New Jersey Superintendents Call State Agency Ineffective

By WINNIE HU

Nearly three-quarters of New Jersey school superintendents said the state Education Department did not play an important role in helping districts raise students’ achievement or prepare graduates for college and careers, according to a survey the department released Monday.

Many superintendents criticized how the state set goals and evaluated districts’ progress and said they did not find school report cards or state and federal data requirements useful in improving students’ performance.

They also expressed dissatisfaction with the state’s handling of special-education services and its guidance on curriculum and instruction. For instance, 63 percent of superintendents said they had not found the department’s efforts helpful in improving math instruction, and 59 percent said the same of improving literacy.

The results of the survey, which had 66 questions and was the first commissioned by the department, were sent to all 580 superintendents, 408 of whom had anonymously submitted responses in May and June.

“The Department of Education has moved more toward being what we perceive as a compliance monitor than an entity that is helping us get better at teaching and learning,” James A. Crisfield, who is the Millburn Township superintendent and participated in the survey, said in an interview. “And to the department’s credit, I think they realize that.”

In a letter to superintendents sent along with the survey results, the acting education commissioner, Christopher D. Cerf, wrote, “The main takeaway for me is that our work at the Department too often strays from our No. 1 priority: to help all students in New Jersey graduate from high school ready for college and a career.”

Mr. Cerf, who plans to repeat the survey annually, said in a phone interview that he had already begun to address the superintendents’ concerns. For example, he reorganized the department to focus more on students’ achievement, partly by streamlining data reporting and reducing paperwork.

“These are very talented professionals, the superintendents, and they are very eager to be part of a comprehensive reform effort,” he said. “I view this as an indication for collaboration and change, rather than in a negative light.”

Richard G. Bozza, executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, said he thought the survey was an important step toward improving an agency that had long frustrated superintendents.

Amid their complaints, the superintendents gave the department high marks for its Web site. Majorities of respondents said that it was up to date and accurate; that it provided clear guidance on attendance, health and safety issues; and that memos about new policies and regulations were timely and accurate.
But while 53 percent of respondents said the department clearly indicated when districts were deficient in operations or performance, 49 percent said they did not receive helpful guidance on how to improve.