September 2011

Dear Presidents and Deans:

As the first month of the 2011-12 school year winds to a close, I want to wish each of you good luck and success in the remainder of the year. I am writing to share some of the initiatives the Board of Regents and my colleagues are undertaking here at the State Education Department (SED) as part of the Regents Reform Agenda.

Last year, New York secured a $700 million Race to the Top grant that provides significant federal support to help implement the Regents Reform Agenda. The Regents agenda is truly comprehensive in scope, touching on almost all aspects of our educational system. A central focus of the reforms is the adoption and implementation of the Common Core State Standards, which serve as the foundation for education in English Language Arts/Literacy and Math. Instruction and teaching practice based on these standards will ensure that every New York student receives an education that prepares them for college and future career success. As a corollary to our standards initiatives, the Education Department is redesigning the State grade 3-8 and secondary assessments to test students' proficiency against these new standards. Several advisory panels comprised of K-12 educators and postsecondary faculty will be advising our work on assessment redesign.

The Department will develop grade-by-grade exemplary curriculum modules to support teachers as they implement the Common Core standards. At the Network Teams Summer Institute in August, we trained more than 500 P-12 educators who have already begun to train their colleagues on the new standards, how to use data to improve instructional practice, and how to conduct observations to improve teacher and principal effectiveness. Many of the curriculum and teacher evaluation resources SED has made available to educators to help local implementation can be found on a new website www.EngageNY.org. I encourage you to take a look to learn more about the reforms underway in elementary and secondary education.

Another critical focal point of our reform agenda supported by Race to the Top is the development of a comprehensive, reliable data system. SED – in coordination with data experts and practitioners from schools and postsecondary institutions -- is working to expand the capacity to use data to improve instruction, to provide enhancements to postsecondary data systems, and to build a more robust and interactive P-20 data system.

At the postsecondary level, the Regents recently awarded eleven grants for Clinically Rich Graduate Teacher Preparation pilot programs, and in the next several months we will issue Requests for Proposals for Clinically Rich Principal Preparation pilot
programs and Clinically Rich Undergraduate Teacher Preparation pilot programs. Taken together, these three grant programs hold promise for testing innovative approaches to teacher/principal preparation that are essential to the success of our students. In addition, our very recently released Request for Proposals for induction/mentoring programs will provide funding that supports early-career teachers in high-need schools and will create a cadre of mentors trained in the Common Core and teacher observation and coaching.

Over the next year, SED will expand our outreach and training to ensure that teachers, administrators and the higher education faculty who train our educators are aware of the reforms and are provided the training and support necessary. New webinars will be developed, Network Teams will provide additional training for teachers, www.EngageNY.org will be built out with more resources for educators -- all of which is designed to support your work developing common core standards, teacher training programs and new assessment and evaluation systems.

Why do we need the new New York State Common Core standards? The answer is easy: far too many of our children aren’t graduating from high school, and far too many of those who do graduate are simply unprepared for college or a career. The longer we wait to implement reforms to get more of our students college- and career-ready, the more children we condemn to a life of frustration and struggle. I know change is difficult, especially during fiscal times like these. Someone recently said to me, “Shouldn’t we wait until times get better?” That’s the wrong way to think about the challenges we face. Times won’t get better unless we change. Our economy won’t grow unless we teach and train students for success.

We’ve taken on an ambitious agenda, but these reforms will improve the training our future teachers receive, enhance the ability of current teachers to deliver the highest quality education possible, and strengthen our efforts to professionally develop our teachers to enable them to reach their full potential. Thank you all so much for your hard work and your support. Have a great school year.

Sincerely,

John B. King, Jr.
Commissioner