June 4, 2015

TO: Chief School Administrators
Charter School Lead Persons
Directors and Supervisors of Curriculum

FROM: David C. Hespe
Commissioner

SUBJECT: Review of Common Core Standards

As we near the end of the school year, I would like to thank you and your educators across New Jersey’s schools for the hard, purposeful work in which you engaged over the past year. You showed a deep passion and commitment to improving student learning. Now is a good time to reflect on our school year.

Last week, Governor Christie announced that teachers and parents will participate in a statewide review of the standards known as the Common Core to ensure that these standards accurately reflect the aspirations that we, as a state, hold for our children.

This action provides a welcome opportunity to improve, inform and communicate our academic goals. We should always strive to provide our children with the best instruction and the highest expectations for their learning. We should also continually strive to ease the burden on local educators and school leaders as they do this hard work in classrooms and schools throughout the state.

I want to be clear from the outset that standards are living and breathing documents and not fixed in stone. They are subject to periodic formal reviews by the State Board of Education, and are regularly subject to informal reviews by NJDOE staff and educators in the field. We look to see if the standards are high enough, clear enough, and if they are age appropriate. We continue to support districts as they implement these standards through aligned curriculum and instruction.

This is an opportune moment in time for a review of the standards:

- We are five years into the change process, which provides a logical time to examine the standards for improvement. Such a review should also identify areas where we should aspire higher for New Jersey students.
- We have just completed the first round of testing to measure our progress toward meeting the standards. The data from these new tests will begin to be available over the coming months and
will provide us with direct insights regarding how our students and classrooms performed. This information will allow us to determine whether the standards were well written and designed, if students understood what was expected of them, and whether our curricular and instructional practices were properly aligned to the standards?

- The general confusion over the past months as we administered PARCC for the first time should give us pause to reflect on the need to work more closely with parents, families and communities to foster greater awareness and understanding. This review process will allow us to engage parents and families and communicate why raising academic expectations is important to their child’s future and how student progress reports derived from the PARCC tests can help parents help their child.

However, this review will also provide us with an opportunity to identify additional issues that are fundamentally important to raising student achievement, such as:

- **Teaching across the disciplines.** One of our objectives from the start of the change process was to focus on the interconnectedness of the standards and how mathematics and English language arts instruction can serve as the basis for learning in the other content standards areas, and vice versa. This cross-discipline approach is occurring in some schools, but it is not consistent.

- **Technology in the Classroom.** Are classrooms throughout the state consistently using instructional technology to help students reach the applied knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary for our students to succeed? This is another important objective that, if done well, would help teachers help students.

- **Curriculum Gaps.** Are there gaps in our curriculum that need to be closed, or aligned, among the core curriculum content standards? Are we adequately supporting students for STEM careers? Do the standards adequately reflect the need to prepare our students to be informed and responsible citizens in a global society?

This is not the first time that we in New Jersey have reviewed our standards over the few past decades, and it will not be the last. We can learn some lessons from the past:

- **Our standards, as a whole, have withstood the test of time.** They evolve over time, and therefore these processes are best seen as renovations – not tear-downs. This was the case when we transitioned to the Common Core, and it will be the case as we improve upon the Common Core;

- **This is a deliberative process that, when complete, will provide ample time for course corrections at the school and classroom level;**

- **Until that review process is complete, our current standards will remain in place, as will our testing program and our programs for using the test data;**

- Once the review is concluded, we will communicate clearly and explicitly to teachers, families and school communities what has been changed, and why. We will provide training resources and, most importantly, time for changes to be incorporated into curriculum and instruction. If changes are required to our testing program, those will also be accomplished in a transparent and responsible manner.

Moving forward we will be assembling educator groups and parent groups to begin the work. We will conduct listening tours across the state. We will provide opportunities for input through on-line tools including a standard by standard matrix that invites specific, detailed, actionable comments and suggestions. We hope that our educational partners will also commit with us to this work as they have done in the past as their assistance and support is invaluable.
We should always remember that our vision that every student graduate from high school college- and career-ready means so much more than standards, tests and teacher evaluations. We share a vision of developing the whole child through character education, digital citizenship, student support and intervention services, career and college counseling, career and technical education, and participation in the arts. We measure our success with a number of metrics such as our high graduation rate, college enrollment and persistence, and participation in dual-enrollment programs. Let us keep sight of our greater vision for education.

From the moment I returned as commissioner, I have been committed to shepherding this multi-year change process through to completion – based on a model of engagement, evolution, transparency, responsibility and consistency. Preparing our students for the challenges of the future is our greatest societal obligation. As our vision of the future changes, so must today’s academic expectations change. Constantly reviewing, improving and communicating education are key to making this happen, and this has made New Jersey a national leader in student performance.

DCH/gm
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