

Cerf's departure catches Montclair educators by surprise

Longtime [Montclair](#) resident Christopher Cerf is stepping down as New Jersey's education commissioner.

STAFF PHOTO BY GEORGE WIRT

Education Commissioner Christopher Cerf drops in on a social studies class at Montclair High School in March 2011.

After more than three years as the point man for the Christie administration's education reforms, Cerf is returning to the private sector to head an education technology firm based in New York City.

"I have accepted a position as CEO of Amplify Insight," Cerf said in a statement released on Tuesday by the state Department of Education (DOE).



Although Cerf owns a house in town, he relocated to Somerset County to become the DOE commissioner. An [Essex County](#)-based state legislator had implemented an arcane rule called senatorial courtesy to block Cerf's nomination by Gov. Chris Christie. The state senators in Somerset County supported Cerf's nomination.

As of this date, it's not known whether Cerf intends to permanently move back to [Montclair](#). The Times has sent emails to a DOE spokesperson requesting an interview with Cerf and wondering whether Cerf will give up his apartment in Somerset County and fully reside in town.

As the DOE commissioner, Cerf visited [Montclair](#) High School and spoke at local education forums.

[Montclair](#) Board of Education Vice President Shelly Lombard said she respects Cerf and the work he did.

"When I look back on Chris Cerf's more than three years as commissioner, I think of two things," Lombard told The [Montclair](#) Times. "He was on the cutting edge of educational reform. He was in the forefront of some of the reforms that will take New Jersey's schools to the next level.

"And he really cares about the kids at the bottom of the pile," she said. "He was willing to make hard decisions to help those kids."

During his time in Trenton, Cerf ushered in a new tenure law that for the first time, takes teacher effectiveness into account and guided the state DOE as it adopted and then implemented the Common Core State Standards.

Cerf approved the opening of more than 30 charter schools and overhauled the DOE's annual school performance reports, providing parents and teachers with more detailed information about how well students are doing in the classroom.

Schools Superintendent Penny MacCormack, who worked on Cerf's DOE staff, said she was surprised to hear that Cerf is leaving.

MacCormack described Cerf as "a very affable guy."

"He's a warm, good, solid human being," she said. "He's an inspirational leader with a deep commitment to kids, and that's inspiring to me."

MacCormack said that in his role as commissioner, Cerf was focused on making sure that all students have equal opportunities.

"He has a vision for the success of all students during a challenging time, and I think he held true to that vision," MacCormack said. "We can all learn from that."

Third Ward Township Councilman Sean Spiller, a teacher who also serves as secretary-treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association, said educators and school administrators are watching to see what happens next.

"Mr. Cerf, to his credit, tried to push the envelope in a few different areas, and I applaud him for his work in those areas," Spiller said. "While we didn't agree with him on all of the issues, he was always receptive to conversations, and I think that's a good thing."

"The focus now is on who's coming in to succeed him and what needs to be done," he said.

According to Spiller, New Jersey's public schools are at a critical crossroads, and the Christie administration needs to move quickly to fill the leadership void created by Cerf's departure.

"There is just such confusion around Common Core and lack of resources, combined with a new evaluation system for teachers and how the two relate, combined with PARCC testing and the impact on that, combined with districts that are doing their own thing with assessments," Spiller said. "When you put all those pieces together there is a lot of uncertainty."

"It's going to be an important time for the next commissioner," Spiller said.

Contact George Wirt at wirt@northjersey.com