detailing the subjects that are taught to all public school students.

Employers asked for this change because they needed greater technology and analytical skills in their employees. Employers have also recently collaborated with teachers to create a middle school curriculum that infuses business skills and awareness into the classroom. It was published and disseminated to educators across the State by the New Jersey Policy Research Organization Foundation, the research affiliate of NJBIA. Again employers asked for this curriculum because there was a lack of real world skills and business and career awareness in the classroom.

Another recent example of curricula innovation in New Jersey is the 12th Grade Option initiative, where partnerships between high school, higher education, the community and business were created to make the senior year of high school more meaningful. NJBIA and the NJ Department of Education developed a Career Internship Resource Packet for this program. It could serve as a model for a similar program to promote partnerships.

### **NJBIA POSITION**

To better prepare for the jobs of the future, New Jersey must strengthen educational options through legislation and regulation.

New Jersey should expand public school choice by authorizing more charter schools, vocational-technical schools, schools-within-schools, magnet schools and academies. It should also increase enrollment capacity at county vocational-technical schools to increase the effective workforce preparation opportunities they provide.

New Jersey should also create a non-public school choice program in New Jersey by providing financial resources to attend a private school, such as a State-supported urban scholarships program.

New Jersey's Department of Education should provide for innovation and flexibility within the curriculum by supporting subjects such as technology education, financial literacy and entrepreneurship. And the State should increase

the use of programs like partnerships and internships that bring business and schools together.

### **ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF EXPANDING OPTIONS**

New Jersey's vocational-technical high schools work. Collectively, they have a 96 percent success rate in placing their graduates in either work or higher education. Data from NJBIA's 2006 Business Outlook Survey indicates that employers' satisfaction level with entry-level employees from public vocational-technical high schools is more than 50 percent higher than their satisfaction with employees from traditional public high schools.

Vocational schools do not have the capacity to meet the demand for their education. Two students apply to a vocational school for every one open seat. Expanding these schools and their available seats will generate more students with a clear linkage to business and the future workforce.

Non-public schools offer an important option for New Jersey students that needs to be preserved. The continued closing of non-public schools will force more students into public schools that have higher per pupil costs for the State, require new school buildings and often have inferior achievement levels in urban areas.

Funding non-public schools through scholarships for example can save the non-public schools and save the State money because it would still be less expensive than educating the student in a public school.

Targeting non-public school scholarships to urban students would offer them more alternatives to better prepare for the workforce. More importantly these schools provide another quality education option to students.

Businesses and State and national business groups have stepped forward to infuse business and technology skills into the curriculum. Technology education, which has a history of business support in New Jersey, must be strengthened.

### **CONTACT**

Christopher Emigholz, Director of Education Policy – [cemigholz@njbja.org](mailto:cemigholz@njbja.org) or 609-393-7707, ext. 201.