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NEWS RELEASE

Report Issued Tracking Education Progress in Camden: Groups Call for Community Dialogue to Support Improvement of Camden Public Schools

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CAMDEN, NJ – The Camden Board of Education, District Parent Advisory Council, CAMConnect, and the Education Law Center are issuing a call for a broad community dialog about the Camden public schools' progress in meeting goals that have been set by state and federal school improvement initiatives.

These Camden stakeholders released a research report that can be used in community discussions to take a closer look at what is running smoothly and what warrants closer inspection. The report - *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Camden Abbott Indicators* - was prepared by ELC, the children's advocacy group spearheading New Jersey's historic effort to improve public education in its poorest cities. CAMConnect played important roles in preparing the report and facilitating the involvement of community stakeholders.

The report will be released at a press event on Thursday, May 26, 2005 at the Camden Board of Education television studios at 1600 Pine Street Camden, New Jersey 08103-1722.

Developed over the past 18 months, the report is based on interviews with district and school officials and research of a wide array of publicly available reports and datasets. The comprehensive reports are believed to be the first in the nation of their kind, specifically prepared to support broad community dialog about public education. Unlike other reports, the focus of *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Camden Abbott Indicators* goes beyond student outcomes to examine student opportunities to learn, teacher qualifications and supports, budget, leadership, supports for students and their families, and school facilities. The indicators themselves were developed by the Education Law Center with input from an advisory committee of education experts.

The goals of the *Abbott Indicators Project* are to *inform* everyone with a stake in the public schools; *engage* them in noting accomplishments and identifying where more work is needed; and spark *advocacy* and *planning* for continued improvement.

"The Abbott Indicators provides valuable information regarding the participating Abbott Districts. Having experienced the conditions and needs of the Camden City Public School District firsthand, I share with all persons receiving the information that our schools are in perpetual motion. That motion includes improved student performance, preparation for and implementation of teaching and learning. Are we satisfied with where we are? Yes and no! We are satisfied with our current progress with our minds focused on the road ahead," said Annette D. Knox, Superintendent of Schools, Camden City Public School District.

Claraliene Gordon, President of the Camden Education Association said, "The Abbott Indicators Report is an important snapshot of how far the Camden Public Schools have come – and how far they have to go. As President of the Camden Education Association, I know it's easy to identify shortcomings and areas that need improvement. Our role as educational professionals is to stay the course and do the hard work of addressing areas that require our full effort and attention. It is said that 'It takes an entire village to raise a child.' We agree and we extend to all stakeholders an invitation to join us as we continue our efforts to improve the schools and the community in which our students live."

"CAMConnect is pleased to partner with the Education Law Center and our other Camden partners to release this important report. We are committed to providing the data and information that will promote informed civic engagement in Camden, and we hope that this report will be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue about how to improve the quality of education in Camden's public schools. CAMConnect looks forward to providing and building local capacity around this year's report and subsequent updates," said Derek Ziegler, Acting Executive Director of CAMConnect.

"The District Parent Advisory Council supports excellence in the Camden schools through extensive parent outreach and education efforts and legislative action. We look forward to working along with the Camden Board of Education, the Camden Education Association, CAMConnect, and the Education Law Center to engage our community in using this information to improve our schools," said Martha Wilson, President of the District Parent Advisory Council.

"ELC wrote this report for Camden's education stakeholders: we will work with our partners in Camden to encourage them to ask more questions, get involved in conversations about the public schools, and support their continued improvement," said David Sciarra, Executive Director of the Education Law Center.

Camden is one of four pilot communities taking part in the project, along with Newark, Trenton, and Union City. The reports for each community will be presented to the public during the week of May 23, 2005 as a first step in the community dialog about improving public schools.

The following information is also attached:

- A summary of the **key findings** from *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Camden Abbott Indicators*;
- *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Camden Abbott Indicators Summary Report* (Adobe Acrobat version); and
- A **Fact Sheet** containing information about our community partners in Camden, and lists of the Abbott Indicators Project funders and advisory committee members.

Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Camden Abbott Indicators

Key Findings

The attached Summary Report contains findings about a wide range of school practices and student outcomes presented in the context of federal and state standards as well as recommended next steps for Camden's education stakeholders. Below, are key findings presented in brief.

About the Community and the Students

- The most successful suburban districts had 15 times more property wealth per student than Camden in 2003. The state average was almost ten times Camden's.
- Reflecting the poverty experienced by many Camden families, 80 percent of the children enrolled in Camden's schools are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch.
- Student mobility is an additional challenge that the district and its children face. Nearly one in three children leaves or enters school in a single school year, presenting a disruptive influence on educational progress.

Progress Has Been Made ...

- Elementary school class sizes have markedly decreased since the mid-1990s. Now, average class sizes in all grades are smaller (better) than the Abbott standard.
- Camden's preschool teachers were on their way to meeting state certification and education requirements in time for the state's 2006 deadlines. Nearly all of Camden's preschool teachers earned their four-year college degrees, and all but five had earned at least provisional certification.
- Camden has made progress enrolling three- and four-year-olds in preschool. In 2003-04, three-quarters of Camden's eligible population was enrolled in the Abbott preschool program only five years after it began. Most remaining children are enrolled in programs that the district was helping to meet Abbott standards.

...And More Work Lies Ahead

- ELC estimates that fewer than half of Camden's class of 2001-02 graduated from school. Although clearly insufficient, the rate has improved from a low of 32 percent in 1996-97.
- In each year since 1994-95, fewer Camden students have graduated by passing the traditional Grade 11 exam and more have graduated by passing the alternative Special Review Assessment.
- Even though four out of five of Camden's teachers were highly qualified, the district had a lower percentage of highly qualified teachers than the average of the other Abbott districts.
- Each Abbott district is required to have a representative body to govern implementation of the state's urban school reforms. As of September 2004, there was no Camden Abbott Advisory Council.

Abbott Indicators Project Fact Sheet

THE PARTNERS

The Education Law Center. The Education Law Center (ELC) was established in 1973 to advocate on behalf of New Jersey's public school children for access to an equal and adequate education under state and federal laws. ELC works to improve educational opportunities for low-income students and students with disabilities through public education, policy initiatives, research, communications and, when necessary, legal action.

ELC serves as counsel to the plaintiffs in the *Abbott v. Burke* case – more than 300,000 preschool and school-age children in 31 urban school districts throughout New Jersey. Through the *Abbott* decisions, the New Jersey Supreme Court established an unprecedented legal framework of measures to assure the rights of urban public school children to an adequate education. The remedies include standards-based education and reform supported by foundational funding equal to New Jersey's most affluent suburbs; supplemental funding for programs that address the social and health needs of students, whole school reform; school based management; high quality preschool for all three and four year olds; and safe and educationally adequate school facilities. ELC's successes in *Abbott* have resulted in an additional \$800 million in foundational state aid each year for the *Abbott* districts and schools, \$300 million in preschool aid, and \$6 billion in school construction funds. The New York Times editorialized that *Abbott* represents "the most important equal education ruling since *Brown v. Board of Education*" (April 30, 2002).

District Parent Advisory Council is a districtwide organization that promotes parent participation and holds regular monthly meetings. In operation since 1999, its officers are elected from among its peers, including parents, grandparents, and the general community. The District Parent Advisory Council's goals are to: provide regular opportunities for parents to learn about school issues and to hear their concerns; be vigilant and steadfast in keeping our parents and community informed of their rights; and build a capacity for partnership among parents, teachers, schools, community members, and the district with focus on improving student achievement. We carry out our mission by: holding televised monthly meetings with updates on *Abbott* and No Child Left Behind; hosting ELC updates on the *Abbott* regulations; joining other *Abbott* districts on trips to the State House to speak to our Senators and Assembly Members; and attending conferences in the state to keep our community informed with up-to-date information about their and their children's rights.

CAMConnect: Linking Communities with Information is devoted to creating a learning partnership in Camden, New Jersey, with the belief that sharing and using data will lead to informed decisions and better policy making to support the improved quality of life of all Camden citizens. The purpose of CAMConnect is to expand and democratize access to information for residents and organizations that live and work in the City of Camden. Our partnership includes local community and neighborhood groups, government, community-based organizations, hospitals, educational institutions, and other non-profit and for-profit organizations that collect or use information.

Camden Education Association. The Camden Education Association represents approximately 3,000 teachers and educational support professionals working in the Camden Public Schools. The CEA is an affiliate of the New Jersey Education Association and the National Education Association. Its mission includes being an advocate for positive change, which encompasses diversity, responsibility, and accountability, while adjusting to modern educational philosophies. In addition, CEA recognizes, advocates and supports improvement for its members, students, schools and community.

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