



New Jersey Association of School Administrators

*The Unifying Professional Society
of Educational Administrators*

Superintendents' Summit

*Steinert High School - Hamilton, New Jersey
October 13, 2008*

Summary and Recommendations

2008-09 NJASA OFFICERS

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NJASA SUPERINTENDENTS' SUMMIT

New Jersey's Chief Education Officers gathered in Hamilton, Mercer County, at Steinert High School on October 13, 2008 to address the challenges they face as they work to improve outcomes for students. The *Superintendents' Summit*, the first conducted by NJASA, initiated with a welcome from host superintendent, Neil Bencivengo. NJASA President Kenneth King next greeted the attendees and spoke to the importance of their participation in developing solutions designed to overcome impediments to student and school success. Executive Director Richard Bozza provided an overview of NJASA actions supporting participants' work as Chief Education Officers and encouraged collaborative efforts to develop strategies which will enhance student learning and guide the planning of Association programs.

The opening session was followed by participation in pre-selected focus groups in which school leaders spoke with one another in small groups about challenges to effective leadership and the approaches and promising practices which assist in overcoming the stumbling blocks that school leaders encounter.

NJASA Officers and staff members worked as group facilitators and recorders during the focus group sessions. The facilitators engaged session attendees in directed discussion in the following areas:

- Developing a high regard for educational leaders' responsibilities;
- Creating and maintaining strong leadership teams;
- Developing appropriate employment contracts;
- Advocating the best educational system for our students;
- Employing positive results in special education programs without excessive costs;
- Implementing professional development programs which capitalize on in-district and out-of-district opportunities;
- Communicating student and school successes and securing positive media coverage; and
- Uniting calls for higher standards in an effective plan to reform secondary schools.



The summit concluded with an open forum for comments by all members and a brief summary of the focus group discussions by the facilitators.

The information contained in this document summarizes the important points of discussion which were raised during the focus group discussions. The Chief Education Officers present for the summit demonstrated their genuine commitment to their profession and to reinforcing the critical leadership role which New Jersey's educational leaders play in directing the school districts of our state toward excellence.



The following are highlights of the discussions among the Chief Education Officers attending the inaugural Superintendents' Summit.

Developing a high regard for educational leaders' responsibilities.

- It is important to let people know what superintendents do. The community does not understand what a superintendent does. Since tenure has been abolished, a superintendent does not have enough time to establish credibility with his/her board and public.
- Establish a key communicator list. Provide those key communicators (board members, legislators, etc.) with weekly reports tracking what you do and why. NJASA should return to writing "white papers" or "position papers" on major issues.
- It is very important for superintendents to get to know and forge a relationship with their local legislators, newspaper reporters and radio station personalities. Invite them to school events, budget meetings, etc. Keep them up-to-date on school issues. Make them feel welcome in your schools and at your events. They can also be helpful in passing budgets and referendums.
- Superintendents are constantly hearing about their high salaries and perks. Some superintendents' salaries are very close to the salaries of their high school principals. A comparison should be done showing the different levels of responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the responsibility of each administrator.
- The full responsibility of student health & safety ultimately falls on the superintendent. Superintendents are the first ones to answer the phone when there is a crisis of any kind.

Creating and maintaining strong leadership teams.

- Board Member Turnover – The frequency of change and short terms of many school boards negatively affects a superintendent's ability to govern in the district and maintain stability.
- Board Member Training – The differences in the level of adequate training provided to board members has resulted in a lack of awareness of the school board's role and the role of the superintendent in a school district. It is recommended that NJASA join with NJSBA to provide training to board members.
- Board Member Accountability/Ethics – The lack of accountability and adherence to sound ethical practices among some board members has caused superintendents to question whether board members really represent the community.
- School Board and Community Relations – The inability of some school boards to connect to the community and maintain good community relations has resulted in a loss of credibility in the community and distrust of the school board. It is recommended

the Superintendent have on-going and frequent communication with key individuals (i.e., mayor, town council, police chief).

- Effective Governance – The ability of a superintendent to effectively govern in a school district largely depends on successfully executing a systematic entry plan and taking control of one's own evaluation. It is recommended that new superintendents understand the importance of having an entry plan.
- Contemporary superintendents are faced with a new generation of board members who often view themselves as having a greater sense of knowledge and independence. As such, they have a need for far more information and communication, both formally and informally, and they are more inclined to act on special interest populist views that challenge the role of the full board and superintendent.
- Superintendent Training and Sharing – The success of a superintendent is primarily determined by the ability to engage others in the governing process by providing training and direction to board members and professional staff, establishing good community relations, and connecting with local government and outside agencies. It is recommended that NJASA and members share "best practices."



Developing appropriate employment contracts.

Participants responded to the question: "What is most important to you?"

- One-year notification – The group felt very strongly that we should oppose any effort by the Legislature to reduce the one-year notification because they feel they need that much protection.
- Model Contract – The focus group would like to see a Model Contract drafted by NJASA and NJSBA. They encouraged us to continue our efforts to work this out with NJSBA sooner, rather than later.
- Five-year contract – They felt that a consistent, five-year contract term should be available to all superintendents in the state. They feel this is important to foster educational continuity and consistency in leadership. They noted that a person with a three-year contract only has two years to affect change before being up for renewal, and this really is not enough time.
- Educational Focus – They feel that in negotiating or speaking about contracts, our focus should be on educational leadership and providing a solid education in order to achieve goals and standards set by the State Board of Education.
- Attendance at Conferences – A joint response in getting approval for Techspo is needed. Lobbying with five people will not work anymore, as there is a need for a new arena. Every administrator, NJEA, and board members need to come together and do a letter in response to the Commissioner not approving the Techspo waiver. The focus is

on expense and should be on the goal which is to provide education to children in the State. The State standard needs to be stressed and that the most cost-effective way of achieving this goal is through Techspo.



Implementing professional development programs which capitalize on in-district and out-of-district opportunities.

What is causing the reduction in the Professional Development registrations?

- Travel restrictions that are too onerous and difficult to complete (but are basically understood how to do).
- Travel restrictions that are constantly changing and not easily understood. The restrictions create concerns about possible reprimands.
- Limitations put on professional development by school business officials or board of education fears of penalties.
- Reimbursement rates that do not cover the personal costs (examples: mileage @ 31 cents or limits on meal allowance).
- Concern about the perception of community or staff about not being in-district or possible public criticism of doing something only for personal benefit.

Advocating the best educational system for our students.

- Three events, the “SCI Report,” the “Keansburg Contract,” and the “Diploma Mill Incident” have led to new laws being passed that have impacted significantly on the current and future role of the superintendent and how public school systems are operated in New Jersey.
- It is more important than ever that superintendents engage their local legislators and forge positive relationships with them.
- NJASA should form partnerships, coalitions and alliances with other education associations to promote sound educational policy for the State of New Jersey.
- NJASA should be proactive and promote an aggressive educational agenda, which includes focusing on the importance of the superintendency and its impact on student achievement.
- NJASA should continue to be vigilant in monitoring legislation which impacts on public education and should promote its own legislative agenda.
- A concerted effort should be made to keep parents informed of the impact legislation can have on their children’s education.

Employing positive results in special education programs without excessive costs.



- Participants agreed that “unfunded mandates” such as world language, dual certification, and preschool (potentially) continue to place pressure on school district budgets, generally and on special education, in particular.
- School administrators can creatively approach challenges such as reducing the number of out-of-district placements through opportunities presented by sharing services with the local educational services commissions and other neighboring school districts.
- Resourceful scheduling of experienced teachers can be used to help address the lack of availability of appropriately qualified special education teachers, particularly on the secondary level.
- Assemble a group of “master” special education directors based on superintendent referral to cull and teach effective and appropriate strategies for reducing out-of-district placements and reasonable, as well as appropriate, responses to parent demands.
- Explore methods to encourage the New Jersey Department of Education and other state agencies to support and encourage public school placements by changing the definition applied to out-of-district placements and offering less support to private schools.

Communicating student and school successes and securing positive media coverage.

- Participants are concerned about the negative press and would like to convey a more positive message to the public through the media and internet.
- Participants felt, for the most part, that the SGW public relations proposal was good and is a step in a forward, positive direction. There were concerns about a negative impact and that the Association may be seen as defending the status quo and not addressing impending important issues.
- Participants felt that communication with the public is needed about the superintendent’s role. There needs to be a clear message from the Association regarding what superintendents do for education and how it impacts on students.
- Participants felt that relations with the Legislature need to be done through the superintendents as well, not just through NJASA.
- Participants feel that the Association needs to get more involved with NJEA and the study councils of Seton Hall, Rutgers and University of Pennsylvania to get the positive message out.

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Uniting calls for higher standards in an effective plan to reform secondary schools.

Question: "What resources would be needed to implement the secondary reform plan?"

- Personnel – qualified certified math, science and special education teachers, guidance counselors specifically trained to develop personalized learning plans
- Time – devoted to completing new graduation requirements, additional assessments, professional development
- Facilities – specifically labs to meet the expanded science requirements & enhanced technology
- Professional Development - quality, innovative programs

Question: "What are some of the attributes and some of the concerns under the recommended plan?"

Attributes:

- Development of personal improvement plans will challenge students.

Concerns:

—Concept vs. Funding—

- Funding should be allocated in order to implement goals.

—Assessment—

- Diagnostic tools will need to be more on point with plan requirements.
- Holding all students to the same standard may result in higher dropout rates.
- Districts at different starting points are expected to come to end result at same time.

—Professional Development—

- Allow time and resources for teachers to develop better teaching methods.

—Teaching and Learning—

- The plan is only a "blueprint". What is needed is a new approach to how students learn. The proposed plan is still using a 1970's approach to teach 21st century kids. The focus should be more futuristic.

—P-16 Coordinating Committee—

- Should include a cadre of educators on the committee

—Time Frame for Implementation—

- Pre-School Initiative and High School Redesign being implemented at the same time.
- Fifteen-Hour Service Learning Initiative - There are implementation concerns regarding liability issues.



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The mission of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, the unifying professional association of school leaders, is to ensure a superior statewide system of education by influencing and effecting educational policy, regulations and legislation; and by maximizing the capacity and effectiveness of school leaders through professional development programs and support services.