



# MAYOR'S NEWS RELEASE

*Monday, June 20, 2005*

## MAYOR PALMER LAUNCHES SCHOOL REFORM COALITION TO BUILD ON NEW EDUCATION LAW CENTER REPORT

Mayor Douglas H. Palmer, Trenton school officials, and leaders of the Newark-based Education Law Center today announced the formation of a citywide coalition with the mission of using new research to spell out specific action steps for school improvement in the city.

“This coalition already has tremendous energy,” Mayor Palmer said. “It will now draw insights from the report the Education Law Center is issuing today. We are very fortunate to have this frank assessment of our present educational progress and also to re-engage the community residents from my school issues forum in March. Our community will press the case for reforms with the Education Law Center and School Superintendent Dr. James Lytle. We will unify our constructive problem solving capabilities to identify priorities and pursue immediate action steps and long-term recommendations in time for the school budget process this fall.”

“For three decades, the Education Law Center has been the catalyst behind the *Abbott* litigation to improve education in New Jersey’s poorest cities,” Mayor Palmer added. “Today, by launching the Coalition for Hands-On Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education – the CHANGE Coalition – we are locking arms as parents, teachers, researchers, and public officials. Instead of sitting on a shelf, the ELC research will be our organizing framework. We will use it as a roadmap to improve educational opportunities. We will combine it with the priorities our parents identify and go to work together to specify the actions we need from our schools, our parents, and our students, so that our schools become more safe, thorough, and efficient.”

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The ELC developed its new report, *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Trenton Abbott Indicators*, over the past 18 months from interviews with district and school officials and from a wide array of publicly available data. Trenton is one of four pilot communities taking part in the project, along with Camden, Newark, and Union City. All four summary reports will be available today on the Education Law Center website, [www.edlawcenter.org](http://www.edlawcenter.org).

“The comprehensive reports we are issuing today are believed to be the first of their kind in the nation, specifically prepared to support broad community dialog about public education,” said David Sciarra, Executive Director of the Education Law Center. “Among the four pilot cities, Trenton is unique in recognizing that this information can be a valuable catalyst for reform – and in coming together to act on it as a unified, citywide coalition.”

Unlike other reports, the focus of *Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Trenton 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.

“When I first met with David Sciarra and the Education Law Center staff to discuss the findings about Trenton, I was already hearing from parents and teachers desperate for orderly classrooms, better academic preparation, and clear communications,” Mayor Palmer said.

“These were the three most powerful messages from our parents’ forum in March.

“Since then, I have corresponded with parents, teachers, and community members who are willing and interested to be part of our working groups for achieving solutions. We are on a mission, with the Board of Education and the Education Law Center, to focus the firsthand knowledge of our parents on specific recommendations for reforms on behalf of our children. There is a natural confluence of Trenton’s needs and the goals of the ELC’s *Abbott Indicators Project*.”

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The goals of the ELC *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.

“This summer, our working groups will examine the needs of youth and their families in light of the *Abbott* indicators report being released today. The working groups will identify specific steps to achieve the goals that we assign the highest priority,” the Mayor said. The eight topic areas for the working groups are detailed on the attached listing, entitled, “Engaging the Community in School Improvement, Engaging the Schools in Community Action.”

“Many at the Mayor’s school issues forum in March observed that we would do well to continuously have parents involved,” said Superintendent Lytle. “The framework presented today by the Education Law Center research will help us channel that energy in constructive ways so that we can ensure that all schoolchildren are safe and well served with appropriate opportunities to succeed. We also know that we need to improve two-way communications; these working groups will help us make those connections, too.”

“ELC wrote this report for Trenton’s education stakeholders: we will work with our partners in Trenton to encourage them to ask more questions, to get involved in conversations about the public schools, and support their continued improvement,” ELC Executive Director Sciarra said.

“Today we launch an unprecedented citywide school reform coalition that combines insights from the Education Law Center’s research with the passion of willing and interested parents and teachers,” Mayor Palmer said. “Today we make the commitment not to talk about school reform, but to produce it.”

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## *Engaging the Community in School Improvement, Engaging the Schools in Community Action\**

Mayor Palmer, the Trenton Public Schools and Board of Education, and the Education Law Center (ELC) are collaborating to engage the community on school issues. The overarching purpose is to help prepare students to be productive citizens now and in the future. To develop specific action steps, the Mayor is convening a Coalition for Hands-On Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education – the CHANGE Coalition, which initially will have eight Working Groups developing action steps based on parent priorities and ELC (and other) research. Here are the eight topic areas:

**SAFETY AND SECURITY.** Students learn more when they feel safe and when there are few behavior disruptions during the school day. Issues include the security available in schools; school responses to student violent behavior; coordination of school and city services during non-school hours; school transportation routes that promote student safety; and a uniform code of behavior and consequences.

**COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE SCHOOLS AND THE COMMUNITY.** Parents and community members have questions about the district's strategic vision, school and district policies, budget/resource allocations, staffing and staff quality, and academic achievement. Who makes the decisions that affect children? Who is consulted? What are parents' best sources of accurate information about school programs? Are there better ways to notify parents of services, advise them of their rights, and coordinate responses to families' needs? How will schools and parents resolve conflicts?

**PARENT INVOLVEMENT.** Overwhelming evidence shows that family involvement – both in school and at home – has a positive impact on student achievement. Research finds parental involvement tends to drop off during the transition from elementary to middle school, when achievement also declines most. How can the community truly assist schools in educating, motivating, and supporting students? What can schools do to encourage more parent involvement, especially at the middle and high school levels?

**CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION; COLLEGE AND CAREER PREPARATION.** District-wide curriculum can reassure the community that every child has equitable opportunities to learn concepts and skills. How can schools better ensure that students derive the full benefit of educational opportunities? This Working Group will examine resource allocation and procedures for distributing and tracking textbooks.

**ADDRESSING HISPANIC STUDENTS' NEEDS.** Spanish-speaking and immigrant populations are increasing every year. What programs for students and families will help students succeed in school? What programs can engage parents/families and sustain their involvement? What can schools do to identify, accommodate, and address family concerns and students' learning needs?

**SPECIAL EDUCATION.** The No Child Left Behind Act sets as a goal that students with disabilities will achieve at the same level as their non-disabled peers. Attaining this goal will demand the coordinated efforts of family and school district. How will parents learn about – and how will their children receive – available services? How will the school district inform parents of students' placement and progress?

**MAGNET SCHOOLS.** What sorts of schools with specialized curriculum, such as magnet schools or alternative programs, would serve to advance learning and development for gifted and talented students as well as district compliance with State standards for student achievement?

**SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY:** What schools do Trenton parents and students need for the future? What is feasible in light of the experience to date with the School Construction Corporation?

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\* These eight Working Groups each will have a Board of Education member and facilitator assigned and will develop immediate action steps and long-term recommendations by December 1, 2005.