March 5, 2014

TO:      Chief School Administrators
         Charter School Lead Persons

FROM:    Christopher D. Cerf
         Commissioner

SUBJECT: Educator Evaluation/Common Core/PARCC Facts

Over the last month, the NJEA has made a number of statements about the Common Core, the new educator evaluation systems, and the PARCC assessments that are simply not true. I have heard from countless superintendents, principals, and teachers who are frustrated with this misinformation campaign that they feel denigrates the hard work they are doing to implement these initiatives. These individuals are also frustrated that these statements seem designed to slow down progress on initiatives that not only have been unanimously endorsed by both political parties in the New Jersey legislature, but also by the NJEA itself.

In this letter, I address directly some of these incorrect statements with the facts.

I would like to think that these are honest mistakes by the new leadership at the NJEA. Unfortunately, for two reasons I have come to believe that these are willful misrepresentations meant to mislead the public and their members. First, we have held dozens of meetings with the NJEA over the last several years on the development of the new evaluation systems. We have also included them in our evaluation statewide advisory group, which consists of teachers, principals, and superintendents, and which is responsible for tracking implementation and improving the evaluation systems. We have consistently clarified these facts with the NJEA, which often they concede in private, only to then make baseless accusations in public.

Second, it is a well known secret that their concerns are not even about these facts, but instead part of a larger attempt to turn back the clock on accountability. This “implementation dodge” has been seen with teachers unions nationally as well. How else can you reconcile that within a year of endorsing the TEACHNJ Act -- which they said at the time would “address the concerns of tenure critics while maintaining fairness for teachers and protecting public schools” -- they were already asking for a delay even before it was implemented? And how else can you reconcile recent statements below claiming that test scores have no place in evaluation systems after they endorsed a bill that explicitly required test scores as one component of evaluations?
The coming months will be telling for the NJEA. I would hope that they are sincere in their claims that they want to see these initiatives succeed and engage in productive dialogue about where problems exist so that we can work together to solve them, instead of standing on the sidelines and creating needless uncertainty for educators.

Implementation is hard work. But across the state educators are working tirelessly to implement higher standards and more meaningful evaluation systems because they know they are overdue and important. I am proud of what our educators have accomplished, and encourage all education leaders to support, rather than impede, them in that effort.

**NJEA says:** “The flawed [evaluation] system relies heavily on the costly and unproven PARCC standardized testing system being imposed on districts by the New Jersey Department of Education.”

**The facts:**
- The new evaluation system does not “rely” on the new PARCC assessments. In fact, as required by the very statute NJEA endorsed, the new evaluation system is being fully implemented this year, a full year before PARCC assessments will even be introduced.
- The PARCC assessments are not being “imposed” by the Department. Since 1990, the federal government has required that that we assess students in grades 3-8 language arts and math and in high school. (In fact, the nearly $300 million New Jersey receives annually for Title I is conditioned on it). The PARCC assessments merely substitute a vastly superior test for the current iteration of that requirement, the NJASK and HSPA.
- PARCC is a much higher-quality assessment that will truly measure students’ critical thinking skills, be vertically aligned to the central objective of college- and career-readiness, and get results to teachers nearly a half year earlier than our legacy assessments do. In other words, the PARCC assessments are a direct response to the NJEA’s long held view that our current tests need to be dramatically improved if they are to help catalyze better teaching and learning. It is beyond ironic that the NJEA seems now to have forgotten its own demand for a higher-quality NCLB assessment.
- The NJEA’s chronology is just wrong, an error that further debunks their claim that the new assessments have been “imposed” in recent years. The move towards the PARCC end-of-year assessments began long before this administration. The High School Redesign Task Force in 2007-08 recommended replacing our high school test, the HSPA, with end-of-course exams that measured college and career readiness. (The HSPA measures 8th grade skills and therefore is not an indicator of college and career readiness at all.) This decision was reaffirmed by the College and Career Ready Task Force in 2012, where members of K-12, higher education, and the business community endorsed not only the Common Core but the new PARCC assessments as the statewide measure of college and career readiness. Indeed, under Governor Corzine, as a condition of accepting more than $1 billion in federal stimulus (ARRA) money, the Department and each Superintendent committed to...
implementing new assessments aligned to the Common Core – and to linking growth measures on such assessments to educator evaluations. Superintendents all across the state signed a pledge to do so as a condition of receiving these funds.

• Regarding “cost,” the per-student cost of the PARCC assessments is nearly identical to the cost for the NJASK/HSPA exams, and the cost is fully borne by the state to implement this federal requirement. The state is also engaged in a comprehensive effort to help districts upgrade the technology they use for instruction and also to deliver the new PARCC assessments.

NJEA says: “As a result of his [my] rush to impose costly and unproven high-stakes testing in New Jersey, districts are spending money they don’t have to implement testing they don’t need.”

The facts:
• The new evaluation system does not mandate any new tests. As noted, it incorporates -- as a small percentage of the evaluation for a small percentage of teachers -- the summative assessments long required by federal law. Separately, every teacher in New Jersey must develop a Student Growth Objective (SGO) with their supervisors that will account for 15% of their total evaluation score. This is common sense and good practice – educators should set clear goals that they hope to accomplish, based on their individual school and student circumstances, and identify whether or not they meet that goal. However, there is absolutely no requirement from the state that this must be based on a test. We have given guidance that in many cases a test will not even be appropriate, and educators should think about portfolios of student work or other measures.
• In fact, in cases where individual teachers and supervisors decide they do want to use tests for these SGOs, we have prohibited the use of the NJASK for this purpose. Perhaps for that reason, in many cases they are using existing final exams that have long been administered by teachers for decades to determine whether students have learned the material.

NJEA says: “Students are left to take all of those tests, with no regard for whether they do anything to improve the actual quality of teaching and learning in their classroom.”

The facts:
• The NJEA seems to have forgotten that, far from being a dirty word, teachers invented tests as a critical teaching and learning tool. As every educator knows, you simply cannot have “standards” unless you have assessments that measure the degree to which students have met those standards. And when you raise standards, as New Jersey has proudly done for many years before this administration even arrived, it is necessary to have rigorous assessments that match them.
• I used to teach AP US History. Knowing that there was a high-quality assessment at the end of the year that would cover certain analytic skills (like writing a persuasive essay from primary sources), or that would assume mastery of pivotal historical contexts (like competing theories about the origins of
the American Revolution) and familiarity with certain American literature (like Progressive Era social critiques such as Upton Sinclair’s, The Jungle) helped guide instruction for teachers and students alike. Not only is there nothing wrong with that, such focus is central to the craft of effective teaching.

- Part of the reason the legislature mandated the use of test scores in the new evaluation system was because the evidence is clear that it does support student learning. Research shows that the quality of the educator is by far the most important in-school factor affecting student learning. The gold standard study on evaluations, the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) study led by a prominent Harvard professor, found that evidence of student learning was the best predictor of future educator success.

NJEA says: “Just this week, New York announced that it is dramatically slowing implementation of PARCC and other assessments associated with its adoption of the Common Core. New York recognizes that rushed implementation was hurting students and schools. It is time for New Jersey to acknowledge the same reality.”

The facts:
- While we know that our colleagues in New York are working equally as hard to support implementation of the Common Core, there are key differences that are important to recognize. New York adopted the Common Core in 2010 and then introduced new statewide assessments only three years later in 2013.
- New Jersey, however, adopted the Common Core in 2010, laid out a four year implementation plan, slowly aligned existing assessments to the Common Core during that time, and is not introducing a new statewide assessment until 2015, five years after the adoption of the Common Core.
- We have also committed that reaching a specific cut-score on the PARCC assessments will not be a student graduation requirement until at least the class of 2019, nearly ten years after the adoption of the Common Core.
- Similarly, we have given assurances that we do not propose to use PARCC end-of-course exams as a measure of effectiveness for high school teachers.
- Because the Common Core was not fully implemented until this year, four years after Common Core adoption, we have found that 88% of districts today have curriculum fully aligned to the Common Core, and we are working to support the remaining districts with plans to improve.
- History tells us that what districts need to adopt aligned curriculum is not simply time, but also support and commitment. After the adoption of NCLB, the Department conducted a curricular audit of our 31 Abbott districts in the late 2000s. We found that nearly 10 years after the adoption of state standards in 1996, district after district and school after school did not have aligned curriculum or accompanying resources. The lesson that we took away from this experience is that time is not the
key factor for implementation. Without clear and consistent timelines, and curricular support, some districts will never make the required instructional shifts.

- To facilitate this work, we have undertaken a comprehensive strategic plan to support districts and teachers. We have developed a free website (www.njcore.org) that allows educators to download and share their own instructional resources. We have posted on our website a model curriculum as a free, optional tool for educators along with model assessment items. We have held webinars and more than 500 trainings across the state, reaching more than 15,000 educators in the past year alone.

- Through our Regional Achievement Centers (RACs), we have worked hand in hand with our lowest performing schools to develop and implement aligned curriculum. And, we are investing Race to the Top dollars in the acquisition of an Instructional Improvement System (IIS) that links student records, formative assessments, instructional materials, and collaboration tools together in a tech-delivered system that promises to give our great teachers an extraordinarily powerful resource to support teaching and learning.

**NJEA says:** “We warned at the time that tying evaluation too closely to standardized test scores was the wrong approach, and the Legislature agreed, including language intended to limit that misuse of test scores. Since then, the NJDOE, under Commissioner Cerf, has consistently worked to undermine the Legislature’s intent and amplify the role of standardized testing in teacher evaluation, to the consternation of educators and parents alike.”** AND: **“Student learning is far too complex and important to be boiled down to so-called student growth percentiles based on standardized tests, with the results assigned to individual teachers.”**

**The facts:**

- These NJEA statements are impossible to reconcile with incontrovertible facts – facts that they are indisputably aware of. The NJEA fully endorsed the TEACHNJ Act, which included the following requirement: “standardized assessments shall be used as a measure of student progress but shall not be the predominant factor in the overall evaluation of a teacher.” In simpler terms, the statute that NJEA fully supported, and actually helped draft, mandated the use of standardized assessments in evaluations. The NJEA’s mischaracterization of this history is beyond the pale.

- We have fully followed the direction of the legislature. For New Jersey teachers who teach in grades 4-8 language arts and math, representing roughly 20% of all the classroom teachers, measures of student growth based on the NJASK will only account for 30% of their total evaluation. This is actually a decrease from the higher percentage we included in the two pilot years. For these teachers, “teacher practice” (observations) will comprise 55% of the total evaluation and SGOs will represent the remaining 15%.

- For the other approximately 80% of classroom teachers in the state, SGOs will account for 15% of the total evaluation, and “teacher practice” will account for 85% of the evaluation. Summative assessments like the NJASK, HSPA or PARCC high school end of course exams will not count at all.
NJEA says: “Teachers in tested subjects will be left with no choice but to focus on test preparation, and we’ve seen the damage done by that under No Child Left Behind.”

The facts:
- While there is much talk about “teaching to the test,” as noted above, good educators know that the best way to prepare students for assessments is to teach a rich curriculum throughout the school year rather than simply engage in test prep.
- This is backed by volumes of research, including a report from the University of Chicago. Other studies have shown that high standards lead to higher achievement.
- Further, unlike assessments in nearly 40% of other states, the NJASK is not a “bubble test” that relies simply on multiple choice questions. The assessments have long included constructed response and writing sections.
- The new PARCC assessments next year will leverage technology to fully assess the critical thinking skills incorporated into the Common Core. So, our assessments will actually incent teachers to teach critical thinking throughout the school year and will not reward test prep strategies.

NJEA claim: “Every day, we are hearing new reports from our members across the state that the roll-out of the evaluation system is a chaotic and inconsistent mess. Administrators are unprepared and untrained for these major initiatives.”

The facts:
- Just as we rolled out the Common Core over four years, we similarly have introduced the new evaluation systems over four years.
- The work began with the recommendations of the Educator Effectiveness Task Force in 2010-11. We then began a first statewide pilot in the 2011-12 school year, followed by a second pilot in the 2012-13 school year, complete with an evaluation from Rutgers University on the findings of the pilot.
- In 2012, the legislature unanimously passed a new tenure bill, the TEACHNJ Act, which was endorsed by the NJEA and mandated full, statewide implementation of a new evaluation system in the 2013-14 school year.
- Based on what we learned from our pilots and in order to give districts time to prepare for this legislative mandate, we made the 2012-13 school year a capacity building year for districts, meaning a full year to prepare for implementation.
- This four year process, one of the longer “ramp ups” in the country, was designed to give districts an opportunity to learn from the experience of their peers and build capacity before implementing new evaluation systems this school year.
- As found in reports both by Rutgers and our EPAC, the same concern about rushed implementation was also advanced in first year pilot districts two years ago as they adopted the new system. By the
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end of the year, however, educators consistently reported that the new evaluation system was a positive experience that led to a real culture change and to better conversation about high-quality teaching and learning than ever before. Moreover, districts that participated in the pilot both years experienced significantly stronger implementation and better results in the 2nd year, a pattern we expect to continue as all districts become more comfortable over time.

- I am not so naïve as to believe that implementation will not on occasion be bumpy and that some districts are ahead of others in terms of the quality of their execution. For the NJEA, those realities mean, “let’s go back to a system that we ALL agreed was failing.” For me, it means, “let’s work together to get this right, learn as we go, and commit to making improvements based on real world experience.” I would ask the NJEA which approach best serves the interest of children? And, which approach best serves its historical, almost religiously-held position that adult accountability for student learning is to be vigorously fought and, wherever the opportunity arises, affirmatively undermined?

I cannot say for certain why the new leadership of the NJEA has decided to engage in a deliberate campaign of misinformation. I do know that they are personally aware that their statements are false, as I have engaged them directly with the incontrovertible, publicly verifiable facts. In response, they exhibit what can only be described as reckless indifference to the truth. When the educational well being of children is at stake, the least we can expect of interest groups is a commitment to honest debate. One might also hope for a commitment to civil discourse and a pledge to avoid ad hominem attacks. The NJEA has decided at the very top of the organization to eschew these basic elements of responsible political discussion. I find that highly regrettable and, frankly, a significant change of direction from the previous leadership of the organization, with whom I personally built a strong and trusting relationship – albeit one marked by spirited disagreements.

Fortunately, the educator community and the courageous legislators who reached across the aisle to unanimously pass the TeachNJ Act see through these nakedly political antics. I have been immensely grateful to the teachers, principals and superintendents who have let me know that the hard work of the last few years is paying off, and that conversations across the state are now far more focused on quality teaching and learning than ever before.

The work is hard and has many challenges. It will have its ups and downs and many moments of frustration. It will inspire irrational fear in some and a commitment to working towards a better future for many others. But, if we are serious about our core commitment to ensure that all of New Jersey’s children, regardless of birth circumstances, will be launched into life ready for success, it is worth the effort.

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