

Governor Christie Signs Legislation to Expand Educational Opportunities in Failing School Districts in Urban Communities Around the State

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Urban Hope Act 1 of 4 Christie Administration Bills to Reform Education through Increased Choice, Accountability and Focus on Results for Students

Trenton, NJ – Continuing to move his Education Reform Agenda forward, Governor Chris Christie today signed legislation that expands education options in failing schools and school districts in urban communities in the state and provides students and their parents with renewed hope and access to quality educational opportunities. The Urban Hope Act is one of four bills proposed by Governor Christie needed to achieve the goals of turning around failing schools and giving every child in New Jersey the educational opportunity they deserve.

Governor Christie was joined by Mayor Dana Redd for the signing at the Lanning Square School in Camden, where on June 9 he and the mayor publicly announced the initiative aimed at providing greater school choice for students in the some of the worst performing districts in the state.

The Urban Hope Act allows three districts – Camden, Newark, and Trenton – to partner with one or more nonprofits to construct as many as four “renaissance schools” in each district. The nonprofits must have experience operating schools in low-achieving districts and commit to both building a new school and offering a rigorous academic program designed to prepare every student for college, career, and beyond.

“Last June, Mayor Redd and I announced an innovative public-private education project designed to turn around some of the most chronically failing schools,” said Governor Christie. “Today, I am proud to sign the Urban Hope Act to finally give students and parents trapped in some of the state’s school districts with the largest achievement gaps, hope and opportunity for increased educational options that will lead to a successful and productive future. While renaissance schools are just one component of my Administration’s aggressive educational reform agenda, there is more critical work that must be done this year to address the education challenges facing our state.”

Today, 100,000 New Jersey children are trapped in nearly 200 chronically failing schools. Putting the opportunity of a quality education within every child’s reach, no matter where they live or their economic circumstances is an issue of vital importance to the future of the state and the country as a whole.

The Urban Hope program specifically targets students with the greatest need in order to ensure every child in New Jersey has access to the same quality education. Whether it is particular after school programs or extracurricular activities, longer school days or years, the focus in renaissance schools will be about getting results in the classroom through greater freedom and flexibility to adapt to the unique needs of students.

“Today’s signing of the Urban Hope Act is truly a victory for our young students,” Mayor Dana L. Redd said. “I thank the Governor for his support and commitment towards improving educational needs and outcomes for our children. I also applaud Senator Norcross and Assemblymen Fuentes, Wilson and Singleton for sponsoring this bill and for moving it along expeditiously through the legislative process. The Urban Hope Act will truly give the three urban school districts – Camden, Newark, and Trenton – hope and will offer young urban students a new academic opportunity. If we provide our children with the necessary tools like a solid education, safe learning environments, and clean and secure neighborhoods to grow up in, we are offering them a second chance to succeed in the ever changing global economy.”

An application for a renaissance school must come jointly from the district and the non-profit school management organization that will operate it. The application must be submitted within three years to the Commissioner of Education for approval. Only upon the Commissioner’s approval will a renaissance school be built. Renaissance schools will be subject to the same educational standards as any other public schools and be accountable to the Department of Education (DOE).

“We must continue to be impatient for the thousands of students that remain stuck in failing schools across the state,” said Acting Education Commissioner Chris Cerf. “The signing of this bill today provides one more tool that we have to ensure that a student’s zip code does not define his destiny. We must continue to seek high-quality education options for our students so that every child can graduate from high school ready for college and career.”

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DOE will annually evaluate whether renaissance school projects are meeting certain goals and improving student achievement. This will be accomplished through required assessments of the performance of the renaissance schools ten years after the first school opens or five years after the third, whichever comes first.

The primary sponsors of S-3002/A-4264 are Senator Donald Norcross (D-Camden, Gloucester) and Assemblymen Angel Fuentes (D-Camden, Gloucester), Gilbert Wilson (D-Camden, Gloucester) and Troy Singleton (D-Burlington, Gloucester).

The Urban Hope Act is one of several integral pieces of the Administration's overall education reform effort. Other aspects awaiting legislative action include: the Opportunity Scholarship Act, which would establish a five-year pilot program to provide tax credits to entities contributing to scholarships for certain low-income students; the School Children First Act, which provides for an educator evaluation system based on multiple measures of teacher effectiveness; allows for merit pay; ends the practice of forced placement for teachers; and requires that reductions in staff be made on the basis of effectiveness rather than seniority; and the Charter Reform Bill, which provides critical updates to strengthen and improve New Jersey's charter law, including increasing the number of charter school authorizers.

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