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NEWS RELEASE

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Whitman and Hespe Act to Make Schools Safer

Gov. Christie Whitman and Education Commissioner David Hespe today announced a number of actions the Department of Education will take to make schools safer and improve the reporting of school violence incidents.

The Governor said that the department is working with the New Jersey Violence Institute at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey to help parents identify and help troubled children before they turn to violence.

"No child should ever be afraid to go to school and no parent should be afraid to send a child to school," said Gov. Whitman. "Over the past several years, we have taken many actions to make our schools safer.

"We have a school search manual that is regarded nationally as one of the best resources available to help school officials keep guns and weapons out of schools. We've adopted a zero tolerance for guns law, created alternative schools to keep disruptive or violent students away from other students, and proposed expanding the crisis intervention units in each county to deal with children at risk for behaving violently. I've also asked the Legislature to pass a law requiring gun locks or "smart gun" technology on all handguns sold in the state."

"But we can do more. As a next step, we will provide parents and policy makers with the information they need to help them deal more effectively with violence, vandalism and substance abuse in the schools."

"There is no foolproof way to prevent violence in schools," Hespe said. "But the course of action that stands the best chance of success is to reach out to, and work with children in need of counseling before they choose the path of violence. Early detection is essential. However, we will not be able to success in this effort unless parents are actively involved in the process."

The Governor said that she has asked Hespe to convene a group of experts in education and law enforcement next month to review the causes of school violence and to recommend additional steps schools and the Department of Education can take in response. The group will also help the department overhaul the current reporting system for violence, vandalism and substance abuse in the schools.

"Clearly, the system that was established pursuant to law more than a generation ago needs to be improved," the Governor said. "Beginning this fall, school districts will be required to provide more detailed information to the Department of Education about incidents of school violence and the department will develop a computerized mechanism to detect flaws and inconsistencies in the reports."

"For the information to be useful, it has to reflect reality," said Hespe. "Our message to the districts is that the reporting system is a policy tool. Without complete and accurate information, our ability to help them deal with these problems will be compromised."

Hespe said instructions will be sent to all chief school administrators that will clarify the definitions used to categorize incidents of violence, vandalism and substance abuse. The new, more precise definitions and exception criteria will be prepared by the department based on the recommendations

of the expert group and will be transmitted to the districts prior to the beginning of the new school year in September.

"We will stress the need to include all incidents reported as disciplinary actions to the local school board," the commissioner noted. "We will also work with the New Jersey School Boards Association to encourage consistency in reporting."

The department will also develop an electronic reporting system, possibly web-based, that will make it easier for districts to file their reports with the state-and for the department detect reporting errors or significant shifts in the actual number of incidents.

The new electronic monitoring system will be tested on a pilot basis during the 1999-2000 school year. Hespe said he expects the system to be fully operational in the 2000-2001 school year.