

Governor Christie Continues Bold Education Reform Agenda by Taking Lead to Turn Around Failing Camden Schools

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Trenton, NJ – Continuing to act on his firm commitment to ensure that every New Jersey child has access to a high-quality education, Governor Christie is taking decisive, bipartisan action in Camden schools to fix a broken system and end the persistent failure to deliver results for the city’s children. With the support of leadership in the City of Camden, education advocates across New Jersey, and members of both parties, the Christie Administration today filed the first necessary paperwork to formally take the lead in the management of the Camden School District.

Concurrent with this action, the Administration is moving forward with a proactive and comprehensive set of next steps to guide the transition, beginning today until there is full approval of the Administration’s plan to intervene in the district.

“While there are some great teachers and educators in Camden, the system itself has proven undeniably to be broken and incapable of change on its own. We can no longer stand by or take ineffective and incremental steps while thousands of our children are so profoundly failing year after year,” said Governor Christie. “The problems of governance, leadership and operations make it impossible for the district to reform on its own. Decisive action and reform are desperately needed, not just to prevent students from falling further and further behind, but to overcome the current obstacles that are preventing children from receiving the educational tools they need and instead give the children of Camden real access to the meaningful, high-quality education that they deserve.”

Once approved through the appropriate legal steps, the Christie Administration, with a new reform-oriented, state-appointed superintendent and leadership team, will assume direct oversight and operational control in the school district. This will provide a new educational platform, leadership team, and transformational circumstances that are desperately needed to create change centered on accountability and results. By taking this action today, the Christie Administration anticipates approval of the intervention in time to take effect for the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year to start delivering better results for Camden students and their families.

“We have a moral and legal obligation to make sure that all of our students are on track to graduate from high school ready for college and a career, and today we are acting to make that a reality on behalf of Camden’s children,” said Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf. “This is a tremendous opportunity to work together with the Camden community to make every Camden school into a great school, and to build capacity in the district so that success can continue long after our involvement ends.”

“As leaders we have an obligation to give our children a real chance to succeed. Today, with the bipartisan commitment of state and local officials and the community, we’re doing just that by taking a critical step to improve the quality of education in Camden,” said Camden Mayor Dana Redd. “Demanding accountability to make our schools stronger and more competitive will finally give our students the opportunity to be successful.”

The problem is not a lack of funding, as Camden is receiving over \$279.5 million in this year’s budget, an increase of \$3.6 million from last year.

During the 2011-12 school year, Camden spent \$23,709 per student, compared to the statewide average of \$18,045.

Additionally, the teacher/student ratio during those years was 9.3 to 1, which was the lowest statewide of the largest 106 school districts in the state.

Despite this increased public funding and support, student achievement in Camden is the lowest in the state, and in many cases, getting worse over time. For years, the Camden School District has been unable to demonstrate an acceptable level of educational achievement for its students almost uniformly across grade levels and measures of proficiency. The district lags far behind the state average for performance in all critical areas of education.

Nearly 90% of Camden’s schools, 23 out of 26, are in the bottom 5% performance-wise in all of New Jersey, including the three lowest performing schools in the state.

Camden’s four-year graduation rate was only 49% in 2012 – 37 points below the New Jersey average – and decreased from 57% in 2011. **Of those students who do graduate, only 25% do so by passing the High School Statewide Assessments.**

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Camden's standardized testing scores in math and English drastically underperform the state average:

- o **New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK):** Less than 20% of Camden students are proficient in language arts literacy – 46.9% lower than the state average; only 30% of students are proficient in math - 44.9 percentage points lower than the state average.
- o **High School Statewide Assessments (HSPA):** Only 28% of Camden students are proficient in math – 51.3% lower than state average; only 61.7% of Camden students are proficient in language arts literacy – approximately 30 points below the state average.

As bad as the situation seems, the reality could be even worse. Insufficient teacher evaluations make it impossible to truly assess the situation, and self-evaluations by the district have proven to be drastically out-of-touch with the facts on the ground.

The system is broken, and a top-to-bottom evaluation completed by the New Jersey Department of Education in August 2012 found that the problems are incapable of fixing themselves. It's clear that additional state involvement is necessary to truly address these problems and get these schools back on the right track.

"With today's historic announcement we are laying the groundwork for not only the future of education in Camden, but the future of our city," said Camden City Council President Frank Moran. "By working together we will improve educational conditions and outcomes, which will ultimately empower our parents and our students."

"We owe it to all of our children to provide them with an education that will give them options as they consider what kind of future they want to have. Today's action is a critically important step in achieving that in all of our schools in Camden and equipping our children with the same educational tools many other students across New Jersey receive," said Camden School Board Member Felisha Reyes-Mortan. "As a mother of a four-year-old in the Camden School District, I am supportive of this decisive action by Governor Christie and his Administration so that we can work together to fulfill the promise of educational opportunity for all of our kids."

"There are few more important tasks than ensuring our children receive the tools they need to succeed in life, and that all starts with ensuring our schools are doing that job for our students," said Sheila Davis, CEO, Crossing Over Community Development Corporation, a community-based organization dedicated to the city's revitalization. "By acting in a bipartisan manner and with a hands-on approach, Governor Christie and this Administration is demonstrating that it is invested in public education and in the families of Camden. This local and state partnership is critical to strengthening not only our school system, but our community,"

Recognizing that the challenges inherent in the district as it exists today and the need for decisive action, the Christie Administration today filed an Order to Show Cause outlining the state's position in acting to intervene in the district. At the same time, the Christie Administration is proactively implementing necessary first steps to guide coming months, to secure a smooth transition, and to build capacity and existing state supports in the district.

Immediate Action:

Applying lessons from past state interventions, Governor Christie and the Administration are today taking specific, immediate actions to ensure a smooth transition:

The Department of Education has dispatched several staff members including fiscal monitors and transition guides for personnel to the Camden School district central office.

The transitional leadership team will immediately launch a 90-day review of district practices in the areas of academics, talent, accountability and operations.

The state will also engage local leaders to build awareness and support. These efforts will include organizing tours of high-performing district and charter schools in low-income areas as examples of the possibilities for change in Camden.

Reorganization And Reform:

The Christie Administration will be prepared to move aggressively once the state's intervention plan has been approved to improve overall performance of the School District and the academic experience for Camden students from Day 1, which will include:

Leadership. Following an extensive, nationwide search over the next several months, Governor Christie will appoint a new School Superintendent who will take office on Day 1 of formal state intervention. The Governor will also appoint three additional members to the advisory school board.

Curriculum. The district lacks approved and aligned curricula in all 9 subject areas. The state will take immediate action to ensure that all teachers have approved curricula aligned to state standards and supported with comprehensive professional development for all teachers.

Talent. Today, a significant number of teaching vacancies exist in Camden, many of which are filled with a rotation of substitute teachers. The state will conduct a needs assessment over the next several months and launch a search process to make sure that every child has a great teacher in front of the classroom shortly after intervention takes place.

Resources. Immediately upon state intervention, the state will ensure that every child has the books, instructional materials, and technology necessary for a high-quality education, many of which are currently not reaching the classroom.

Providing Students With More Options While Building A Stronger School District:

In the months following the formal state intervention, the district leadership team will work school by school to ensure that every child in Camden has the choice of a high-quality educational option, and will focus extensive resources to build capacity in Camden's central office to ensure the district can continue this success long after state intervention ends.

The new District leadership team will implement individual school improvement plans to target turnaround strategies to the needs of individual schools and students.

A three-year strategic plan will be developed to maximize the district budget through a public review of expenditures and space utilization.

The District will seek to increase the choices available to students while holding all schools accountable for results, building on the Christie Administration's track record of closing 8 underperforming charter schools in the past three years.

The ultimate goal of this process is to improve outcomes for Camden students by providing families with greater opportunities to an array of quality educational options. Governor Christie firmly believes that New Jersey has a moral obligation to provide every child with access to a high-quality education, and that the state simply cannot continue to sit on the sidelines as this fundamental promise goes unfulfilled for so many children in Camden.

A copy of the Order [pdf 1MB] to Show Cause filed today with the Office of Administrative Law can be found as an attachment to this release.

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Administration Continues Hands-On Approach with Failing Districts, Acting with Bipartisan, Community Support to Lead Operation of Camden School District

Press Contact:
Michael DREWNIAK
Kevin Roberts
609-777-2600



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Office of the Governor
PO Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625
609-292-6000