Schools local and statewide start challenging year with improvements

Students might find the start of school this week daunting, but the bigger changes and challenges this year are for teachers and administrators, thanks to some recent successes at the local and state levels.

Schools in three districts in the region recently were recognized for their progress in helping the lowest achievers with an end to their federal/state need-of-improvement status.

Schools in Egg Harbor, Galloway and Deerfield townships were among 27 in the state to successfully exit this federal No Child Left Behind accountability program.

This is a big deal for the schools. No Child Left Behind set a uniform national measure of “adequate yearly progress,” and schools that fell short in a content area for two consecutive years were designated “in need of improvement.” That set in motion a complex system of corrective actions for years, until the schools achieved adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years.

Those annual “school improvement plans” included implementing student-centered learning activities, professional development, common assessments, data analysis and small-group interventions. Schools had to demonstrate increased graduation rates or performance improvements for its lowest-achieving subgroups.

The teachers and administrators of the schools are to be congratulated for a lot of hard work — five years of it in Egg Harbor Township. But they don’t have time to bask in their success because a completely new comprehensive system of school accountability is starting, effective this week.

In more than a decade of No Child Left Behind, resistance to imposing federal testing, reporting and proficiency standards on schools nationwide grew among teachers, administrators and parents. In 2015, Congress and President Barack Obama responded by passing the Every Student Succeeds Act, with a goal of maintaining accountability standards and programs but making them the responsibility of individual states.

States have to make their own plans for assessing schools and implementing programs for improvement where needed, and the ESSA system takes effect with this school year.

New Jersey deserves credit for being among a handful of states to develop their plans and recently get them approved by the federal government before the start of school. Others were Connecticut, Delaware, Louisiana, Nevada and New Mexico, according to the national newspaper Education Week.

ESSA still requires schools to measure and report performance, and the state to identify and support schools in need of improvement. But the new system is aimed at being more collaborative, encouraging district and school leaders to work with teachers, parents and the community toward better student progress.

One big change will be that, while standardized tests will still be used, student scores will no longer be the biggest factor in a school’s overall rating. Now a growth rating for students — how much they’re progressing from year to year — will count more (40 percent) than the percentage of students getting a passing test score (counting 30 percent). That should help keep the educational focus where it belongs.
There will still be a concerted effort to help underperforming schools, but now the state will identify schools needing the “most intensive level of support,” corresponding to those in the bottom 5 percent of performance. They’ll get a variety of interventions, with more or less as needed.

Whether or not New Jersey schools need more funding to meet their challenges is a broad question that state leaders seem to answer differently every year when it’s time to set aid in the state budget. The existing formula, considered outdated, isn’t fully funded. Yet New Jersey is among the five-highest states nationwide in spending per pupil.

New Jersey’s schools already are high performers, and the state is among national leaders on most measures of success. But there’s always room for improvement. The state’s ESSA plan admits that fewer than half of its SAT takers scored at a level suggesting success in college is likely, and a third of students entering state public four-year colleges need remedial classes.

Education is challenging work for all involved. As in nearly everything, the best results come from people working together.

We hope all stakeholders take advantage of the new ESSA system to collaborate more and make New Jersey schools even better.