

## From the Commissioner



Dear students, parents, educators, policy makers and broader school community members, After nearly a year of conversations and meetings with stakeholders from across the state and receiving feedback from thousands of New Jersey educators, of Education (NJDOE) submitted New Jersey's final [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\) State Plan](#) to the U.S. Department of Education. With this letter, I thank those of you from Cape May to Sussex County, and the hundreds of communities in between, for participating in the development of New Jersey's state plan under ESSA. As

I stated during the release of the draft state plan, NJDOE staff and I deeply appreciate and hope to continue the meaningful conversations we have had with you and your fellow stakeholders about what type of schools each and every one of our students deserves. We have been amazed by how many of you have been willing to share your time, expertise, passion and ideas to ensure your voices are being heard and reflected in this state plan.

Please remember the policies included in our state plan are just pieces, albeit important pieces, of our broader education work in New Jersey. Every day, educators, families and community members provide our students with tremendous educational opportunities that challenge and support them in ways that extend beyond mere data points. We have heard from you and agree that a plan setting forth how we in New Jersey are complying with federal law falls short of capturing the breadth and depth of these rich experiences, nor reflects a child's entire school experience. The plan does, however, set forth the intention and direction of how the NJDOE will continually improve its systems of support so schools that need the most help will receive coordinated and efficient assistance. To that end, we deeply appreciate, and count on, your continued engagement as we embark on the most challenging work of ensuring the ideas put forth in the state plan are implemented in a way that leads to providing all of our students the high-quality schools we envision for them.

Moving forward, I implore you to continue to keep the themes below in mind. Conversations across the state revealed broad spectrums of opinions and preferences, but we encountered stakeholder support for the following themes:

**Students and their well-being are at the center of all of NJDOE's work.** The policies already in place in New Jersey, and those set forth in this state plan, recognize NJDOE's role to set high standards for all of our students, identify gaps and empower school districts and school communities to use data, policies and flexible federal funding mechanisms to identify the unique needs of their students and help them achieve and excel beyond the high standards.

**NJDOE recognizes that school districts and school communities are best positioned to identify the unique needs of students.** When stakeholders were asked what aspects of schools are most important, the answers were varied, but important themes emerged. For instance, stakeholders throughout the state indicated they want all students to have educational experiences that challenge them to reach their greatest potential. Stakeholders said they also expect schools to provide welcoming, safe, healthy and captivating learning experiences that support the whole child's development. Recognizing the tremendous diversity of student populations and priorities in the state's 2,500 schools, NJDOE set forth policies in the state plan that provide schools and districts the flexibility to prioritize what their unique student populations need for well-rounded educational experiences.

**There must be a relentless focus on ensuring all students, particularly those in historically disadvantaged subgroups, have equal access to high-quality educators and educational experiences.** Despite the many changes enacted in ESSA, the law still requires all state agencies, school districts and schools to identify gaps or places where historically disadvantaged students are not making the progress they need to graduate high school ready for college and careers and to use ESSA funds for

the explicit purpose of closing the identified gaps. This aligns perfectly with New Jersey's collective expectation that all students, regardless of race, economic status, zip code, language or disability, have access to challenging educational opportunities that encourage students to reach their greatest potential.

Through meaningful and sometimes difficult conversations, you challenged and encouraged us to think differently about some of our proposals and about how we implement and communicate these ideas. For instance, in many conversations, we heard that we must place a greater weight on student growth than was originally proposed. Looking at students' progress from year to year, regardless of their starting point, provides one of the clearest windows into how educators and school systems are helping students achieve great heights. Placing a greater emphasis on growth implies there is no ceiling or end point for our students – but rather exponential opportunities to shine. So as we look at how all of our schools are performing across the state, it makes sense to place a heavier emphasis on growth rather than other academic measures such as proficiency.

I would like to thank you for continuing to engage in extremely meaningful, often challenging conversations on how we best meet the needs of the children we serve. The most important work lies ahead. Please engage even more deeply in your community conversations as every school and district strives to provide high-quality educational experiences for each child through its own local plan. We cannot waiver from the commitment to collectively and continuously strive to improve current and future opportunities for all of our students.

The U.S. Department of Education has 120 days to review and notify the state whether the plan has been approved. The *ESSA* State Plan, along with other *ESSA* resources and information, are available in the [ESSA section](#) of the NJDOE website. The NJDOE also issued a [news release](#).

With gratitude,

Kimberley Harrington  
Acting Commissioner