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Fulfilling the promise of Abbott

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BY DAVID G. SCIARRA

Gov. Jon Corzine recently restated his commitment to the reforms ordered in Abbott vs. Burke, the Supreme Court's landmark education equity rulings. This is good news for poor children, largely concentrated in New Jersey's high-poverty, intensely segregated urban school systems.

It's good news because of the great progress made in transforming long-neglected urban schools in recent years. As a result of Abbott, we've built arguably the best preschool program in the United States, narrowed test score gaps in the fourth grade, lowered class sizes, made tutors and other supports available to students and teachers and, just last year, launched an ambitious effort to improve urban middle and high schools.

Building on that success, Corzine, in announcing the first aid increase to low-income students and schools outside the Abbott districts in five years, said he would target the new aid to expand those Abbott programs proven so effective: preschool, full-day kindergarten and intensive literacy reforms.

In supporting Abbott, the governor also stated his concern about its "execution." Clearly, educational progress in Abbott districts would be much greater if the state had not mismanaged key reforms and instead operated with a coherent vision and strategic agenda for improving high-poverty public schools.

At its core, Abbott is about equity, about improving public education for poor students in distressed communities, urban, rural or otherwise. The governor's expansion of the Abbott programs is long overdue, but much more is needed from his administration to fulfill the promise of Abbott in high-needs districts across the state.

First, recognize what Abbott has clearly shown: Adequate school funding is necessary, but not sufficient, to improve educational quality in high-poverty schools. Any new funding formula must provide and sustain such funding to all schools serving sizable enrollments of poor students.

Second, state officials must be willing to hold themselves accountable for performance, especially to poor students and schools. This means the state needs to refrain from blaming districts for fiscal or educational failures and telling underfunded local officials to fix these failures on their own.

Third, the state Education Department must be overhauled so it has the expertise, technology and capacity necessary to lead reform and collaborate with districts to solve tough educational problems. The Legislature last month authorized an independent evaluation of the department's operations, and the governor should move quickly to bring in the nation's leading educational experts to perform a thorough review. Any departmental reorganization, such as abolishing the Abbott division, should await the results of this evaluation.

Fourth, we must recruit top-notch leadership at the state level. The Abbott reforms are unprecedented but challenging to implement. We need creative leaders, steeped in educational practice and policy, with the skill set to build strong partnerships with diverse schools and communities. If we can raise judges' pay, why not do the same to attract talented leaders to run our education system?

Fifth, while audits address fiscal operations, they say nothing about the effectiveness of educational programs or what reforms are working. Incredibly, the state devotes almost no funding to research effective practices. The Education Department has even refused to evaluate the Abbott reforms despite a court order to do so. Without a robust education research agenda, we'll continue groping in the dark for solutions.

Finally, educational investments in high-poverty communities must be viewed as vital to regional redevelopment efforts. For too long, schools have remained off the urban revitalization agenda. Schools should be networked with social services and health care, child welfare, public safety and other systems. Every new or renovated facility should be planned and built as a "center of community." We know poor students aren't the challenge. It's the intense concentration of poverty, something schools simply cannot

address in isolation.

Isn't it high time state officials took responsibility for ending New Jersey's decades-old educational divide? After all, it's the state's obligation under our constitution to make sure local districts and schools deliver the education our children need and deserve.

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