

To: Chairman Cryan and the Assembly Education Committee
From: Christopher Emigholz
Director of Education & Workforce Development Policy
New Jersey Business & Industry Association (NJBIA)
Date: January 26, 2008
Re: **NJBIA's Support of High School Reform**

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 higher standards and higher expectations are needed for all New Jersey students.

Need for Higher Expectations

The NJ STEPS report 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 we need to hold high expectations 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 - employers' top concern. Yet 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.

Quality is good in places but.... (1/4, BOS, 50% in NJPRO)

addresses achievement gap – really an opportunity gap

More challenging high school coursework has shown itself to be a potential solution to the achievement gap between white students and minority students and leads to a 13% increase in entry-level wages, while more specifically advanced math classes can lead to an increase in the chances of completing college. Research has 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.

Implementing a culture of high expectations is even more critical given the plight of New Jersey's low-income districts, especially its Abbott districts, because research from schools in San Jose and from Teach For America, has demonstrated that raising standards has an even more pronounced positive impact on lower income and minority schools. Often, these students and educators have existed within a culture of low expectations that has contributed to the academic struggles that so often characterize lower income schools. Some education advocates even point to the culture of low expectations as leading to the terrible achievement gap that exists between white students and students of color. Some evidence indicates that expectations are even more important to the success of a school than funding.

Specific Comments on NJDOE Proposal

Applaud - Math (geo, alg1 & alg2) & Science (bio, chem & lab science),

Small schools and PLPs,

End-of-course testing,

P-16 council – encourage partnerships and collaboration

use of data, Phase-ins

SRA – need rfor something but only for few and should be meaningful

There is a need for some type of alternative assessment, so changing the original Department plan for outright elimination is understandable, but more needs to be done to dramatically reduce its use. Only very few students should be eligible for the SRA and the eligibility requirements should be specifically spelled out. Other states have qualifiers for taking the alternative so that only the appropriate students avail themselves of it. **New Jersey should consider limiting the test to only certain student populations that truly have no other alternative such as certain severely disabled students or students with a demonstrated and substantial hardship. Then for those few using the SRA, students should have to meet a rigorous set of standards including high attendance, high grades, and/or HSPA scores that were close to passing.** The State should ensure that the SRA is never just another way to get out of high school for any student.

These reforms may require a change in statute because the SRA law currently reads “Any student who does not meet said requirements”, and my suggestion is that the SRA no longer be an option for any student. I would be happy to work with the Board and Department to help make that happen.

Implementation

Obstacles are reason to better prepare for higher standards, not reason to lower them

And the time for excuses and delays has passed. High expectations of all learners are not easy, but they are a critical part of educational success and workforce development. 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.

This reform would not be easy for all high schools, but ease for schools should never be the priority. High expectations of all learners are not easy, but are a critical part of educational success.

NJBIA does see the need for some flexibility within the higher standards proposed, and I think Commissioner Davy and the State Department of Education are trying to achieve that. NJBIA only hopes go they far enough to ensure that quality career and technical education programs are not diminished in any way.

Need for Flexibility

CTE and flexibility - option 2, passing all tests, recognizing certs ad licenses, cite NJPRO need for technical

Flex with world languages

Despite NJBIA's strong support for high school reform proposal outlined by New Jersey Department of Education, we do have some concerns about the reforms' impact on career and technical education.

The goal of the reforms is a better workforce, yet there is a possibility that the new standards may undermine some of the more successful workforce development programs that currently exist in our schools. NJBIA's Business Outlook Survey revealed that employers were 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 career and technical education (CTE) at the vocational-technical schools. It is important to ensure that the new reforms designed to improve the future workforce do not hurt the existing CTE programs that are already assisting the future workforce.

The aforementioned NJPRO "Economic Policies and Solutions" report interestingly highlighted that New Jersey employers were somewhat satisfied with the higher-level professional workforce of the State, but they had great difficulty 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. To protect the State's technical education programs, flexibility should be provided for students in licensed CTE programs. Perhaps a waiver can be given to students in these programs so that they can still demonstrate the rigor of their programs and extent of their knowledge, but do so in a less formal way that does not diminish any of the technical education they receive. Students that know what career they want to pursue immediately after high school should have flexibility to be able to best prepare for that so that they can successfully enter the workforce as soon as possible, but the vast majority of students who do not know what career or discipline they plan to pursue should more strictly comply with the higher standards proposed by

the State. It is great that some students might know their place in the workforce early on, and we should not penalize them or delay them.

Again, NJBIA is a strong supporter of these reforms and believes they will improve the future workforce of the State. NJBIA just wants to make sure that they will improve the future workforce in all disciplines. NJBIA thanks you for considering our perspective, and we look forward to working with you in the future. NJBIA is committed to improving the quality of education to improve our future workforce, and the high school reforms can do just that.