

Officials: Schools were left behind

They highlight money problems to state education chief

Oct. 18, 2011

By Larry Higgs, Staff Writer

<http://www.app.com/article/20111017/NJNEWS/310170091/Officials-Schools-were-left-behind-in-Monmouth-County>

Acting Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf was in the role of student Monday as two state legislators and school officials taught him how two Monmouth County schools districts fell through the funding cracks, receiving less money than the state considers adequate.

Assemblywoman Caroline Casagrande and State Sen. Jennifer Beck, both R-Monmouth, brought Cerf on a tour of two schools in Red Bank and Freehold Borough, which are among 14 in the state that receive 20 percent less than the amount of funding the state recommends, which is a glitch they want corrected.

Perhaps the most telling examples of his trip to the Red Bank Primary School and the Park Avenue school complex in Freehold was the stage in the Freehold school cafeteria, which has been converted to a classroom, and the former library, which has been carved into a technology lab and other small teaching facilities.

Cerf was direct with school officials and legislators that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, but that the time to discuss school funding won't come around in the legislative cycle until February.

"There are downright oddities in how we fund schools. They ought to be funded based on the number of kids and the need," he said. "The courts will get the last word on this. At the same time, we can work together to talk about what it means to process a thorough and efficient education. Is it money? Is it policy?"

Beck and Casagrande argued that both districts would now qualify as "Abbott" districts, referring to the 31 poor school districts in the state for which state-funded education reform and assistance programs must be provided. Back in the mid-1980s when the Abbott vs. Burke suit was heard by the state Supreme Court, Red Bank and Freehold had a different demographic makeup than they do now. Both districts now have high numbers of students whose first language isn't English and whose families live at or near the poverty line.

“There has to be some grant program to allow for districts like Red Bank and Freehold Borough,” Casagrande said. “We need some grant program tailored for places like these.”

Both Freehold and Red Bank also have nonprofit or government agencies making up about 16 percent of the local property tax base, for which neither borough receives tax revenue, Beck said.

She suggested bringing the 20 inadequately funded districts up by 15 percent as a first step.

But Cerf said it is hard to talk about doing something for specific communities in a state with over 600 school districts.

“We need to look at the (school) funding formula to make sure there is a reasonable equitable spending,” he said.

In Freehold the talk was a little more frank about the space problem, where Superintendent of Schools Elizabeth O’Connell detailed how the student population is growing annually, but the district has no room for the additional students and can’t finance upgrading the schools to meet current standards, nevermind building additional classrooms.

“We had an increase of 55 to 65 children this year, and we’re expected to stay on that path for several years,” O’Connell said, noting that some classes have 27 students in a room.

Cerf said he understood the relation between class size and the difference in student proficiency, with smaller classes yielding better academic results.

“The point is, I understand. ... It’s simply a quirk of history that you’re not an Abbott district,” Cerf said.

A planned preschool program in Freehold was shelved after a state grant didn’t come through, meaning that of 300 eligible students, the district can only provide instruction for 40 students, O’Connell said. By contrast, Red Bank is part of a state pilot program that provides grants to fund a full preschool program in the borough.

Red Bank has to rent space for those students in four locations outside of the school system. And Superintendent Laura C. Morana said Red Bank also has no additional space.

Cerf also assigned some homework on the way out the door in Red Bank, telling officials that he wants to see reading proficiency levels among third-graders improve when he comes back for a return visit next October. In the 2010-11 school year, third-graders in the general education program had a 44.6 percent language arts literacy.

“Even this school, which is a great school, needs to continually get better and better,” he said. “I want to be back at this podium next October, and I want to see the number of children proficient (in reading) on the NJ ASK (test) progress by dramatic levels.”

Morana accepted.

“You’ll find we are up to the challenge,” she said. “We’ll contact your office for a (return) date.”

Red Bank’s tour was more academics and less facilities-oriented. Cerf dropped into prekindergarten, kindergarten, second- and third-grade classes, in addition to getting an overview of the district presented by Morana and Middle School students. Morana also detailed how the district has used grants and partnerships with universities, community organizations and two theaters to make up for the lack of funding.

Cerf also talked about proficiency levels in Freehold, questioning how reading levels could have declined. O’Connell said the district is doing its own assessments and using that information to identify individual students who need help and meeting with their parents to work on improving their involvement in academic performance.

He also posed a question to Freehold school officials about formulating a plan showing how the community would come up with a plan to provide a prekindergarten program in a year.

“Make this a major town initiative to execute in 12 months. How would we do this, who would pitch in and by the way, we need some help from the state,” Cerf said. “Show me you’ve got a plan and how I can help.”