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SECRETARY OF EDUCATION

SUSANA MARTINEZ
GOVERNOR

March 21, 2018

Superintendent Raquel Reedy
6400 Uptown Blvd. NE
Albuquerque, NM 87110

Dear Superintendent Reedy:

At present, and upon review by the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED), the district's request for application for Whittier Elementary School, as a school that has selected *Significantly Restructure & Redesign* for the purposes of transforming the school and dramatically improving student achievement, is denied. The school was designated for More Rigorous Intervention (MRI) under New Mexico's federally-approved Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Plan. As previously noted, the identification of only four schools statewide was in response to chronic low school performance. Whittier Elementary School has earned a school grade of "F" in each of the last six academic years.

As such, we can all agree that an entire generation of students has been underserved. I know that we all fundamentally believe that this need not be the case for any student in APS or for any student across the state of New Mexico. It is a moral imperative that no student be underserved in this manner and for such a long period of time.

Overall, the request for application at Whittier Elementary School lacks the requisite urgency, clarity, and cohesiveness to dramatically improve student achievement outcomes. It fails to fully embrace best practices from across New Mexico, undervalues the immediate importance of outstanding educators, underappreciates the importance of increasing instructional time with high-performing educators, fails to implement meaningful, regular measurement of student progress, and does not fully seize this unique opportunity to boldly and courageously redesign our students' learning experiences. While the district's application recognizes the need for early childhood education, strong school leadership, and extending the hours in a school day, it does not significantly redesign and restructure in every way. The plan does not fully prioritize the needs of our students.

However, the PED has determined that the district and school leadership shall be afforded an additional three weeks to fully and completely respond to this feedback. Final submission under the *Significantly Restructure & Redesign* option should be submitted to the PED no later than three weeks from today, Wednesday, April 11, 2018.

The following eight overarching areas of focus must be adequately addressed for consideration:

- 1) **Ensuring that every teacher at the school has a track record of Highly Effective or Exemplary performance by the beginning of the 2018-19 school year.** Clear evidence (Kane, 2008; Chetty, Rivkin, and Rockoff, 2014, Hanushek, 2017, e.g.) exists that prioritizing access to high-performing educators will eliminate the opportunity gap for traditionally underserved students. Given the district's stated commitment to equity for our students, this should be the minimum standard for students in a high-need school.
- 2) **Ensuring that the school-based teacher compensation system proposed is designed as a means to recruit, champion, reward, and retain teachers demonstrating substantial impact on student achievement growth. Teacher compensation should be dramatically higher at this school than anywhere else in the district, in order to address the students' unequal access to effective education.** Note: It is an expectation that the district align and allocate all available state and federal funds to promote stronger student performance. The core compensation system should reward outcomes, not inputs, and be in full alignment with state statute and regulation. Additional state funds will also be made available by the PED for those teachers who earn an Exemplary distinction (in New Mexico such teacher achieves 25 months of learning in a single school year) in the current school year.
- 3) **Ensuring significantly more instructional time with the school's highest-performing teachers, not with outside entities or consultants.** Enrichment opportunities should be in addition to, not a substitute for, increased instructional time with the school's highest performing teachers. Further, the school should ensure that it has strong protocols in place to communicate student progress and provide students and families the option of additional years of instruction.
- 4) **Ensuring that the selected school principal has a multi-year track record of increasing student performance and is compensated at a higher salary than any other school principal in the district.** Our students need more support, which starts with our leaders. Given the district's stated commitment to equity for our students, it would reason that the principals at MRI schools be compensated in alignment with the expectation of more services leading to rapid improvement in student performance.
- 5) **Ensuring that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are evidence-based, vertically aligned, and standards-aligned.** This includes utilizing state-approved, rigorous, and common formative and interim assessments, with clear structures for data-driven analysis and instructional planning, and evaluating effectiveness of curriculum. Our students and families deserve to know how they are doing in school at all times, which requires embracing meaningful assessment as the foundation of

instructional decision-making. The district's commitment to this for this school is unclear.

- 6) **Eliminating any parallel or redundant assessment or accountability systems that duplicate effort at the school and district level, which causes confusion among stakeholders.** Unnecessarily creating parallel structures compromises student equity by potentially lowering common statewide expectations for students at Whittier Elementary.
- 7) **Clearly delineating the expected outcomes of any community partnerships, external resources, and national partnerships that the district and school plan to access and coordinate with, as well as a direct connection to the root cause(s) of school underperformance.** To be a true community school and to leverage all resources, the plan should identify clear metrics for development of the whole child—academic, cultural, social emotional, etc. Ensuring equitable access to content paired with more resources to meet students' needs at this school is imperative, and the plan structure should allow for innovative deployment of resources available to the community.
- 8) **Revising the budgetary request to not exceed \$100,000 for the planning period and \$675,000 per implementation year for the school via this submission for supplemental funds and denoting all areas where state (SEG) funds, federal funds, grant funds, and all other funding are being utilized to fuel this plan.** This additional application for funding is *supplemental* to the substantial funding that the district and school already receives for its highest-need schools. Further, the district or school should plan to immediately apply for additional funding through proven targeted investments made possible at the state level.

In order to fully facilitate each of the mission-critical items above, and to create the necessary flexibility and innovation at this school, the PED also suggests the suspension of the district's collective bargaining agreement for the next three years for this school. This is a suggestion, not a requirement, for approval. Per the section in your application titled, "Describe the process the LEA will use to work with the union (if applicable) and the anticipated timelines for such negotiations," it states that that, "Any provision of the APS/ATF Negotiated Agreement may be waived or altered with the written consent of both the District and the Federation (Article 31 C)." In an urgent school turnaround situation with our students' futures at stake, the superintendent and school principal will need the freedom to manage all aspects of the district and school, and the freedom to make student-centered decisions pertaining to scheduling and staffing.

Further, the PED will appoint a five-member NM Educator Advisory Council (EAC) to monitor adherence to the school's MRI plan and provide outside oversight, if the revised application merits approval. It will be comprised of educators with a track record of substantial student achievement growth (e.g., Highly Effective/Exemplary teachers, high-performing principals and district leaders). In order to facilitate continuous improvement and the sharing of best practices statewide, the EAC will be comprised of educators from schools outside of the district's jurisdiction. The Chair and the members of the EAC will be appointed by the

PED and shall commit to serving the full three-year term. The EAC will visit the school on a regular basis, hold quarterly meetings and report to the community, the district, and the PED.

The eight categories of feedback included herein constitute the minimum level of responsiveness from the district and school. In many instances, the language provided was the same from school to school, indicating that the applications are not reflective of individual circumstances and challenges at each school. As detailed in the State Plan under the Every Student Succeeds Act, if the plan is denied, New Mexico reserves the right to select another option for the MRI school. The three remaining options include Closure, Restart, and Champion & Provide Choice.

It must be noted that, after six years of underserving students, this submission should have reflected an intensive, robust, and comprehensive plan. The plan must reflect the challenging of status quo policies and extreme urgency toward student achievement.

In addition to the feedback herein, we are open to arranging a meeting on April 4th, 5th or 6th (or another date that works for all parties) prior to final submission. Please contact us at your earliest convenience if you would like to arrange. While the original intent was to approve/deny the plan upon this review, we would like to provide the district and school *yet another opportunity* to put something transformative in place for our students.

Please note that this letter, alongside the application, will be posted publicly.

Respectfully,



Christopher N. Ruszkowski
Cabinet Secretary, NM Public Education Department

- cc: APS Board of Education
Kim Finke, Principal, Whittier Elementary School
Dr. Gabriella Blakey, Associate Superintendent for Leadership and Learning - Zone 1
Debbie Rael, Deputy Secretary of School Transformation, NMPED
Matt Montano, Deputy Secretary of Teaching & Learning, NMPED
Marian Rael, Deputy Secretary of Finance & Operations, NMPED
Ashley Eden, Deputy Chief-of-Staff, NMPED
Elisabeth Peterson, Director of Priority Schools Bureau, NMPED