

State Superintendent Asks Legislators to Clarify Her Role

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State Schools Superintendent June Atkinson has asked legislators to either restore her post's powers or ask voters to amend the Constitution to make sense of school governance for K-12 public schools.

Atkinson wrote a letter to House Speaker Joe Hackney and Senate leader Marc Basnight on Tuesday calling for changes that spell out the purpose of a State Schools Superintendent and clarity in oversight.

"The people of North Carolina need the General Assembly to address the governance issue in its entirety, not just in piecemeal fashion," Atkinson wrote. "Now is the time to decide to restore the authority to the State Superintendent, issue a Constitutional referendum or to give Governor Bev Perdue total authority of education." Atkinson does not state whether the referendum should call for abolishing the position of an elected State Superintendent, an idea that has gained approval from the N.C. Senate in the past but has never been approved by the N.C. House of Representatives.

The letter follows a decision by Perdue to further consolidate authority over public schools by naming Dr. Bill Harrison both chairman of the State Board of Education and giving him the duties of running the day-to-day operations of the Department of Public Instruction. Atkinson, now in her second term, also did not oversee department operations in her first term. That job was given to J.B. Buxton, an appointee of Gov. Mike Easley.

Atkinson's letter, which may be viewed in its entirety on the NCASA website at <http://www.ncasa.net/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=228>, reflects her frustration with the current state-level governance scenario for public schools.

"Twice I have stepped forward and offered my service and leadership, and twice I have been denied this opportunity," she wrote. But she concludes that she will work with Harrison and Perdue regardless of whether legislative leaders act.

Harrison, in an email to staff at the Department of Public Instruction this week, made a similar pledge for collaboration.

Noting that he has been "colleagues and friends" with Atkinson for 20 years, he wrote, "I have spent some time with her since this announcement and look forward to working collaboratively with her as we strive to meet the educational needs of every student in North Carolina."

The Governor's power over public schools comes from her authority to appoint 11 of the 13 members of the State Board of Education. The state Constitution gives the board the authority to "supervise and administer" public schools, and the board has provided varying levels of authority to the State Superintendent since the tenure of Bob Etheridge in that role in the 1990s.