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INTERVIEW

Focusing on the Achievement Gap: An Interview with Commissioner Chris Cerf

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Focusing on the Achievement Gap:

An Interview with Commissioner Chris Cerf

Chris Cerf was appointed commissioner of education of the New Jersey Department of Education by Governor Chris Christie to fulfill a mission: to address the state's complex and troubled school system, which despite its strong rankings in nationally-normed tests, has one of the highest achievement gaps in the nation. Cerf is known for his work transforming large school systems that face significant challenges and inequities in education. As deputy chancellor of New York City public schools, he led the effort to close 100 of the city's lowest-performing schools and replace them with new district and charter schools. In New Jersey, Governor Christie and Cerf have recently taken over Camden City Public Schools. Cerf's strategy for district improvement is centered on a system of seven Regional Achievement Centers (RACs), which provide professional development, training, and intervention to the highest need schools (priority schools) in each region.

Cerf's career has encompassed work in government, business, and law. He began his career in education as a high school history teacher in Cincinnati, Ohio, and after four years, he left teaching for Columbia Law School. He subsequently worked as a clerk for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and later as associate counsel to President Clinton. Despite his successes as a lawyer, he missed the education world and became president and chief operating officer of Edison Schools, Inc., the nation's first for-profit public school management organization, overseeing more than 150 public schools and 77,000 students. In 2005, he was hired by Joel Klein of New York City public schools to serve as the chief advisor on transformation and later as deputy chancellor.

In this edited interview, DMC CEO John J-H Kim, Senior Associate Jean Kim, and Commissioner Chris Cerf discuss strategies for effective school turnaround and the approach being taken in New Jersey.



Chris Cerf, Commissioner of Education, New Jersey Department of Education

How do you view the role of the state department of education vis à vis districts and schools?

We as an organization began by asking the question, “Why do we exist?” It’s important to ask that question because I think state departments of education have historically lost sight of that. We exist to assure that every child in New Jersey, regardless of birth circumstances, graduates from high school ready for the next stage of life, which we define as college and career. And while that almost sounds cliché, state departments of education historically have not focused on that. They have found themselves focused on regulation, on compliance, on auditing, on tracking dollars, and the like—to the point where I would not have wanted to be a state commissioner of education ten years ago. But state education agencies (SEAs) have recently repositioned themselves within the hierarchy that extends from classroom, school, district, SEA, to the federal government. SEAs are now in a position of tremendous opportunity to make a difference in driving forward that core mission to educate every child.

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So what do you say to people who ask, “Why does the state have a better plan for these failing schools than the districts? Why is the state in a better position to help?”

At one extreme is the view that the federal government can really change what’s happening at the interface of teacher and students in the classroom, through control of dollars (e.g., Title I) or →

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through a centrally-directed, almost Napoleonic approach. At the other end of the continuum is the view that we should eliminate everything but the school community itself—let a thousand flowers bloom and couple autonomy with accountability. And, of course, there are various points of view in between.

The best argument for a substantial role for the state—as opposed to federal government control or total district autonomy—is rooted in history. The obligation we bear to ensure that every child has a quality education is enshrined in our constitution and is actually a duty of the state. It is a duty we have historically delegated to districts to discharge and implement. But the reality is, in many instances, districts have not discharged that duty successfully. We have schools in New Jersey that have been failing for years and, in some cases, decades. Left to their own devices, some of these districts are presiding over schools where only 10 to 15% of students can read, and there is no sign that the schools are positioned to make progress. In these cases, it is the responsibility of the state to intervene.

How do you balance the tension between accountability and support, especially in your turnaround districts?

We really live by the motto of differentiated interventions. It is very difficult to get people to understand that. We believe the balance between support and a more prescriptive approach is highly dependent on the particular situation.

There are some things that, regardless of the quality of the school, are appropriate roles for the state. First, it is the role of the central authority to define what success is. That is not a delegable duty. We need to define success to mean that you have achieved certain learning milestones, however measured. Secondly, I believe, for complicated reasons, that it is an appropriate role for the state to assure that there is an educator evaluation system in all schools. There can be lots of room for customization, but the state should direct that there be a system. The research that the effectiveness of the teacher is vastly more important than anything else we can do in the schools is just too compelling. Thirdly, the role of the state is to be an R&D arm to foster and fund innovation, and to encourage breakthrough learning techniques. Lastly, it is the role of the state to allocate taxpayer resources and to ensure that there are appropriate safeguards against inappropriate use of funds.

For schools that are successful in the state, we want to be as uninvolved as possible, except in the few areas I’ve mentioned. I don’t want to go to a quality high school and say we think that you’re starting your school day at the wrong time or that you ought to be using a certain math program. In fact, we have spent a lot of energy going through thousands and thousands of pages of regulations and statutes to cull and reduce them.

But, at the other extreme, when schools are failing and when districts have failed to discharge the duty we have delegated to them, I think they have lost the privilege of autonomy and independence. At that point, we have to become much more prescriptive. And if that doesn’t work, then we believe in and have the authority to engage in more comprehensive turnaround strategies.

One of the big questions we spend a lot of time thinking about is, how do you *sustain* improvement? We've done a lot of research that says when you have focused intervention, urgency, technical assistance, and resources, then schools can improve. But often, once all that is taken away, schools fall back again.

The research you're describing is more hopeful than the research I have seen! For the most part, I think school reform is littered with intensive, centrally-driven school reform efforts that have not proven effective. I think there are a handful of elements that are necessary conditions for a successful turnaround. They are also the keys to sustainability.

The first is an effective leader. I mean an effective leader who is entrepreneurial enough to know how to work a crazy system to make things happen. It has got to be a transformative person who really understands the role of culture and so on.

The second is you need to give him or her autonomy over personnel. That's a challenge under many collective bargaining agreements, but I do not know how you ask a principal to be accountable for results without giving him or her the freedom to select the people who are going to deliver those results. I just think that's a proposition that's hard to defend.

Third, there is a notion of a culture of success that is a little ephemeral. I don't believe in the tyrannical principal model. It can work, but I don't think that's ultimately sustainable. So I do think that creating a community organized around success and high expectations, and built on analyzing data to enable

real-time assessment of learning, is really central. How you use data and how you evaluate personnel are critical dimensions.

So let's talk a bit more about the effective leader, because we agree that that is so essential. What can the state do to either "grow" more effective leaders or attract more into these situations?

There are two things you can do, one from the negative end and one from the positive end. From the negative end, we have asserted our power to remove principals in our low-performing "priority schools." Many districts have actually indicated that they appreciate the cover we provide. Sometimes these principals are iconic figures, so it's a difficult thing for a district to do.

But on the affirmative side, we view it as central to our mission to develop leaders for placement in low-performing schools. And that can happen in a variety of ways. It can be achieved through targeted recruitment strategies, almost like an executive search firm. If you've got some great principal in Chicago, you do whatever it takes to get that individual to move to New Jersey to take over a troubled school. The other is to identify individuals who either are assistant principals or are serving some senior role on the faculty, and to groom them for placement in a school. We are in the early stages of developing essentially a West Point of principals. We are exploring this now, and it's something we intend to fund either with state dollars or additional →

FAST FACTS: New Jersey Department of Education

2,492 schools*

NJ ranks in the top five in the nation in reading and mathematics achievement for grades 4 and 8.**

603 school districts*

NJ consistently has larger achievement gaps for minorities and students of poverty than the national median.**

1.36 million students*

NJ had the third-largest achievement gap in the nation in 8th-grade math and reading.**

117,803 full-time classroom teachers*

*NJ DOE, 2012-2013 **Based on the 2009 NAEP results (available for grades 4 and 8)

philanthropic dollars. The idea is that you really need to have 20 or 30 principals-in-training every year who are ready to be deployed into schools.

The implication of your trying to build an ecosystem that helps you identify and cultivate leaders for schools is that there is a very limited pool right now.

Let me make the implication explicit: I think that there is a very limited stock of individuals who have the right combination of skills, intelligence, and the *je ne sais quoi* to turn around a culture that has been historically failing and ridden with more than its share of challenges.

So if I had a wish list, I'd get a big pot of money and I'd put together an organization for which success would be defined by the yield and quality of principals coming out of it each year. A significant piece of the money would be reserved for national recruiting. I would literally have people scout the country for top leaders, and then I would offer these leaders transition bonuses—I'll give you \$150,000 if you move your family, or I'll give you \$50,000 this year and \$100,000 after three years, or whatever it may be. Then, on a parallel path, learning from various models like New Leaders and the NYC Leadership Academy, I would identify great potential leaders, bring them in, and train them to be the next generation of leaders.

Do you think education schools or business schools can play a greater role in helping to train leaders? What is lacking in terms of the training that's available today that you would want?

I don't want to be disrespectful to superintendents, but an awful lot of individuals who become principals across the country do so because it's their turn. They have progressed, they have served, they are good people, and they have been successful in their prior roles. I don't think we have a disciplined system of training leaders that focuses on our core mission. I think it's important to develop evaluative criteria for what it takes to be a good principal. One of the best examples I've found of this is KIPP. They have a process for identifying leaders and making them go through a one-year regimen to get trained.

Secondly, in order to be effectively prepared for the job, I think you have to kneel at the feet of a very successful principal in a sort of apprentice model—a residency. I'm not sure a lot of principals being trained now are being partnered with a great principal. The one thing I think we can all agree on is that there has never been a great school without a great principal. There are a lot of bad schools with good principals, but there has never been a great school without a great principal. It's absolutely a precondition for success.

There's a lot of debate as to whether an instructional leader or an organizational leader is more critical. Our feeling is that, at the end of the day, a great principal has to be both.

I agree with you that you shouldn't have to choose between the CEO model versus the instructional leader model. But, if I did have to choose, I would tell you to have a principal who knows instruction intimately and who defines his or her job as advancing the quality of instruction. Or, if you have

Chris Cerf's Biographical Timeline

1977

B.A., Amherst College



1977–1981

History teacher, Cincinnati Country Day School, Cincinnati, Ohio



1981–1984

J.D., Columbia Law School



1985–1986

Clerk, U.S. Supreme Court

1986–1992

Private practice

1993–1996

Associate Counsel to the President, Clinton Administration



a person who is not endowed with knowledge of instruction, then you've got to have a management team that is engaged in that.

It's not one model. You have to have the right combination.

Right.

So how do you manage those situations where you have a mediocre or weak principal and you can't find an alternative?

Well, I guess it depends in part on what you're aiming for. Remember, I'm focusing this part of the conversation on the 200 lowest-performing schools. For them, we can't accept incremental improvement. It's not sufficient to go from 30 to 37% proficient. Either you have to have a truly great leader or you have to create capacity by more radical means, such as creating a new district or charter school or collaborating with a turnaround partner. A constant problem in public education is that we overestimate the capacity to remediate people. The general view is that if someone is unsuccessful, it's because the system has not put them in a position to be successful. We think we just need to give them more professional development, more scaffolding, more staffing, more support, and the problem will be solved. We have an overly optimistic view of the ability to change capacity in public education. It's very different from the private sector, which is much less patient with the idea of improving or remediating people.

On the other hand, there is no question that we can do much more in terms of effective training and development. Right now, we take a first-year teacher

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and drop him or her in the middle of a classroom of students who are desperately far behind and say, go forth and prosper. We could do much better, if we could afford it, to pair a first-year teacher with a master teacher. We could give that new teacher half a course load the first year so that they could learn from the master teacher, and then ease them into a full course load the year after. But that's a massively expensive proposition. I do think you can grow people, but we're much too tolerant as a rule of people who are not performing at a level that the kids deserve. →

1996

Partner, Wiley, Rein and Fielding

1997–2000

General Counsel, Edison Schools, Inc.

2000–2004

President and Chief Operating Officer, Edison Schools

2004

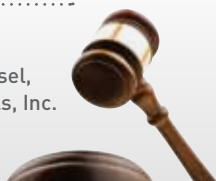
Graduate of the Broad Superintendents Academy

2005–2009

Deputy Chancellor, New York City Department of Education

2011–present

Commissioner of Education, New Jersey Department of Education





Chris Cerf, John Kim, and Jean Kim at the New Jersey Department of Education

What I hear you saying is that there are many incentives or competing interests that are not aligned to produce consistent, sustainable, strong results. How do you use these levers to try to have a more cohesive system?

When confronted with a tough decision, my team and I have a lot of conversations that begin with the following: OK, the vow we took here is that we would try to make every decision based first and foremost on the question of what will advance our core mission. For me, it's a very important reminder, because education is a half-trillion-dollar-a-year enterprise—it's second only to healthcare. You don't need to be a Marxist to know that this attracts all sorts of interests, most of which are totally legitimate. It attracts the interest of employees as employees, the interest of vendors, the interest of elected officials and school board members and their institutional prerogatives. The Venn diagram of interests has many different circles in it, and the best interest of children is only one circle on the Venn diagram.

A lot of times, you're forced to choose between these competing interests. We really do try to make decisions that are in the interest of kids, but it's also true that we need to leverage interests that exist. The whole idea of pairing autonomy with accountability is basically saying that this is ungovernable. That was certainly a premise in New York City. We want to leverage forces that exist independent of us—like accountability, like consequences, like the ambition people have to advance their career.

Tell us about the recent state takeover of Camden City Public Schools. What's going to be different about Camden from what has been done before with other takeover districts?

Well, we're in the very early innings of this. We officially completed the state intervention on June 25. The context of Camden is actually a little bit counter to the basic model I was describing. In general, the unit of change that we focus on is the school and not the district. Even if you are a very

successful district, if you have a very bad school in it, we will intervene. Our Regional Achievement Centers and our targeted interventions are really aimed more at the schools than the districts.

But in Camden, and in a very limited number of other communities throughout the state, that line is blurred. Let me give you a statistic that says it all: 23 out of 26 of the schools in Camden are priority level schools, which means that by one measure or another, they are in the bottom 5% of the schools in the state. There are some situations that are so extreme that inaction is just not an appropriate response. So we and the governor concluded that a district-wide intervention was the start. You almost don't know where to begin.

So where do you begin?

Our work in Camden had to begin with a pretty fundamental principle—one that we try to live by, which is that our commitment is to assure that every child in Camden has a quality public education. We want to be indifferent to whether that public education is provided through a public school, a charter school, a magnet school, a vocational school, or otherwise. Every student learns in a different way, and so our job is to ensure the availability of quality, equitable public education for all of them. That means that we are open to whatever works. If a charter school says they have an incredible plan and a track record to back it, we're open to that. In fact, the KIPP schools in Newark, called Team Academy, have entered into an agreement to open five schools in Camden over the next ten years. Those schools will not be charter schools but rather a new model in New Jersey called Renaissance Schools.

Even before we were officially in Camden, we sent The New Teacher Project (TNTP) there to look at personnel policies and approaches. We're taking a close look at the collective bargaining agreement. We sent in a special team for early childhood intervention just to get the lay of the land. We sent a team to analyze the data, which was a mess to understand—just about anything you wanted to know you couldn't know, in terms of who was being evaluated, which students had which credits, and so on. We're mostly in this fact-gathering and planning phase. We're in what we hope are the final phases of hiring a superin-

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tendent; and we're not looking for a superintendent who is just going to take a broken central office and make it better, but we're looking for one who has a totally different vision about the role of the central office and is able to drive change.

Shifting gears a bit, we have one final question. You have made the transition from the private sector to where you are today. To those in the private sector who might be thinking, “I want to go serve or contribute to the improvement of the public education sector,” what would you tell them?

I would tell them that it's the most important work in America right now. I personally doubt that the economic proposition that made this country great is sustainable in the context of the massive divides of wealth and lack of social mobility we are seeing today. I used to teach AP History years ago. Not to get all apocalyptic, but one of the harbingers of the demise of a great society is when any individual or group does not have equal access to prosperity and success in life due to their birth circumstance. I can't think of a more important mission than that of giving children an equal opportunity. I do feel that bringing your energies to address improvement in public education really is the most important work in America right now.

We certainly agree with you on that. ♦