



December 24, 2009

State has solid plan to educate tomorrow's leaders

DELAWARE VOICE

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There are so many reasons to be proud of Delaware's public schools. We have so many talented teachers. We have schools that are the centerpieces of their communities. We graduate thousands of young adults each year who are ready to contribute to their communities and add their own achievements to our state's great future.

But there are also so many reasons we need to keep working to improve our schools and better prepare our children for the future. As the rest of the world continues to invest in their own systems of public education, and technology makes it ever easier for companies to move work overseas, our children are no longer competing against each other for tomorrow's jobs -- they are competing against the rest of the world.

We need to, and can, meet this challenge and ensure that Delaware's children have the chance to be tomorrow's leaders if we have a plan, if we have the opportunity and if we have the will. That is why I was so happy to join with Gov. Jack Markell recently to release "A World-Class Education for Every Child: Delaware's Plan to Strengthen Our Schools."

The plan builds on what works best in our schools so we can do more of it. But it also makes an honest assessment of where we can improve. It is an action plan that focuses on four specific goals to help ensure that Delaware schools are world-class:

1. Improve student readiness: We need to set high standards for what we want our children to learn. Delaware also needs to measure effectively what our children have learned and use that information to ensure they are getting the best instruction possible. To make sure these standards have value and ensure that our children can compete in a world economy, those standards need to be benchmarked against both national and international standards.

As the national co-chair of the Common Core Standards initiative at the National Governor's Association, Gov. Markell is helping to lead a group that is setting those standards.

2. Ensure teacher quality: Great teachers are the foundation of student success. Delaware can improve the way it prepares, hires and supports its teachers. Delaware must also evaluate how the best teachers in our schools developed their skills and apply those same lessons to others so we can better develop the next generation of great teachers for the future.

3. Use long-term data to guide decisions: Delaware will use the data we collect about students throughout their education careers to support decision-making in the classroom and to determine what teaching methods and practices are effectively educating students.

4. Turn around persistently low-performing schools: About 40,000 Delaware students are in schools that did not meet targets for educational progress in 2008-09. Of those, 26,000 are in schools that have not made their targets for at least five consecutive years. Delaware must do more to target those schools needing assistance so that all of Delaware's children receive the opportunity to succeed. If schools do not or cannot make that progress, we need to ensure significant and positive changes to give the children in those schools a chance to learn in a place or way that they could succeed.

Gov. Markell likes to say that Delaware is a state of neighbors. When we pull together, when we work side by side, we have the chance to make the kind of progress that other places would envy.

We have that opportunity now.

The U.S. Department of Education launched a grant program called "Race to the Top," that rewards states that are making significant progress improving their public schools. The winners of "Race to the Top" will receive additional, critical resources to invest in efforts to improve education.

A key component of the Race to the Top scoring is how much support a state can show for its efforts to strengthen its schools. I am confident that Delaware will be competitive based on the strength of its plan, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue with stakeholders to gain their support for our efforts.

More importantly, however, I am confident that if we continue to work together, our education plan will help us to ensure that when our children graduate from our state's public schools, they are more than just the pride of their communities -- they are the leaders that will keep our state and our nation ahead.
