

**Government relations report to NJASL  
January 25, 2007**

**State Board of Education:** Nothing to report at this time.

**Department of Education:**

**New Science Tests for High Schoolers Announced by Department.** According to a [report in the Star Ledger](#), state officials have announced that high schools tests for specific sciences, starting with biology, will begin in the spring of 2008. These tests would be in addition to a general science test to be given as part of the state's High School Proficiency Assessment given to 11<sup>th</sup> grade students for the first time this year. The new subject specific tests are an attempt by the state to improve math and science education in high school, now considered a national goal in response to increased international competition.

**Update on DOE'S Report on the Cost of Education.** On January 19, 2007, the Department of Education released an updated appendix to the [Report on the Cost of Education](#), originally issued in December, 2006. Specific changes include the updating of fiscal information to include more current data from the 2005-06 fiscal year and an adjustment in methodology that allows certain weights associated with the costs of English language learner programs and other programs that serve at-risk students to vary with the size of a school district.

The updated tables are available at <http://www.nj.gov/njded/sff/appendix/>

Additional hearings on the report were to be held by the department on January 24 and 25 in Gloucester County, Mercer County and Hudson County. (As of today's date, it is not clear from the department's website whether these hearings did in fact take place.)

Following the [substantial criticism of the report](#) articulated at the first round of hearings in December, the department announced that a [Commissioner Lucille Davy announced on January 4th](#) that she had hired three more experts to "review and comment" on the NJDOE cost study. They are Allan Odden of the University of Wisconsin; Larry Picus of the University of Southern California; and Joseph Olchefske of the California-based American Institute of Research. According to the department's announcement, the experts have three weeks, until January 19th, to complete their review.

**State House**

**School Construction Program Needs New Funds.** The Star Ledger reported on January 25 that Scott Weiner, chief executive officer of the state Schools Construction Corp., has warned his agency's trustees that the corporation will have to begin shutting down the school construction program if the legislature does not authorize new funding. SCC officials are seeking legislative permission to borrow another \$3.25 billion for the program, including \$2.25 billion for construction in Newark, Camden and 29 more of the state's neediest communities. Republican legislators say they will oppose any new funding. [Read more.](#)

**Tax Reform Update:** As of late afternoon on Monday, January 29, 2007, the New Jersey Assembly continued debate on a bill to provide a 20 percent property tax cut to most homeowners and restrict future property tax increases to 4 percent per year. Assembly Majority Leader Bonnie Watson Coleman invoked a little used Assembly rule keeping the legislators in session in an effort to pass the bill by day's end.

The cap on property tax increases is opposed by organizations representing schools including the NJEA and the NJSBA. Local government officials also oppose the cap. Opponents argue that the cap will lead to service cuts.

The Senate is expected to consider the proposal on Feb. 5.

**Lower taxes or local control of schools?** A January 16 article in the Philadelphia Inquirer discusses the experience of several states in balancing lower property taxes against local control of small school districts. The article notes that the eight states with the highest property taxes are the eight states with the geographically smallest school districts with New Jersey first in both categories. Consolidating school districts could save money but weaken the cherished connection between communities and their schools. Pennsylvania, a much larger state than New Jersey, consolidated its school districts decades ago and now has 501 for its 1.8 million students compared with New Jersey's 616 districts (593 of which operate schools) for 1.4 million students. [Read more.](#)

#### **National Items:**

**Bush pushes vouchers as part of NCLB reform.** Vouchers are included in the White House proposals for NCLB reauthorization. The proposal calls for vouchers to students in persistently failing schools. The administration tried to include such a measure in the No Child Left Behind law when it was first signed into law five years ago. Democrats, then in the minority, blocked the voucher provision from the initial legislation and have promised to block the proposal again. The administration has also proposed other changes including requiring states to publish a report card showcasing how students do on state tests compared to a rigorous national test. Such a move could put pressure on states to strengthen their assessments and standards. [Read more.](#)