

APPENDIX

**Testimony to the NJ Joint Committee on the Public Schools
by Steve Beatty, NJEA Vice President
Tuesday, October 19, 2021**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm Steve Beatty, a New Jersey classroom teacher and the vice president of the New Jersey Education Association. I'm here today to speak on behalf of our members who live and work in every community in this great state.

I want to begin by noting that we have much to be grateful for as New Jersey educators. We work in a state that has prioritized the health and safety of students and staff over the last 19 months. Compared with many other states, our schools are safer because of New Jersey's approach of collaboration among school districts, public health officials and the Murphy administration, with the clear support of so many of our legislators.

We also live in a state that is working hard to overcome past funding shortfalls. Unlike some states where the only question ever asked is "where can we cut?", in New Jersey we have many elected leaders who are asking "where can we invest in our students and our future?"

Because of that approach, plus the incredible dedication of NJEA members and other school employees, we have the best public schools in America. All of that gives us plenty of reason to be proud of our great public schools.

But it also prompts me to pay close attention when speaking with members across New Jersey when I hear the weariness, fear, and frustration that they share. And it's not because they're ungrateful. It's not because they don't care.

It's because what we're asking educators to do under current conditions – even under the best of current conditions – is simply not possible. And for educators who only want to see their students succeed, being put in impossible situations takes a mental and physical toll that has left too many of our educators at their breaking point.

If I had more time, I'd read you an article that was just published in Forbes which lays out some of the impossible conditions educators face. As a classroom teacher of 25 years, it struck me as being right on the mark. I'm going to share it with you after this but I urge you to read it. It takes about five minutes and it's an incredibly powerful explanation from the perspective of educators who really and truly want to give their students the very best.

Allow me to share this one powerful excerpt:

"Teaching... is a ten-gallon bucket in which [educators] are expected to carry fifteen gallons of stuff, and so they make choices (if they refuse to choose, things just spill anyway). And society is always trying to add more to the bucket. Need a new public health program? Let schools do it. People in this country don't seem to understand some issue? Pass a law saying schools have to explain it...."

"The pandemic has exacerbated the situation."

"Teachers, you are now required to be able to run both in-person and on-line classes. Create packets for students who can't do either. Negotiate mask and/or anti-mask policies with parents and colleagues. Take care of the social and mental strains that students are experiencing. Manage the safety of your classroom even as your district tells you that many pandemic safety measures will not be taken in your district; maintain social distancing with 30 students in your classroom. Also, there are some people outside who would like to yell at you about this week's major controversy. And here's a new list of things you aren't allowed to teach, or are required to teach."

"Dump more and more into that bucket."

That's not a complaint. It's the reality that our members face every day.

Let me share a couple of excerpts from emails I've received in just the last few days. One member writes: "We recently had two cases of COVID with preschoolers who obviously cannot be vaccinated. One classroom had an unvaccinated teacher who was forced to use her own sick days while the other is vaccinated and is in school without having to quarantine. All students have to quarantine. There has been no guidance about how those children will receive their education and related services based on their IEPs, but different procedures are being taken for each class."

So, I reached out to the president of her local, and this is what he said: "[She] represents just one of many teachers concerned and scared for the welfare of themselves and their families. They do not feel trained in teaching school with the current expectations. There are not enough people who are willing to substitute, be lunch aides, or carry the load that it requires. Parents and some administration think teachers are available 24/7. The loss of veteran staff is considerable and newer staff are leaving the teaching profession. Her response is not a reflection of just [our district], it is everywhere. I am no longer a president of an educational organization. I am a president in COVID affairs. The difference now is that Superintendents are all pretending that everything is full speed ahead."

And recently, I had the opportunity to speak with two school nurses in the East Windsor School district while visiting there. They recounted their harrowing, never-ending day, enforcers of a shifting paradigm of confusing regulations – exacerbated by the overwhelming emotions of fellow educators, students, and their families. During 'normal' times, never getting a break, and not close to breaking. We must make better efforts to support our frontline nurses.

Here's the thing: these members didn't write to complain. They were reaching out in desperation because they've done everything they can and it's still not enough. And those are just two of hundreds of conversations I've had like that with members across New Jersey who are struggling to see the way forward as the pressures of the pandemic continue to grow.

So, my message to you today is relatively simple: Please, please do not try to pretend that anything is back to normal in our public schools. We are working hard every day to make things as normal as possible for our students. But there is nothing normal about the conditions we are facing. And in some ways, we may never return to normal. So, it's not just a matter of "toughing it out" for a few more months, as if that will be the end of the challenges educators, students, and their families are facing.

Acknowledging that we're never going to be able to return to pre-pandemic norms means we need to reconsider all of the things that get in the way of our fundamental job of protecting, supporting, and educating our students.

We need to reconsider things like an evaluation system that imposes incredible amounts of paperwork yet does nothing to benefit students, a system that seems designed to add stress and fear rather than to provide support and encouragement. I know that wasn't the intention, but I can tell you first hand that it's what we have. And I'm not saying we shouldn't have evaluations. What I am saying is that our system should be based on the premise that educators are professionals who want to grow, learn and succeed, not based on some idea that they need to be monitored, controlled, and criticized in order to make sure they're really doing their work. Regardless of intent, a system like that is counterproductive and stifles the creativity and innovation at the heart of great teaching. Having thoughtful standards is helpful, but impossible standards are soul crushing.

We need to reconsider things like high stakes standardized tests that suck countless hours away from real teaching and learning in the name of "accountability" and "data" but that never provide anywhere near the kind of real-time data that educators need to meet the immediate needs of their students.

We need to reconsider things like the too-frequent failure to recognize that our students' social-emotional wellbeing is an essential prerequisite to their academic success. We need to do a better job of measuring and monitoring student well-being, so we can intervene and provide support where needed. If we do that, math and reading scores will follow. And if we don't, no amount of testing and drilling will make our students truly successful. The time and money spent on standardized test-prep and test-taking would be better invested in intentional and sustained efforts toward building a stronger social-emotional learning infrastructure, complete with the counselors, nurses and other supports necessary for sustained success.

So here is my ask of this committee today: Speak to three educators who live in your district, preferably people you don't already know. I'm happy to provide names and contact information if that would be helpful. Ask them how their year is going. Ask them what support they and their students need now and in the future. Ask them what is getting in the way of their success. Ask them what their elected leaders could do to support them in their efforts to help our students.

I believe this: You will find that they are passionate about their work and that they hold a deep love for their students. You will find that they are beyond exhausted by the demands that are put on them. And you will find that they're not sure whether they can sustain the pace and the pressure of the past 19 months when that shows no signs of slowing down.

Then ask them: What can we do to reduce the pressure? What can we do to help you focus on your students? What can we do to make it better? Because they will tell you.

And when they tell you, listen and do just that.

Thank you.

Testimony NJ Legislative Joint Committee on Public Schools
Sarah Bilotti, Superintendent, North Warren Regional School District,
Warren County, New Jersey

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony today.

North Warren Regional School District is a rural, secondary district in northwest Warren County. We have about 800 students but our district covers over 100 square miles of land. To help you visualize it, the Appalachian Trail runs through the entire northern border of our district. It's a beautiful area of the state with a wonderful set of parents and students and I am proud to represent the community as its educational leader for the last 7 years.

The energy we feel this year is incredible, these kids want to be back, they want to learn, they want to be middle schoolers and high schoolers. We have seen a huge upswelling of school spirit. Students have asked if the Pep Band could "play us in" on Fridays - so they have been doing that. The students decided that their "song" for the year was going to be John Denver's "Country Roads," very apropos for this region, and we have enjoyed supporting them with this choice. We have played Country Roads over our PA system in the mornings, the band and chorus are learning the song, and last Friday night we had a spectacular Homecoming Football game where we played it at the very end, after our alma mater. The marching band's horn section joined in as all of the students sang it at the top of their lungs. The sheer joy in their faces gave us relief. The students showed one another, and our community, that things are going to be okay. The students are resilient, we are seeing that.

That said, we have hurdles to overcome. We recognize that students need "extra" this year. This pandemic is the most traumatic event we have ever collectively experienced and the kids need support both academically and emotionally. Our school counseling department is in overdrive supporting kids. Our intervention teams are providing three times the amount of intervention support than normal. We are focusing on data. Our own benchmark assessments address learning gaps. We are continuing to meet students where they are and bring them to where they need to be.

These efforts take a lot of resources: time, emotional strength, and financial resources. Assemblywoman Jasey mentioned staff morale and Mr. Beatty mentioned that teachers are weary - it has been hard. There is a lot of pressure on our teachers to make sure our kids make substantial learning gains this year. I heard a phrase the other day that really resonated with me, our teachers are "June-tired" meaning that the general level of stress that we are experiencing is akin to that at the very end of the school year. The pressure is being felt by our staff. We are doing things internally to help keep our staff morale up, in addition to the things we are doing to keep students engaged and excited.

In addition, in North Warren, we, unfortunately, are facing a 25% overall budget reduction through S2/Chapter 67. The cuts remain very difficult for us to manage and as a result, despite our creative efforts at funding and expense allocation, we have lost many programs, specifically in the lower-enrolled courses such as career tech ed and AP classes. We are managing all of the covid-related additional stressors along with our S2 budgetary losses and are concerned about our upcoming budget cycle.

We, and every district like ours, need help. We ask the legislature to consider a 2% cap exemption for covid-specific expenses. Right now, there are exemptions for Healthcare costs that allow schools to go above 2% when circumstances beyond our control cause costs to rise.

We need a similar solution for unexpected covid expenses, such as the extreme increase in the cost of transportation due to the shortage of drivers, the cost of substitute teachers due to the shortage of teachers statewide, and rising fuel costs.

As an example, last year we were paying under \$1 per gallon, but right now the same commercial heating fuel is coming in at over \$2.50 per gallon. This increased cost is the equivalent of approximately 1.5% on our tax levy.

A bus run that last year may have cost us \$115/day can now be as much as \$300/day and that is for bus companies who are trying to help us and who are not price gouging.

I know a 2% cap extension bill for underfunded districts was vetoed by the Governor in January of 2020 but our situation has changed dramatically since then and we feel it should be revisited. This is an issue that could be looked at in a new light in this new climate of unexpected costs.

We pride ourselves on being very efficient. Our costs per pupil are well below the state average and we have worked hard to instill trust in our community. I often say that we did everything right. We gave back to our taxpayers when we could and we maintained small tax levy increases over the last 15 years. With the budget cuts from S2 and the unexpected fixed cost increases due to Covid, these unexpected, rising covid-costs are going to make it very difficult to operate normally without negatively impacting instructional services and without impacting kids.

I have heard from the State that we should be using our ESSR or ARPA money to offset these costs, but in my district, we are losing almost \$2 million dollars over the next three years and have only received \$400,000 in ESSR funds. That ESSR money will barely cover our increased costs for necessary instructional services such as intervention, 1:1 laptop allocations, cleaning supply costs, social-emotional and mental health support, etc. ESSR funds will not offset the transportation, substitute teacher, or fuel cost increases.

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I know you know about bus driver shortages and I understand the regulations around bus driver licensure are largely driven by the Federal government, but any leeway you can give with scheduling of tests or administration of the exams would help. We have routes not running and students being picked up an hour and a half before school and being dropped off two hours after the end of our school day.

As for the teacher shortage, school nurse shortage, and substitute teacher shortage, I want to be sure that we are cautious in our solutions so as to not dilute the quality of our teacher pool.

In New Jersey, we are often ranked number one in the nation, instructionally. This is largely due to our strong and prepared teachers. Our teachers make us great and we need to make sure that any allowances for easier teacher certification have considerations for how we, as school districts, will pick up that obligation to support, mentor, and retain teachers in our ranks once they are hired. If we make it easier to become a teacher, we must ensure measures are put in place to adequately train those teachers once they are hired to the high caliber that we are accustomed to here in New Jersey.

I am aware of the equity concerns with our pre-service teacher training programs and I support measures that level the financial playing field for teacher candidates. Emphasis must be placed on maintaining a teaching force that continues to drive our students to the top. Educational researchers Linda Darling Hammond and Thomas Friedman both conclude that highly-trained, well-licensed teachers are the single most important factor in student success. They both cite New Jersey as an example of a system to emulate. We, in New Jersey, are often used as a case study, nationally, because of our high-caliber teacher training programs, our teacher evaluation programs, and our pre-service teaching programs - we employ highly-qualified teachers more so than other states. We can't lose that rigor. Our students will lose, if we do.

I think we must, similarly, approach any policy regarding the permanency of virtual learning as an option for New Jersey students with caution. Many regions of our state, including mine, do not have consistent, reliable access to high-speed internet needed to maintain virtual instruction. We learned that during the pandemic. We also saw that virtual learning disproportionately impacted students of lower socioeconomic status and disproportionately impacted students in homes where primary caregivers worked outside the home, again impacting our lower-income families. Virtual instruction also was shown to be difficult for students with certain disabilities. Any changes to allow a full virtual option for students must be carefully considered. We have seen throughout this pandemic that in-person facetime with students is precious. Our teachers are telling us that kids learn best when they are in classrooms. And while we managed virtual learning successfully over the past 18 months, there are caveats and lessons learned about the disproportionately negative impact of virtual

instruction on our most vulnerable students that we must consider and mitigate if we are going to consider a permanent virtual option as we exit the pandemic and re-enter our new normal.

I conclude by extending thanks and appreciation to all of you for continuing to support our students and our schools. We are grateful that you are taking the time to consider these important issues facing our great state's students as we emerge from this pandemic and chart our new path forward.

Recommendations:

- **Tax Levy Cap:** Provide a covid or fuel exemption for the 2% tax levy cap
- **NJ First:** Repeal or temporarily waive so that we may hire teachers and substitute teachers from other states; specifically for us, we have a premiere teacher-training university 15 minutes from our school, but it is in Pennsylvania, we cannot hire substitute teachers from their ranks.
- **Bus Drivers:** Provide more testing opportunities; shorten the timeline from application for permit - to written test - to driving test; pressure Federal Regulators to waive engine repair requirements for drivers (we use mechanics for that and the test itself is outdated)
- **Teacher Shortage:** Be cautious in waiving requirements without a commensurate requirement for school districts to provide additional mentoring/training for new teachers to uphold the rigor we hold dear in New Jersey
- **Virtual Instruction:** Not recommended universally. Approach with caution; considerations for equity and access must be made; considerations for districts to offer their own virtual option before Charter Schools can be utilized; face-to-face instructional requirements must be upheld, there are many caveats and things we have learned over the past 18 months that we must consider before moving forward with permanency
- **QSAC:** Delay for 1 year to give breathing room to districts who are severely over-burdened. Many administrators and superintendents are substitute teaching classrooms due to the teacher shortages and this additional burden, which is duplicative to other oversight measures, should be delayed
- **No New Mandates:** Please consider delaying new mandates that will place a resource burden on districts until we are able to normalize our instructional practices once again



**NJPSA Comments on School Reopening 2021
Before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
October 19, 2021**

Good morning, Chairman Rice, Co-Chair Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee. I am Karen Bingert, the Executive Director of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA). NJPSA represents the school principals, assistant principals, directors and supervisory staff leading our public schools. Up until July 1, I was the proud principal of Hillsborough High School in Somerset County for many years.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the hard work, the successes, and the challenges that school leaders have faced so far this school year, a year many describe as a “year like no other” and, frankly, a year that is exponentially more challenging than last year.

I must begin by **publicly thanking and applauding the work of our members and their teaching, support, and custodial staff members** who have worked tirelessly since the pandemic began to meet the needs of their students and families. Principals have worked nonstop since schools closed in March 2020. They worked continuously all summer focusing on summer learning programs, overseeing building modifications to meet health and safety standards, providing technology upgrades, and meeting anticipated learning needs. They developed complex and unprecedented building schedules that found unique uses for spaces such as where students would dine, and when, in order to meet social distancing standards as best they could. They collaborated on plans for staff training to support teachers in anticipation of another unique and challenging school year. They also anxiously awaited the latest guidance from the NJDOE and NJDOH on updated health and safety guidance for school reopening to finalize their building plans in order to safely open their school doors to students and staff in September.

At a recent leadership meeting of our association, we conducted breakout discussions with our members representing schools at all grade levels (elementary, middle, and high school) in all counties across New Jersey. **We asked our members what worried them the most in anticipation of starting school, what turned out to be easier than anticipated, and what has been harder to deal with than you thought. I would like to share their thoughts with you today.**

Prior to opening their doors, principals were worried about whether all their students would return to school and what their social and emotional needs would be. They worried about their students’ mental stamina for a full school day and whether they would have the “muscle memory” to recall what behaviors are appropriate in school. They were and are deeply concerned about the spread of the virus, keeping students and staff safe on their watch, and implementing quarantine, masking, vaccination and testing policies in their buildings, especially in the face of public controversy. They lost sleep over staffing concerns in all areas from filling teaching positions to finding substitutes to hiring a full complement of bus drivers, paraprofessionals, and cafeteria staff. They also worried about the level of parental cooperation and compliance they would receive from their school community.

So, how has it turned out?



What is Working

Clearly, experiences vary, but there are amazing commonalities among our principals across the state.

The good news is that **students are thrilled to be back in school in person!** School staff members are equally happy to be working with their students directly and getting to know them personally. Relationships, the key to a student's connection to school and personal development, are being built and strengthened every day. Despite the many challenges we will share with you, a principal or supervisor's opportunity to visit a kindergarten class, greet students in the hallway, work with a struggling student or cheer on a sports team or performance group are the things that make their day and form the life of a school. It is a joy to see that happening again – even though many things must happen differently.

Another positive step is **every school's efforts to assess student learning needs, provide both academic and social/emotional support as needed, and continue the learning process** that has been interrupted. Federal and state funding support is critical to the provision of these programs, and we are grateful for the range of options the funding is making available to us. Many principals will passionately tell you that the social and emotional needs of their students have been magnified by the pandemic and advise that these needs must be effectively addressed **before** students can fully engage in the learning process. Schools have set up programs and services to this end, hiring mental health counselors, contracting with mental health providers, adding wellness moments to the school day, and creating activities for social engagement for students who have been separated for far too long.

One task our members were charged with very early in this new school year was the implementation of the **Start Strong state assessments**. These assessments are designed to provide educators with timely, diagnostic information on a student's level of understanding of the prior year's academic standards in language arts, mathematics and science but do not measure learning loss. The data is valuable as one piece of baseline information for teachers, school leaders and parents to utilize in planning and refining instruction and extra support to a student. Many of our members will tell you that administering a standardized test to students who have just returned to school after their pandemic experience was difficult for both students and staff, even though the assessment was a shortened one (45 to 60 minutes). Many students had not yet readjusted to the routines of a school day let alone the taking of a standardized test. However, our members were surprised and pleased with the quick and useful data this assessment has provided to them as the learning year gets underway. In contrast to past state tests, the Start Strong data results are immediately available so teachers and leaders working in professional learning communities (PLCs) can review this data in their work. This statewide focus on data analysis to continually inform the instruction provided in classrooms, in interventions, and in support programs is a practice that is working in our schools this year.

What is NOT Working

What is a **major challenge in our schools and to our members is the management of COVID-19**. School principals, assistant principals, and school nurses are spending significant amounts of time contact tracing on a near daily basis in order to keep students and staff safe and in school. They have developed



intricate seating charts and sign in sheets for classrooms, buses, and cafeterias. The task is overwhelming and has turned school leaders into public health workers, a shift that is unsustainable in the long-term. Members report spending their workdays, evenings, AND weekends doing contact tracing work with no end in sight. They tell us about a disconnect between state level public health agency guidance and their local agencies which often puts principals in the middle on public health issues with their parents. Starting this week, districts will add weekly staff testing and reporting to their obligations in this area, in many cases to be managed by the principals and vice principals. Our members, who always make things work in their buildings and do not hesitate to do what is necessary, are exhausted, and it is only October. We hesitate to point this out because it is actually a point of pride for most school leaders to always find another creative solution and another burst of energy, but the reality is that people are truly at their breaking points, far more so than at any other point of the pandemic.

Principals' **initial concerns about staffing were real and are a challenge each school day.** Every principal dreads that call or text that a staff member will be absent since there is simply no substitute coverage, so our members are also covering classes to ensure students are supervised. Staffing shortages exist across the board from teachers in all disciplines, to cafeteria staff, to paraprofessionals, to school nurses to bus drivers. Vacancies find fewer applicants and applicants of lesser experience and quality than ever before. The lack of substitutes limits options for the professional development and professional collaboration time of our teachers. I know you have read about our early challenges with school busing. This staffing problem is systemic and threatens the future of our education system. It is an area we need your help to address.

One last concern I would like to raise is the climate surrounding our school communities. **Tensions are high, and tolerance is low.** Whereas last year found teachers and educational leaders touted as heroes in the pandemic, this year finds community members assuming the worst instead of the best of intentions as schools attempt to provide students with excellent academic and social experiences despite the ongoing and, arguably, greater pandemic challenges faced now that ALL students and staff are physically back in school buildings. The pushback on matters that are completely outside our school leaders' control only serves to undermine the critical relationships that will help us develop the partnerships needed to care for "our" kids.

Our Recommendations

- **Make the issue of school staffing a legislative priority, especially for teaching staff members, critical support staff positions, and the leadership pipeline.**
- **Support the final passage of S-3685/A-5576 (Ruiz/Jasey)** which has passed the Senate unanimously and is pending in the Assembly State and Local Government Committee. This legislation would allow retired teachers and professional staff members providing special services in schools (speech language specialists, therapists) to return to employment for up to two years during a state of emergency without having to re-enroll in the TPAF pension system, thereby threatening their hard-earned pensions. This bill would allow our members to hire experienced, qualified teachers in our schools!



- **Develop new legislation to create incentives for individuals to enter the teaching profession** and to continue efforts to refocus and streamline certification while generating high teacher quality. One way to do this is to reinstate the Governor's Teaching Scholars program, or to create something similar, to entice talented students to pursue education in college.
- **Introduce legislation to eliminate the residency requirement to work in New Jersey schools** through the repeal of New Jersey First Act, R.S. 52: 14-7. This statute has served as a barrier to the hiring of many potential staff members in all areas of school need.
- **Urge the Governor to finally enact A-4544/S-3150.** This legislation permits a school nurse who is retired from TPAF to return to employment for up to two years without reenrollment in the TPAF retirement system. **In addition to such efforts, we need to broaden the responsibility for contract tracing beyond educators and our limited health care staff so that we can focus on our primary mission of student learning.**
- **Understand that addressing the issue of learning gaps is a top priority, but it will take time and support.** Test score results are but a single piece of data. Let us report to you on the whole child, on other areas of student growth and development, and on how our schools are actually doing in terms of the impact of the pandemic on learning. We remain at the level of addressing the most basic needs of health and well-being as we begin to transition to a more sustainable focus on education.
- **Bring principals, supervisors and other education stakeholders to the table before considering any new educational mandates** on our schools at this time. Frankly, staff at all levels are overwhelmed. We need the time to act as educators with our students. Please understand this, engage with us, and reach out before asking us to do more.
- **Help us address the volatile school environment addressing not only COVID-related issues, but other issues related to our schools** by promoting tolerance, mutual respect and support for our schools in your local leadership efforts. As our statewide leaders, you can help us set a positive climate in our school communities on so many important issues.

Thank you for all you do and for listening to the concerns and recommendations of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association.

Submitted by:

Karen A. Bingert
NJPSA Executive Director

Debra Bradley
NJPSA Director of Government Relations

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New Jersey School Boards Association

413 West State Street • P.O. Box 909 • Trenton, NJ 08605-0909 • Telephone: 609.695.7600 • Toll-Free: 888.88NJSBA • Fax: 609.695.0413

October 19, 2021

NEW JERSEY SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
Testimony to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
Submitted by Jonathan Pushman, Director of Governmental Relations

Thank you Co-Chairs Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey and fellow members of the joint committee for inviting the New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of all the state's boards of education, to testify at today's hearing.

The subject of today's hearing – school reopenings – is one that we could probably spend several days, if not weeks, discussing. Reopening our school buildings – and keeping their doors open – is something districts across the state have been diligently working towards since the public health emergency began in March 2020. Unless you have been living on another planet for the last 18-plus months, you are already acutely aware of the struggles school districts have encountered as they pivoted to fully remote instruction to hybrid settings and now back to full-time in-person instruction. The myriad challenges they have encountered, many of which will likely persist for years to come even as the pandemic subsides, have not made the process an easy one to navigate. With that in mind, I thought it would be best to use my allotted time to share with the committee how our Association has tried to help our members move forward and restore some sense of normalcy to our students' educational experience at a time when life has been anything but normal.

When I last appeared before this body this past February, the NJSBA had just issued the fourth in series of reports the Association has published since the COVID-19 pandemic began:

1. Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools: How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State (May 2020) addresses the safe reopening of schools, students' mental health, academic and extracurricular programs, budgetary issues, and preparations for the future.
2. Choosing the Best 'Road Back' for Our Children (August 2020) provides an advocacy agenda for public education during the pandemic, including state and federal funding, assistance in securing personal protective equipment and technology, financial flexibility, and critical changes in law and regulation.
3. Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide (October 2020) looks at the challenges facing school districts in delivering instruction remotely to all students during the pandemic and beyond.
4. Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health (January 2021) shows how mental health programs are helping students withstand the pandemic.

Today's hearing is once again timely, as just last month, the Association issued its fifth report on education during the pandemic:

5. Rebuilding Opportunities for Students (September 2021) looks at challenges facing school districts and students in dealing with pandemic-related gaps in academic and social-emotional learning.

For the purposes of today's hearing, I would like to spend my time highlighting some of the key findings and recommendations included in this report. For your convenience, each of you has been provided an electronic copy of the report.

Earlier this year, the NJSBA established a Committee on Post-Pandemic Learning Gaps in Academic and Social Emotional Learning, which consisted of Association staff, local board of education members, and school administrators from across the state. Representatives from various education organizations, such as the NJPTA and NJEA, as well as the Department of Education served as resources to the group. The study group explored challenges facing school districts and students, state and federal policy and financial support, and strategies at the local level, a number of which were put in place during the past year.

As our schools returned to exclusively full-day, in-person instruction last month, the challenge that lay before the educational community was as follows: **adequately assessing the academic and emotional impact of the pandemic on their students and developing strategies to address individual needs.** To help the state's education community meet this objective, the committee provided information on effective practices and programs, guidance and support. The committee's final report provides insights, findings and recommendations on the following topics:

- Identifying gaps in academic learning and addressing academic learning gaps caused by the pandemic.
- Embedding social-emotional learning into the entire curricular and co-curricular program.
- Recognizing the role of arts education in social-emotional learning.
- Meeting the needs of special populations, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Promoting healthy organizational structures and cultures, designed to enable educators to close academic learning gaps and meet students' social-emotional needs, through methods such as strategic planning and collaboration between labor and management.
- Directing coronavirus relief funding provided to school districts through the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, so that it has the optimal impact on growth and learning for all students.
- Ensuring adequate transportation for students to maintain full-time in-person instruction.

Key findings of the committee included:

- Nationwide and statewide data on student learning during the pandemic are valuable in informing federal and state education policy. However, the experience of each local school district and each student has varied widely over the past 18 months. Consequently, local school districts and educators should rely on formative assessment and other ongoing measures of the progress of individual students in grade-level work when developing strategies to overcome any academic and social-emotional learning loss.

- Efforts to address gaps in social-emotional learning must precede, or be simultaneous with, efforts to accelerate academic learning.
- New Jersey's local school districts did an exemplary job in delivering an education program to students during 2020-2021, pivoting between virtual and in-person. School districts developed plans to ensure that every child had nutritious meals, either tech-based or hard copy instructional materials, and social-emotional support. However, numerous factors beyond the control of educators and families caused learning disruptions, the impact of which needs to be addressed through local school district post-pandemic learning plans and the use of federal emergency funding.
- New Jersey Department of Education data based on locally administered summative assessments show that the majority of New Jersey students met grade-level standards in English language arts and mathematics over the past year. However, progress for students with disabilities, English learners and economically disadvantaged students was significantly lower than that for the total student population. Progress for Black and Hispanic students was lower than that for their white and Asian counterparts. The state data underscore the importance of ensuring that, as appropriate, local school districts address the needs of vulnerable populations in post-pandemic education plans and the use of federal emergency funding.

In the end, the committee offered 15 different recommendations for the educational community to consider in confronting the challenges that lay before them:

1. School districts and educators should rely upon formative assessments, which are ongoing and diagnostic, to identify post-pandemic student learning needs and develop individual instructional improvement plans.
2. To address academic learning gaps, school districts should implement acceleration and just-in-time teaching while also considering implementing a "spiral curriculum," in which key concepts are presented repeatedly throughout the curriculum, but with deepening layers of complexity.
3. Efforts to close learning gaps should be applied with equal vigor in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those not subject to state assessment.
4. To effectively address the pandemic's impact on learning, educators should adopt an "asset-based" mindset, which places a positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.
5. District action plans to address the impact of the pandemic on education should have a dual focus, addressing both social-emotional and academic learning challenges.
6. Social-emotional learning practices should be ongoing, embedded in every lesson and activity, including co-curricular programs, and facilitated throughout the school year and beyond the school day.
7. School leaders should be cognizant of staff members' emotional health, which affects the ability of students to process trauma resulting from the pandemic, and should provide appropriate services through employee assistance programs, professional development and other activities.

8. Boards of education policy should express a belief that social-emotional learning/character development strengthens social competencies, provides for the well-being of students and staff, and facilitates academic achievement.
9. As school districts revise their curricula to align with the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, they should consider using the Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework, which connects the artistic processes with social-emotional learning competencies.
10. To meet the needs of the students most severely affected by the pandemic, educators should consider effective practices being implemented in New Jersey school districts, as well as guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education. Strategies may include accelerated learning, extended learning time and one-to-one tutoring, as well as enrichment in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math) education and access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs and career-technical education pathways.
11. School districts should consider developing multi-year financial plans that extend beyond the expiration of federal American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding to ensure continuation of effective programs to meet students' post-pandemic learning needs.
12. The planning, implementation and evaluation of district plans to address social-emotional and academic learning gaps should be based on proven practices that are inclusive and collaborative, enhance effective organizational structures and promote healthy school climate and culture.
13. School districts should use the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding and related planning to ensure a continued focus on equity throughout the pre-K-12 education system.
14. To ensure adequate transportation services when students return to school full-time, the federal and state governments should address the shortage of school bus drivers by revising requirements for the commercial drivers' license-acquisition process, removing requirements that are unnecessary for school bus drivers.
15. In developing programs to address post-pandemic education, local boards of education should review recommendations and suggestions contained in the NJSBA's research reports on school safety, special education, student achievement, mental health and the career-focused learner, as well as the five reports on education during the pandemic that have been issued since May 2020.

Thank you for your consideration of the NJSBA's perspective on these important issues. I encourage you to read the full report I have summarized, and please let us know if we can offer any additional information. The NJSBA stands ready to work with this committee and the entire Legislature to develop effective policies and strategies to advance the achievement of all students. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like to further discuss these matters, please do not hesitate to contact me at jpushman@njsba.org or (609) 278-5248.



New Jersey School Boards Association

413 West State Street • Trenton, NJ 08618 • Telephone: 609.695.7600 • Toll-Free: 888.88NJSBA • Fax: 609.695.0413

Rebuilding Opportunities for Students



**Fifth in a Series of NJSBA Reports
on Education During the Pandemic**

September 2021

17x

Rebuilding Opportunities for Students

**Fifth in a Series of NJSBA Reports
on Education During the Pandemic**

September 2021

www.njsba.org/RebuildingOpportunities

The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of the state's local boards of education and includes the majority of New Jersey's charter schools as associate members. NJSBA provides training, advocacy and support to advance public education and promote the achievement of all students through effective governance.

Rebuilding Opportunities for Students

Irene LeFebvre, President
Lawrence S. Feinsod, Ed.D., Executive Director
Frank Belluscio III, Lead Researcher/Writer
Janet Bamford, Chief Public Affairs Officer
Adriana DiGiacomantonio, Design

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413 West State Street, Trenton, New Jersey 08618

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FORWARD:

DR. LAWRENCE S. FEINSOD 1

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 3

Key Findings 4

Recommendations 5

IDENTIFYING

ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS 7

Formative Assessment 7

Vulnerable Student Populations 8

Some Thrived Remotely 10

ADDRESSING

ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS 11

Acceleration/Just-in-Time Teaching 11

Acceleration versus Remediation 12

Experience after Katrina 12

Spiraling Curriculum 14

High-Dosage Tutoring 15

An Asset-Based Mindset 15

Focus on All Learning Standards 16

EMBEDDING

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING 18

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL): A Priority . . 19

SEL throughout the School Program,
throughout the Year 20

Emotional Needs of Staff 21

Policy Supporting SEL and Its Effective
Implementation 22

THE ROLE OF

ARTS EDUCATION IN SEL 24

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE

MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS 27

Special Education 28

English Learners 31

Economically Disadvantaged Students
and Students of Color 32

Closing Learning Gaps/Overcoming Barriers . 33

PLANNING, FUNDING AND

IMPLEMENTING RECOVERY 35

Ensuring Equity 36

Forming a Long Term Plan 37

After ARP Funds Expire: Have a Plan 38

A Studied and Collaborative Approach 39

Transportation Challenges 40

CLOSING THOUGHTS 43

RESOURCES 45

Dear Member of the New Jersey Education Community,

The New Jersey School Boards Association is proud to share “Rebuilding Opportunities for Students,” the fifth in its series of reports on the issues facing school leaders, educators, students and their families since the pandemic began some 18 months ago.

Today’s report represents the work of the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning, which convened this spring in anticipation of the resumption of full-time, in-person instruction in 2021-2022. The study group explored challenges facing school districts and students, state and federal policy and financial support, and strategies at the local level, a number of which were put in place during the past year.

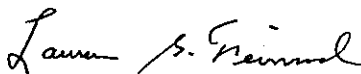
As the pandemic gripped our state, nation and world, New Jersey’s school leaders and educators did an exemplary job guiding the education program, balancing periods of virtual and in-person instruction with unprecedented safeguards for the health of students, staff and families. They deserve the highest commendations for providing our children with the best instruction possible under extraordinary circumstances.

As the 2021-2022 school year begins, the COVID-19 pandemic has not receded, as it appeared it might last spring, and educators, students and families are still facing significant uncertainty. Our responsibility now is to continue assessing the impact of the pandemic on our local school communities, to develop effective programs to overcome any gaps in learning, and to use this period of planning and adjustment as an opportunity to ensure the academic progress and social-emotional growth of all of New Jersey’s 1.4 million students.

The New Jersey School Boards Association intends for this report to provide information and guidance to local board of education members and administrators as they implement plans and strategies designed to meet their students’ academic and social-emotional needs in 2021-2022 and beyond.

It is our hope that this report will assist school districts as they rebuild opportunities for students.

Sincerely,



Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod
Executive Director, NJSBA

THE NJSBA COMMITTEE ON POST-PANDEMIC GAPS IN ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod, Executive Director, NJSBA, ex-officio

Irene LeFebvre, President, NJSBA, 2021-2023 ex-officio

Michael R. McClure, President, NJSBA, 2019-2021, ex-officio

James Gaffney, President, Bergen County School Boards Association; Member,
Oakland Board of Education; High School Administrator

Christine Guerriero, Vice-President, Union County School Boards Association;
Member, Garwood Board of Education; School Nurse

Raymond Kuehner, Vice President, South Brunswick Board of Education; Former
President, School Transportation Supervisors of New Jersey

Robert Morrison, Member, Watchung Hills Regional Board of Education;
Director, Arts Ed NJ

NJSBA STAFF

Vincent R. De Lucia, Educator-in-Residence

Cynthia Harrison, Executive Administrative Assistant, Legal and General Counsel

Marcia Lavigne, Manager, Member Training & Professional Development

Patrice Maillet, Acting Deputy Executive Director, Director of Business
Development

Lou Schimenti, Products and Services Manager

Kathy Winecoff, Field Service Representative

RESOURCE PERSONS

Rose Acerra, Interim Executive Director, We Raise New Jersey

Steve Beatty, Secretary/Treasurer, New Jersey Education Association

Brian Brotschul, Superintendent, Delran Public Schools

Cory Delgado, Principal, Montgomery Township Upper Middle School

Mark S. Jacobus, School Business Administrator, Ho-Ho-Kus Public Schools

Dr. Penelope Lattimer, Facilitator, NJSBA Equity Council

Dr. Don Leake, Professor of Education, The College of New Jersey

Cathy Lindenbaum, Past President, New Jersey PTA

Diana Pasculli, New Jersey Department of Education

Amy Rumbo, Assistant Superintendent, North Brunswick Public Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"We owe it to our students to safely reopen schools and make sure they have the best opportunity for learning, which we know as educators is in person."

"...having our students come into the classroom where they learn by doing, learn social-emotional skills by doing...is critically important."

— Miguel Cardona
U.S. Secretary of Education

The direction from federal and state education officials is clear: After 18 months of extended school closings and periods of full or partial remote learning due to Covid-19, students should receive in-person instruction this fall. In May, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy announced that, barring localized outbreaks of the disease or other emergencies, school districts must provide full-day in-person instruction exclusively in 2021-2022, with no option for remote learning.² He reiterated that position on Aug. 24.³

Even if circumstances compel the state to change course and require school districts to pivot to hybrid or full remote learning (as they have done in the past), educators will still face the same challenge: Adequately assessing the academic and emotional impact of the pandemic on their students and developing strategies to address individual needs.

To help the state's education community meet this goal, the New Jersey School Boards Association convened the Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning to provide information on effective practices and programs, guidance and support. The committee consists of local school board leaders, state and local education officials, educators and NJSBA staff. It has drawn upon the knowledge of experts in various fields and reviewed literature and research, including the Association's previous work on education during the pandemic, student achievement, the career-focused learner, student mental health, and other subjects.

The committee's final report provides insights, findings and recommendations on the following topics:

- ¹ Dr. Miguel Cardona, interview by John Dickerson, "Face the Nation," CBS News, Aug. 8, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/education-secretary-miguel-cardona-details-all-hands-on-deck-approach-to-reopen-schools/#x> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).
- ² "Governor Murphy Announces That Schools Will Be Required to Provide Full-Time, In-Person Instruction Beginning Fall 2021." Office of the Governor, State of New Jersey, May 17, 2021. <https://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/562021/20210517a.shtml> (accessed Aug. 9, 2021).
- ³ Mary Ann Koruth, "Remote Learning: Murphy Reiterates No Virtual School Other than Contingency Plan for Outbreaks," NorthJersey.com (North Jersey Media Group, Aug. 25, 2021), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/education/2021/08/24/governor-phil-murphy-no-virtual-school-contingency-plan-covid/8247526002/> (accessed Aug. 25, 2021).

- **Identifying gaps in academic learning** through formative assessment and other methods, and **addressing academic learning gaps** caused by the pandemic, using approaches such as accelerated learning and “Just-in-Time Teaching,” while providing meaningful instructional opportunities across all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.
- **Embedding social-emotional learning** into the entire curricular and co-curricular program.
- **Recognizing the role of arts education** in social-emotional learning.
- **Meeting the needs of special populations**, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
- **Promoting healthy organizational structures and cultures**, designed to enable educators to close academic learning gaps and meet students’ social-emotional needs, through methods such as strategic planning and collaboration between labor and management.
- **Directing coronavirus relief funding** provided to school districts through the federal Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund, so that it has the optimal impact on growth and learning for all students.
- **Ensuring adequate transportation** for students when they return for full-time in-person instruction.

KEY FINDINGS

By March 2021, each New Jersey LEA reported zero students currently needing a device and/or internet connection. Thus, the State was able to effectively use ESSER and CRF funds and close the digital divide for New Jersey’s students.

—*State Plan for the American Rescue Plan and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund*

- Nationwide and statewide data on student learning during the pandemic are valuable in informing federal and state education policy. However, the experience of each local school district and each student has varied widely over the past 18 months. Consequently, local school districts and educators should rely on formative assessment⁴ and other ongoing measures of the progress of individual students in grade-level work when developing strategies to overcome any academic and social-emotional learning loss.
- Efforts to address gaps in social-emotional learning must precede or be simultaneous with efforts to accelerate academic learning.
- New Jersey’s local school districts did an exemplary job in delivering an education program to students during 2020-2021, pivoting between virtual and in-person. School districts developed plans to ensure that every child had nutritious meals, either tech-based or hard copy instructional materials, and social-emotional support. However, numerous factors beyond the control of educators and families caused learning disruptions, the impact of which needs to be addressed through local school district post-pandemic learning plans and the use of federal emergency funding.
- New Jersey Department of Education data based on locally administered

⁴ “Formative Assessment Definition,” The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, April 29, 2014), <https://www.edglossary.org/formative-assessment/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

summative⁵ assessments show that the majority of New Jersey students met grade-level standards in English language arts and mathematics over the past year. However, progress for students with disabilities, English learners and economically disadvantaged students was significantly lower than that for the total student population. Progress for Black and Hispanic students was lower than that for their white and Asian counterparts. The state data underscore the importance of ensuring that, as appropriate, local school districts address the needs of vulnerable populations in post-pandemic education plans and the use of federal emergency funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School districts and educators should rely upon formative assessments, which are ongoing and diagnostic, to identify post-pandemic student learning needs and develop individual instructional improvement plans.
2. To address academic learning gaps, school districts should implement acceleration⁶ and just-in-time teaching⁷ while also considering implementing a spiral curriculum.⁸
3. Efforts to close learning gaps should be applied with equal vigor in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those not subject to state assessment.
4. To effectively address the pandemic's impact on learning, educators should adopt an "asset-based" mindset, which places a positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.
5. District action plans to address the impact of the pandemic on education should have a dual focus, addressing both social-emotional and academic learning challenges.
6. Social-emotional learning practices should be ongoing, embedded in every lesson and activity, including co-curricular programs, and facilitated throughout the school year and beyond the school day.
7. School leaders should be cognizant of staff members' emotional health, which affects the ability of students to process trauma resulting from the pandemic, and should provide appropriate services through employee assistance programs, professional development and other activities.

⁵ "Summative Assessment Definition," The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, Aug. 29, 2013), <https://www.edglossary.org/summative-assessment/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

⁶ "Acceleration Definition," The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, Aug. 13, 2013), <https://www.edglossary.org/acceleration/> (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

⁷ "Just-in-Time Teaching," Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), <https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-strategies/just-in-time-teaching> (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

⁸ Howard Johnston, "The Spiral Curriculum," Research into Practice (Education Partnerships, Inc., Feb. 29, 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538282.pdf> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

8. Boards of education policy should express a belief that social-emotional learning/character development strengthens social competencies, provides for the well-being of students and staff, and facilitates academic achievement.
9. As school districts revise their curricula to align with the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, they should consider using the *Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework*, which connects the artistic processes with social-emotional learning competencies.
10. To meet the needs of the students most severely affected by the pandemic, educators should consider effective practices being implemented in New Jersey school districts, as well as guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education. Strategies may include accelerated learning, extended learning time and one-to-one tutoring, as well as enrichment in STEAM education and access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs and career-technical education pathways.
11. School districts should consider developing multi-year financial plans that extend beyond the expiration of federal American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding to ensure continuation of effective programs to meet students' post-pandemic learning needs.
12. The planning, implementation and evaluation of district plans to address social-emotional and academic learning gaps should be based on proven practices that are inclusive and collaborative, enhance effective organizational structures and promote healthy school climate and culture.
13. School districts should use the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding and related planning to ensure a continued focus on equity throughout the pre-K-12 education system.
14. To ensure adequate transportation services when students return to school full-time, the federal and state governments should address the shortage of school bus drivers by revising requirements for the commercial drivers' license-acquisition process, removing requirements that are unnecessary for school bus drivers.
15. In developing programs to address post-pandemic education, local boards of education should review recommendations and suggestions contained in the New Jersey School Boards Association's research reports on school safety, special education, student achievement, mental health and the career-focused learner, as well as the five reports on education during the pandemic that have been issued since May 2020.

Research and information that the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Loss used in developing its recommendations, as well as definitions of key concepts, are referenced in subsequent sections of this report. Reports, articles and studies cited can be accessed through the links contained in footnotes.

IDENTIFYING ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS

RECOMMENDATION

School districts and educators should rely upon formative assessments, which are ongoing and diagnostic, to identify post-pandemic student learning needs and develop individual instructional improvement plans.

Nationwide and statewide data on student performance are critical to informing federal and state policy to address pandemic-related learning gaps. Nonetheless, the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (NJSBA Committee) believes that local school district strategy should focus on the experience of the district's student population and, especially, individual student needs.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The committee finds agreement among educators that ongoing formative assessment is a valuable tool in providing a comprehensive analysis of each student's progress toward meeting learning standards. Formative assessment consists of a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or course.⁹ This type of assessment guides the creation of individual learning plans, while providing information to students, their families, and educators with whom they work.

During its deliberations, the NJSBA Committee reviewed information and data related to the pandemic's impact on student growth and learning. Sources include the Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes,¹⁰ two organizations involved in student assessment—NWEA (the Northwest Evaluation Association),¹¹ and Renaissance¹²—McKinsey & Company,¹³ an international

⁹ "Formative Assessment Definition."

¹⁰ "Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year" (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, October 2020), https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/tbjybj6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v3.pdf (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹¹ Lewis, Karyn, Megan Kuhfeld, Erik Ruzek, and Andrew McEachin. "Learning during COVID-19: Reading and Math Achievement in the 2020-21 School Year" (NWEA Center for School and Student Progress, July 2021), <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/07/Learning-during-COVID-19-Reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year-research-brief-1.pdf> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹² "How Kids Are Performing: Tracking the School-Year Impact of COVID-19 on Reading and Mathematics Achievement" (Renaissance Learning, Inc., Spring 2021), <https://renaissance-widen.net/s/t8rbrt2tc/r63444> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹³ Dorn, Emma, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg. "COVID-19 and Education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning" (McKinsey & Company, July 27, 2021), <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning> (accessed August 18, 2021).

management consulting firm, and JerseyCAN,¹⁴ a non-profit education advocacy group.

The work of these and other organizations shows that, to varying degrees, the pandemic has affected learning among students across the entire demographic spectrum. However, there are differences among the reports concerning the severity of learning gaps and the amount of time students and teachers will need to close them.

VULNERABLE STUDENT POPULATIONS

In spite of these differences, one observation has emerged from nearly all of the reports: The pandemic's negative impact on academic growth has been most severe among economically disadvantaged students, many of whom are students of color and less likely to have experienced in-person instruction than higher-income and non-minority students. The data from these organizations also illustrate the pandemic's negative effect on the education of special populations, such as English language learners and students with disabilities.

In a July 2021 report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that, "Reduced access to in-person learning is associated with poorer learning outcomes and adverse mental health and behavioral effects in children."¹⁵ The CDC report indicated the following:

- During January-April 2021, access to full-time learning increased for all-K-12 students nationwide.
- However, disparities in access to full-time in-person learning were apparent by race/ethnicity, geography and school level, with minority students having less opportunity for in-person instruction.
- In New Jersey, minority students were more likely to be limited to virtual-only instruction than other students.

In June, the New Jersey Department of Education released the Local Education Agencies Interim Assessment Data Collection, Summary Report 2021,¹⁶ a compilation of results of various summative¹⁷ assessments administered by local school districts between November 2020 and February 2021. The summative assessments measure student understanding or performance against uniform grade-level standards in English language arts, mathematics and science.

¹⁴ "A Time to Act: COVID-19 Academic Slide in New Jersey (Fall 2020-Winter 2021)" (JerseyCAN, March 25, 2021), https://jerseycan.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/03/03-25-21_JerseyCAN_ATimeToAct_Report_V1.pdf (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹⁵ Emily Oster, *et al.*, "Disparities in Learning Mode Access Among K-12 Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Race/Ethnicity, Geography, and Grade Level - United States, September 2020-April 2021," (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 2, 2021), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7026e2.htm?s_cid=mm7026e2_w#T1_down (accessed July 30, 2021).

¹⁶ "Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) Interim Assessment Data Collection Summary Report 2021," New Jersey Department of Education, June 16, 2021, <https://nj.gov/education/sboe/meetings/agenda/2021/June/public/4b%20New%20Jersey%20Interim%20Assessment%20Data%20Collection%20presentation.pdf> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

¹⁷ "Summative Assessment Definition."

LEA Interim Assessment Data Collection Summary Report 2021			
Percentage of Students at or above Grade-Level Standards			
	ELA	Math	Science
All Students	63%	62%	78%
Economically Disadvantaged	46%	45%	62%
English Learners	34%	40%	57%
Students with Disabilities	44%	45%	67%
Asian	82%	84%	93%
White	73%	72%	87%
Black	49%	44%	63%
Hispanic	48%	48%	65%

The results show that a majority of the total student population performed at or above grade-level standards (63% in ELA, 62% in math, and 78% in science). However, in each subject area, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, English learners and students with disabilities meeting grade-level standards was significantly lower than that of the total population. Additionally, results for Black and Hispanic students lagged behind those of their white and Asian peers.

The grade-level data will be used to “target interventions to meet the needs of all students, especially vulnerable student groups,” according to a presentation made to the State Board of Education. At the same time, an NJDOE official cautioned that the information cannot be used for comparison to previous years’ state-administered assessment results.

“Statewide assessments serve a different purpose, and are administered under different conditions than local interim assessments,” explained Dr. Lisa Gleason, assistant commissioner of academics and performance, in a broadcast memo to local school officials. “Comparisons between these data sets would not yield meaningful takeaways regarding *trends in student learning over time*.”¹⁸ [Emphasis added.]

On one hand, these results show lower achievement among the same student groups that nationwide data indicate have been most negatively impacted by the pandemic. However, based on the caution issued by NJDOE, the statistics cannot be used to illustrate the extent of academic learning gaps among New Jersey students that might have resulted from school closings and remote instruction during the health emergency.

Therefore, the NJSBA Committee believes that it is critical for local education officials and teachers to base strategies on ongoing, formative assessment of the district’s student population, as well as the needs of individual students.

¹⁸ “Interim Data Shows Academic Performance Lagging; NJDOE Cautions against Comparisons to Previous Assessments,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, June 22, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-22-2021-vol-xliv-no-49/interim-data-shows-academic-performance-lagging-njdoe-cautions-against-comparisons-to-previous-assessments/> (accessed Aug. 13, 2021).

SOME THRIVED REMOTELY

There are indications that a subset of students thrived academically during periods of remote instruction. This group may include students with social anxiety or other emotional challenges, as well as those who may not feel safe in school.

In an Aug. 18 report in *Education Week*, an official from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), suggested that schools survey students or target those who thrived to obtain information on why they excelled during virtual instruction.

"You might find they really benefited from the freedom to use their time more flexibly or focus without interruption," said Claire Schu, manager of implementation support at CASEL. "If that's what you're hearing, you might consider changing up the way that the in-person class period is structured, [or] giving options for how and even where students can learn within the school."¹⁹

There may be numerous other reasons why these students excelled — and there may be other strategies to maintain their success when they return to in-person instruction.

The NJSBA Committee believes that school administrators and educators should take steps to determine why some students thrived through online learning and to ensure that those who excelled will have similar success when they return to in-person instruction.

¹⁹ Alyson Klein, "Virtual Learning Was Better for Some Kids. Here's What Teachers Learned From Them," *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., Aug. 18, 2021), https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/virtual-learning-was-better-for-some-kids-heres-what-teachers-learned-from-them/2021/08?utm_source=nl&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=eu&M=62825784&U=2447289&UUID=0e4ffab2513aab88896328f850fb3319 (accessed Aug. 24, 2021).

ADDRESSING ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To address academic learning gaps, school districts should implement acceleration and just-in-time teaching while also considering implementing a spiral curriculum.
- Efforts to close learning gaps should be applied with equal vigor in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those not subject to state assessment.
- To effectively address the pandemic's impact on learning, educators should adopt an "asset-based" mindset, which places a positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Among education researchers and advocates, there is consensus that combining the instructional practices of "acceleration"²⁰ and "just-in-time teaching"²¹ presents the most effective means of addressing learning gaps, the NJSBA Committee finds.

"Accelerated Learning strategically prepares students for success in *current grade-level content*," according to David Steiner, executive director of the Institute for Education Policy at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.²² "Acceleration readies students for new learning." [Emphasis added.]

In the forward to its June 2021 "Learning Acceleration Guide," the New Jersey Department of Education stresses the formative, individualized aspect of accelerated learning. "...once individual student learning needs are assessed, teachers provide targeted supports on the concepts needed to help the students engage with grade-level standards."²³

In essence, *accelerated learning* strategically prepares students for success in current grade-level content and readies students for new learning. Past concepts and skills

²⁰ "Acceleration Definition."

²¹ "Just-in-Time Teaching."

²² "Addressing Learning Loss through Acceleration: A Conversation with David Steiner." Webinar. (National Association of State Boards of Education, Feb. 11, 2021). https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9azcK_cmXZFLoUnWPJxqo4bsfXy23_3UCFeGgGxq7xq8th-AFYsSXR2WNV9DGboZ3GnW/GzL5Pfg3ZcVH.QWqFArhd5rb4jq9Z (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

²³ "Learning Acceleration Guide: A Compilation of Learning Principles and Practices in New Jersey" (New Jersey Department of Education, June 2021), <https://nj.gov/education/acceleration/docs/SearningAccelerationGuide.pdf>. (Accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

are addressed, but always in the purposeful context of current learning.²⁴ *Just-in-time teaching* provides students with just the right amount of help to move forward in a subject where they have missed a pre-requisite skill.²⁵

ACCELERATION VERSUS REMEDIATION

Acceleration offers a vastly different approach to addressing learning gaps than “remediation.”

“Remediation often focuses on drilling students on isolated skills that bear little resemblance to current curriculum. Activities...aim to have students master content from past years,” according to Steiner of Johns Hopkins.²⁶

“Steiner argues that the solution is not to ‘teach again’ the material that students haven’t learned. Instead, he recommends looking forward to what those students will need to know to succeed the next day or the next week and focusing on those skills—a strategy known as acceleration.”²⁷

“Rather than concentrating on a litany of items that students have failed to master, acceleration readies students for new learning. Past concepts and skills are addressed, but always in the purposeful context of future learning,” wrote Suzy Rollins Pepper, education consultant and author, in a 2014 book on accelerated learning.²⁸

Another source, a December 2020 study by McKinsey & Company, asserts that, instead of remediation, the evidence-based approach of acceleration, in combination with just-in-time teaching, is highly effective in closing learning gaps.²⁹

EXPERIENCE AFTER KATRINA

The shortcomings of remediation were observed after the disruption to the education process caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Following the hurricane, schools in the New Orleans area were closed for a

²⁴ Suzy Pepper Rollins, “Acceleration: Jump-Starting Students Who Are Behind,” in *Learning in the Fast Lane: 8 Ways to Put All Students on the Road to Academic Success* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2014).

²⁵ Joy Resmovits, “How a Diverse School District Is Using a Strategy Usually Reserved for ‘Gifted’ Students to Boost Everyone,” *The Seattle Times* (The Seattle Times Company, Feb. 11, 2021), <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/how-highline-is-trying-to-avoid-learning-loss-by-boosting-students-ahead/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021.)

²⁶ Addressing Learning Loss through Acceleration. In the webinar, Steiner cites the work of Suzy Pepper Rollins.

²⁷ Andrew Myers, “To Catch Students Up, Don’t Remediate. Accelerate,” Hub (Johns Hopkins University, May 6, 2021), <https://hub.jhu.edu/2021/05/06/accelerate-learning-to-bridge-covid-19-education-gaps/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

²⁸ Rollins.

²⁹ Dorn, Emma, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, “COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help,” (McKinsey & Company, December 2020), 9-12, <https://www.mckinsey.com/-/media/mckinsey/industries/public%20and%20social%20sector/our%20insights/covid%2019%20and%20learning%20loss%20disparities%20grow%20and%20students%20need%20help/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help-v3.pdf?shouldIndex=false> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

maximum of seven weeks. Educators reported that the average gap in learning was approximately two years, with the greatest shortfall in math. The average time it took to resolve the largest individual learning loss was two years.

A 2020 article published by the Center for Reinventing Public Education relates post-Katrina learning loss to the prospective impact of pandemic-caused school closings. In the article, the author cites the following conditions that faced educators after the hurricane:

- Students came back on average more than two years below grade level, some much more. Losses were most dramatic in mathematics.
- The degree of learning loss could not be predicted by family income, prior school, student age, or pre-Katrina grade level. Any school that opened in New Orleans had to assess individual readiness.
- Since students trickled back to New Orleans over a long period of time, schools could never stop assessing and adjusting to learning loss.
- It often took multiple years of individualized attention to resolve the largest learning losses.³⁰

In advocating for acceleration, TNTP, a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement of urban education, cautioned against the temptation to address learning gaps through remediation. (TNTP was founded in 1997 as The New Teacher Project.)

“The natural inclination [in addressing pandemic-related learning loss] might be to make room for reteaching last year’s missed units by wholly eliminating any on-grade level units focused on ‘additional standards’ and then, once the ‘reteach’ portion of the year is complete, turning your attention to units focused on the ‘major work’ of the grade. *But we know this approach did not lead to student growth in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.* [Emphasis added.]

“Instead, you should identify the most important skills and concepts of each unit of study or standard.”³¹

More recently, TNTP issued a report³² that points to the success of accelerated learning during the current pandemic when compared to remediation.

“Our own pre-pandemic research showed that [remediation] can actually hurt students and exacerbate racial inequities,” states the TNTP report. “Over the past

³⁰ Paul Hill, “What Post-Katrina New Orleans Can Teach Schools about Addressing Covid Learning Losses,” The Lens (Center for Reinventing Public Education, April 20, 2020), <https://www.crpe.org/thelens/what-post-katrina-new-orleans-can-teach-schools-about-addressing-covid-learning-losses> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

³¹ “To Accelerate Learning, Focus on the Most Important Skills and Knowledge, TNTP Blog (TNTP, May 2020), <https://tntp.org/blog/post/to-accelerate-learning-figure-out-what-skills-and-knowledge-are-most-import> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

³² “ACCELERATE, DON’T REMEDIATE: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classes” (TNTP, in partnership with ZEARN, May 2021), https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Accelerate_Dont_RemEDIATE_FINAL.pdf (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

year, an alternative has gained traction across the country: *learning acceleration*. In this approach, the fourth-grade teacher starts with fourth-grade content, and strategically builds in key third-grade concepts when students might need them to master the grade-level work. This 'just-in-time teaching' ensures students spend more time on the work of their grade—the key to ultimately catching up.”

The TNTP report also cites data showing the following:

- Students who experienced learning acceleration struggled less and learned more than students who started at the same level but experienced remediation instead.
- Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were more likely than their white, wealthier peers to experience remediation—even when they had already demonstrated success on grade-level content.
- Learning acceleration was particularly effective for students of color and those from low-income families.

An article in the Summer 2021 edition of NJSBA's *School Leader*³³ magazine highlights various approaches to accelerated learning in the Kenilworth school district. In addition, the NJDOE “Learning Acceleration Guide”³⁴ offers several examples of effective local school district practices.

SPIRALING CURRICULUM

Following Katrina, the use of “spiraling” curriculum had a positive impact for secondary school students.³⁵ One of the benefits of this approach is that “Students are encouraged to apply the early knowledge to later course objectives.”³⁶

A 2012 article accessed through ERIC, the U.S. Department of Education's Education Resource Information Center, describes the spiraling curriculum process. The article was published by Education Partnerships, Inc., a consulting firm.

- The student revisits a topic, theme or subject several times throughout their school career;
- The complexity of the topic or theme increases with each revisit; and
- New learning has a relationship with old learning and is put in context with the old information.³⁷

³³ Sheri Berkery, “‘Accelerated Learning’ Helps Students Catch Up and Look Ahead,” *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/accelerated-learning-helps-students-catch-up-and-look-ahead/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

³⁴ Learning Acceleration Guide.

³⁵ Hill.

³⁶ Howard Johnston, “The Spiral Curriculum,” Research into Practice (Education Partnerships, Inc., Feb. 29, 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538282.pdf> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

³⁷ Johnston.

HIGH-DOSAGE TUTORING

Research indicates that one-to-one support for students, such as “high dosage” tutoring and monitoring, accelerates learning. For example, the July 2021 report by McKinsey describes these strategies as a “proven catalyst for accelerated learning.”

These programs were pioneered by Match Education in Boston and scaled by Saga Education in Chicago to provide students who are behind grade level in mathematics with an individualized 50-minute class period every school day. Tutors work with two students at a time in each session and cover content that not only meets students where they are but also links back to what is being taught in the regular math classroom.

The results are impressive: participating students learned one to two additional school years of mathematics in a single year.

These high-dosage programs are much more effective than low-dosage volunteer tutoring provided weekly or on an ad hoc basis...³⁸

In its March 2021 report, JerseyCan recommended “personalized, research-based solutions for accelerating student learning like high-dosage tutoring” as a strategy to address learning gaps.³⁹

New Jersey’s ARP ESSER State Plan includes tutoring among the initiatives to be funded through federal emergency aid. “Additionally, the State plans to establish a Comprehensive Beyond the School Day Activities formula grant which will support implementation of research-based programs such as tutoring and broader learning supports to families and educators,” according to a summary issued by the USDOE.⁴⁰

The NJSBA Committee suggests that school districts include “high dosage” tutoring when they are considering strategies to address student needs in post-pandemic education.

AN ASSET-BASED MINDSET

A critical component to narrowing learning gaps is adopting an asset-based mindset and rejecting approaches that are deficit-based, the NJSBA Committee finds.

“Asset-based teaching seeks to unlock students’ potential by focusing on their talents,” according to an article published by the Association of College and Research Libraries. “Also known as strengths-based teaching, this approach contrasts with the more common deficit-based style of teaching which highlights students’ inadequacies. By building on strengths students already possess, asset-based teaching seeks to create lifelong learners who are confident in

³⁸ Dorn.

³⁹ A Time to Act: COVID-19 Academic Slide in New Jersey, 10.

⁴⁰ “New Jersey ARP ESSER State Plan Highlights” (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/arp-esser-nj-plan.pdf> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

their abilities to master new skills.⁴¹

By viewing diversity in thought, culture and traits in a positive light, “the asset-based approach is key in achieving equity in classrooms across the country,” according to an article by the NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. “Teachers and students alike are valued for what they bring to the classroom rather than being characterized by what they may need to work on or lack.”⁴²

In comparison, a deficit-based mindset lowers expectation and diminishes learning.

“In education, a *deficit mindset* is when teachers or school leaders focus on problems rather than potential,” according to a blog⁴³ posted on EduSpeak, produced by ANet, an educational services organization. “Deficit thinking causes educators to lower their expectations based on what their students and schools lack, which leads to lower outcomes.”

“Students of color, students experiencing poverty, and students with learning and attention differences are disproportionately harmed when educators adopt a deficit mindset.”⁴⁴

“If students only hear of the gaps in their learning or that they have fallen behind, they will begin to act according to the low benchmark that has been set for their achievement,” writes Angela Di Michele Lalor, a national educational consultant, in *EduTopia*, an online publication of the George Lucas Educational Foundation. “An asset-based approach to teaching is one that is grounded in what students can do rather than what they cannot do or areas of weakness. It is an embodiment of growth mindset in instruction.”⁴⁵

The NJSBA Committee strongly suggests an asset-based approach as educators and students work to overcome any negative impact of the pandemic on learning.

FOCUS ON ALL LEARNING STANDARDS

“Accelerating learning involves examining and improving every component of the instructional cycle,” states the NJDOE Learning Acceleration Guide.⁴⁶ “Districts

⁴¹ “Five Things You Should Read About Asset-Based Teaching,” Association of College and Research Libraries (American Library Association, May 22, 2018), https://acrl.org/IS/wp-content/uploads/is-research_5Things_asset-based-teaching.pdf (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴² “An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What It Is and Why It Matters,” NYU Steinhardt Teacher Residency Program (New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, Oct. 29, 2018, updated Sept. 16, 2020), <https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/an-asset-based-approach-to-education-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴³ “What is deficit mindset in education?” *EduSpeak* (blog) (ANet, Achievement Network, Jan. 14, 2020), <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/anetblog/eduspeak/deficit-mindset> (accessed Aug. 16, 2020).

⁴⁴ EduSpeak.

⁴⁵ Angela Di Michele Lalor, “3 Steps to Developing an Asset-Based Approach to Teaching,” *EduTopia* (George Lucas Educational Foundation, Oct. 22, 2020), <https://www.edutopia.org/article/3-steps-developing-asset-based-approach-teaching> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴⁶ Learning Acceleration Guide, 4.

must ensure [that] educators possess an advanced understanding of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards and implement those standards through high-quality, engaging lesson plans for all students.”

Post-pandemic, a thorough and efficient system of public schools for all students will require robust learning opportunities in all nine of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards: 21st Century Life and Careers; Comprehensive Health and Physical Education; English Language Arts; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies; Technology; Visual and Performing Arts, and World Languages.

State assessments, however, measure student progress in only three of the content areas: English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. Consequently, the NJSBA Committee cautions against focusing attention exclusively on learning gaps in the state-tested areas, particularly ELA and math, rather than on those not subject to state assessment. As much learning delay may exist in non-state-tested content areas, particularly subjects such as physical education and the visual and performing arts, which do not easily lend themselves to remote instruction.

The content areas not subject to state assessments are critical components of a thorough and efficient system of public education and, significantly, can provide ways for students to reengage in schools, the committee believes.

The NJSBA Committee urges educators to ensure that efforts to address academic learning gaps are implemented in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

EMBEDDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School district action plans to address the impact of the pandemic on education should have a dual focus, addressing both social-emotional and academic challenges.
- Social-emotional learning practices should be ongoing, embedded in every lesson and activity, including co-curricular programs, and facilitated throughout the school year and beyond the school day.
- School leaders should be cognizant of staff members' emotional health, which affects the ability of students to process trauma resulting from the pandemic, and should provide appropriate services through employee assistance programs, professional development and other activities.
- Board of education policy should express a belief that social-emotional learning/character development strengthens social competencies, provides for the well-being of students and staff, and facilitates academic achievement.

During the pandemic, many students have experienced isolation and loneliness, the impact of which will not automatically dissipate when they return to in-school instruction. Many students have experienced trauma, resulting from illness among family members, financial issues, and other factors.

NJSBA's January 2021 report⁴⁷ on student mental health during the pandemic includes the following findings:

- "Children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends."⁴⁸
- "Early indications in the COVID-19 context indicate that more than one-third of adolescents report high levels of loneliness ... [and] there are well-established links between loneliness and mental health."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health" (New Jersey School Boards Association, Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/eye-on-the-future-as-districts-monitor-student-mental-health.pdf>, 9-10 (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁴⁸ Maria Elizabeth Loades *et al.*, "Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of Covid-19," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (November 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7267797/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁴⁹ Loades.

- 60% of school district leaders responding to an NJSBA survey felt that students were more anxious and depressed or [that they] had seen increased evidence of serious emotional crises.
- More than 90% of the respondents felt that the impact of remote learning on parents increased stress at home.

A May 2021 special report, published by *Education Week*, notes that the public health emergency exacerbated rising emotional stress among students and increased the difficulty that schools face in addressing the problem. “Even before the pandemic, mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, were on the rise among children and adolescents and many schools were struggling to keep pace with that demand,” states the report.⁵⁰

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL): A PRIORITY

In its report, “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation of Hope,” the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development linked social-emotional development to academic growth and illustrated its benefit for children from low-income backgrounds.

“An analysis of more than 200 studies of programs that teach students social and emotional skills found that these efforts significantly improved student behavior, feelings about school, and most importantly, achievement, and made schools safer,” the national commission found.

“Social and emotional learning benefits all children, of every background,” the report states. “But it disproportionately benefits children from low-income communities, many of whom experience trauma and adversity resulting from insecure access to housing, food, healthcare and safety.”⁵¹

In a fall 2020 article in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, Dr. Maurice J. Elias, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab and one of the nation’s leading experts in building healthy school climates, and Robert Morrison, director of Arts Ed NJ, summarized the situation facing school districts.

...school leaders confront the ever-increasing signs of stress and trauma our students are experiencing. The alarming rise in suicides (which are now appearing in our middle schools and high schools), social media shaming, ghosting, peer pressure, and school shootings have all contributed to what is clearly a mental health crisis in our schools. All of this was occurring pre-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues due to the

⁵⁰ Arianna Prothero, “Mental Health Problems Loom for the COVID Generation. Here’s What Schools Can Do,” *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., May 25, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/mental-health-problems-loom-for-the-covid-generation-heres-what-schools-can-do/2021/05> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵¹ “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope” (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Jan. 15, 2019), http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_aspen_final-report_full_webversion.pdf, 7 (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

anxiety and loss some students are sustaining, the social isolation that comes with stay-at-home orders, the milestones students have missed (graduations, concerts, proms, trips, sports activities, travel), and even questions regarding career aspirations and students' finding a successful pathway to their passion in life.⁵²

"The confluence of student mental health and well-being issues and the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the need for SEL front and center," wrote Elias and Morrison.

The May 2021 *Education Week* special report cites the importance of SEL to academic recovery.

"To be sure, it will be difficult to balance mental health support with an equally massive academic recovery. But child development experts say it's a balance schools must attempt to strike if they want students to regain their academic footing after an unprecedented year of disruptions, stress, and trauma."⁵³

Following a review of research, the NJSBA Committee finds that addressing academic learning gaps cannot be successful unless students' social-emotional needs are met. In addition, overcoming learning gaps will require a school climate in which students feel safe, feel valued, have a sense of belonging, and are heard—all key components of SEL.

SEL THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL PROGRAM, THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

During its discussion of social-emotional learning, the committee considered two previous NJSBA reports: "Building a Foundation for Hope," which focused on mental health services in the public schools, and "The Final Report of the NJSBA Task Force on Student Achievement" (2017). Both reports cite the importance of social-emotional learning and include recommendations based on the work of the Rutgers Social Emotional and Character Laboratory and CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning).

Relevant research, findings and recommendations from the 2019 and 2017 NJSBA reports include the following:

- Social-emotional competence and academic achievement are interwoven. Integrated coordinated instruction in both areas maximizes students' potential to succeed in school and throughout their lives.⁵⁴
- Evidence-based SEL should be a core part of the K-12 educational experience. The five core competencies associated with social-emotional learning—self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and

⁵² Robert Morrison and Maurice J. Elias, "Social and Emotional Learning and Arts Education," *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, Oct. 9, 2020), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/september-october-2020-vol-51-no-2/social-and-emotional-learning-and-arts-education/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵³ Prothero.

⁵⁴ Joseph E. Zins and Maurice J. Elias, "Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students," *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17, no. 2-3 (2006): 233.

responsible decision-making—should be infused into the daily school routine.⁵⁵

- Local school districts should make social-emotional learning part of every course to increase academic performance.⁵⁶

The 2018 report “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, includes a series of recommendations on the optimal implementation of SEL. A key recommendation: *Change instruction to teach students social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and school-wide practices.*

“There is a wide range of effective programs that provide frameworks, activities, and developmental sequences for teaching these skills,” states the national commission. “In addition, many districts and schools have developed their own programs and resources. But if a single curriculum or program is the extent of a school’s or district’s commitment—if students and teachers see developing these skills as a focus only in morning meetings, or in grades 5 and 8—there is little hope for real impact.”⁵⁷

A recent article in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine describes how the Kenilworth school district has infused social-emotional learning into the education program in its efforts to accelerate learning:

- Kenilworth increased SEL efforts in anticipation of pandemic-related needs, and integrated emotional supports into the curriculum. Outside support came from licensed therapists assigned to each school building to provide additional help to students, staff, and families.
- Teachers also received professional development in trauma-informed classrooms; additional rounds of this instruction will be available in the fall.
- Counseling teams coordinated with elementary school teachers on interventions, and followed up with parents to assess needs for counseling, community resources, and technology assistance.⁵⁸

The NJSBA Committee finds that, for social-emotional learning to be effective, it must be ongoing, embedded in all school activities and stressed throughout the school year.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF STAFF

Helping students deal with pandemic-related trauma will require adults who have successfully processed their own trauma, the NJSBA Committee believes. School leaders, therefore, must be cognizant of the emotional health of all staff and should

⁵⁵ “SEL: What Are the Core Competence Areas and Where Are They Promoted?,” SEL is... (CASEL, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021)

⁵⁶ “Building a Foundation for Hope” (New Jersey School Boards Association, September 2019), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NJSBA-Final-Mental-Health-Task-Force-Report-September-2019.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵⁷ “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” 44.

⁵⁸ Berkery.

provide supports through professional development, employee assistance programs, and other activities.

Pre-pandemic studies point to the benefit of teachers' emotional well-being to the advancement of students' academic and social-emotional learning.

"...teachers' own social and emotional competencies influence the quality of the learning experiences they offer their students," states the 2018 Nation at Hope report. "A growing body of research suggests that developing teachers' social and emotional competencies improves teacher well-being, reduces stress and burnout, and can reduce teacher and principal turnover. Teachers also report greater job satisfaction when their students are more engaged and successful."⁵⁹

A 2016 study by Penn State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates that programs to "promote SEL among students also help reduce teacher stress and create more positive engagement with students."⁶⁰ In addition, the report cites studies showing that mindfulness and stress-management professional development provide psychological and physiological benefits to teachers, as well as improvements in quality of instruction.

NJSBA's report, "Building a Foundation for Hope" (2019), cites the importance of staff health and wellness in advancing student learning. It recommends that districts "[s]upport the emotional health of staff by providing structures and opportunities to build collegial relationships through professional development and team building."⁶¹

POLICY SUPPORTING SEL AND ITS EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

NJSBA's 2019 report on mental health services also recommends that school districts "ensure that SEL programs are a priority and that they emphasize empathy, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking—skills that not only enable academic achievement, but also success in college, career and family life."⁶² A key element to setting this priority is board of education policy.

Through policy, the board of education expresses its goals and desires for the district's schools and the education of its students. It provides direction to administration and staff on implementing programs to meet those goals, while reflecting state and federal laws and regulations that govern public education.⁶³

Addressing board policy in support of SEL, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development recommends statements that:

- Set clear vision for students' comprehensive development;

⁵⁹ "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope," 25.

⁶⁰ Mark Greenberg, Joshua Brown, and Rachel Abenavoli, "Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools" (Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University, September 2016), <https://www.prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf450428-TeacherStress.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁶¹ "Building a Foundation for Hope," 8.

⁶² "Building a Foundation for Hope," 4.

⁶³ "The Board's Role in Policy Development," *Fundamentals of School Board Membership* (New Jersey School Boards Association, 2016), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/fundamentals-of-school-board-membership.pdf> (members-only, accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

- Encourage the continuous improvement of learning that advances strong relationships, personalized supports for students, and engaging and relevant learning opportunities;
- Promote the development of adult capacity to support students' social, emotional, and academic development, and
- Align resources efficiently and equitably to support the success of the whole student.⁶⁴

NJSBA Policy Services offers a sample discretionary policy addressing "*Mental Health and Well-Being*"⁶⁵ to local boards of education in New Jersey.

"The many challenges faced by schools adapting to...instruction during the pandemic have raised concerns about the mental health and well-being of students, school teachers and staff," noted NJSBA Policy Services staff in a February 2021 message to local school board members and administrators.

The NJSBA sample policy states that a safe and secure school climate promotes positive mental health and well-being for students and staff and supports student achievement. It further expresses the belief that social and emotional learning and character education strengthen social competencies that will empower students to connect across race, class, culture, language, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, and learning needs.

In addition, the sample policy directs the chief school administrator to integrate SEL and character education into all aspects of the educational program.

The NJSBA Committee urges local school boards to review its policies on SEL and mental health in light of the sample developed by NJSBA Policy Services.

⁶⁴ John Bridgeland *et al.*, "A Policy Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens" (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Jan. 15, 2019), http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/aspen_policy_final_withappendices_web_optimized.pdf, 14 (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁶⁵ "Mental Health and Wellbeing," File Code 5141.5, NJSBA Policy Services Clearinghouse (New Jersey School Boards Association, February 2021) <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/5141-5-mental-health-wellbeing-clearing-house.pdf>, (accessed Aug. 17, 2021).

THE ROLE OF ARTS EDUCATION IN SEL

RECOMMENDATION

As school districts revise their curricula to align with the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, they should consider using the Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework, which connects the artistic processes with social-emotional learning competencies.

Increasingly, educators have recognized the benefit of arts education to social-emotional learning and academic achievement. Today, the connection between the artistic processes and SEL competencies has become more significant due to the impact of the pandemic on students.

The number one priority of our schools as we emerge from the pandemic is the social emotional well-being of our students, faculty, and staff...

As we return to school, it is critical to remember that our students will not learn:

- *until they feel safe*
- *until they have a sense of belonging, and*
- *until they feel valued*
- *until they are heard*

That is why the intersection between music and arts education and social emotional learning will be so important as our students return to schools.⁶⁶

In a Fall 2020 *School Leader* article, nationally recognized leaders in arts education and SEL addressed an initiative to tap the unique synergy between the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts⁶⁷ and Social-Emotional Learning Skills, identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning⁶⁸ for the benefit of the state's K-12 students.



"I believe everyone will soon come to realize that our arts educators are the secret weapon to implementation of social-emotional learning in our schools."

—Dr. Maurice J. Elias⁶⁹

⁶⁶ James Weaver and Lynn Tuttle, "Student Well-Being: Social Emotional Learning and Music Education," Music Guidance and Resources (National Federation of State High School Associations, May 10, 2021), <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/student-well-being-social-emotional-learning-sel-and-music-education-return-to-music-resources/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁶⁷ Creating; Performing/Presenting/Producing; Responding, and Connecting

⁶⁸ The SEL competencies span the areas of Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, and Relationship Skills.

⁶⁹ From "Fostering Social-Emotional Learning through Arts Education," a presentation by Robert Morrison at the NJSBA Social and Emotional Learning Conference (New Jersey School Boards Association, Feb. 14, 2020), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NJSBA-SELArts-021420-pdf.pdf> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

"Schools have an obligation to prepare students for the tests of life and not just a life of tests, by taking SEL seriously. And that means ensuring systematic opportunities for students to engage in SEL," wrote Robert Morrison, director of Arts Ed NJ, and Dr. Maurice J. Elias, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, in an October 2020 article in NJSBA's *School Leader* magazine.

They emphasized how the visual and performing arts can provide such an opportunity.

*...one of the most important avenues for this to take place is in the visual and performing arts. The reason is obvious. It's hard to imagine students creating, presenting, performing, reviewing, responding to, and communicating about the arts in the absence of empathy, perspective taking, a sophisticated knowledge of emotions, and the emotion regulation, problem solving and relationship skills needed to do the work that artists must do.*⁷⁰ [Emphasis added.]

The initiative, *Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework*, was designed by a team of experts in SEL and Arts Education, with members drawn from SEL4NJ (the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey) and Arts Ed NJ (previously the New Jersey Arts Education Partnership).

Over an 18-month period [starting in early 2019], this task force explored all of the intersections between SEL and arts education through the lens of the arts education standards. This approach maintained the focus on the primary goal of teaching the arts while making a clear connection to SEL to inform [instruction]. This allowed the team to illuminate the inherent nature of SEL within arts education and how this can be activated in students intentionally.⁷¹

Compelling rationale for arts education utilizing SEL are:

- Purposeful integration of SEL into arts education will enrich the students' personal connection to the arts.
- The relationship built between arts teachers and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build school connectedness and foster empathy.
- The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to artistic excellence fosters resiliency both in and out of the arts classroom.
- Artistic creation fosters self-awareness and allows students to develop a greater sense of autonomy and emotional vocabulary.
- The collaborative community developed in the arts classroom welcomes discussions and an awareness of acceptance and embracing diversity.

⁷⁰ Morrison and Elias.

⁷¹ "Arts Education and Social and Emotional Learning Framework: A Synergistic Pairing," ArtsEdSEL (The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning, Sept. 8, 2020), <https://selarts.org/about/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

- Through the arts students learn the necessity of personal goal-setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop high standards for their artist endeavors and themselves.
- Arts education provides developmental experiences that actively allow students to practice and hone social emotional competencies.⁷²

“By connecting the new arts learning standards to the SEL competencies, along with examples of effective strategies, New Jersey arts educators and administrators will have a road map they may use to aid in the SEL integration process and our students, schools and communities will be the better for it,” explained Morrison and Elias in *School Leader*.⁷³

A State Board of Education directive requires school districts to align their curricula with the revised New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those for the Visual and Performing Arts. The deadline for implementation was extended to September 2022, due to the public health emergency.⁷⁴

“By encouraging your own district to embrace this approach, our schools and districts will accelerate the incorporation of SEL into the curriculum during the revision process in a way that underscores the inherent nature of SEL within the arts,” Morrison and Elias advised.⁷⁵

The NJSBA Committee encourages school districts to consider the components and principles of the *Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework* as they align the curriculum with the revised New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts and embed SEL and character development throughout the school program.

⁷² “Social and Emotional Learning and Arts Education,” September Forward (Arts Ed NJ, Aug. 10, 2021), <https://www.artsednj.org/september-forward/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷³ Morrison and Elias.

⁷⁴ “Resolution to Amend the 2020 New Jersey Learning Standards Curriculum Implementation Schedule,” State of New Jersey (New Jersey State Board of Education, May 5, 2021), <https://nj.gov/education/sbos/meetings/agenda/2021/May/public/5d%20Item%20D%20Resolution%20to%20Amend%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20New%20Jersey%20Student%20Learning%20Standards.pdf> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷⁵ Morrison and Elias.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATION

To meet the needs of the students most severely affected by the pandemic, educators should consider effective practices being implemented in New Jersey school districts, as well as guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education. Strategies may include accelerated learning, extended learning time and one-to-one tutoring, as well as enrichment in STEAM education and access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs and career-technical education pathways.

Conclusions drawn from nationwide data on learning during the pandemic range from overall progress in math and reading for the total student population⁷⁶ to lower achievement for all relative to pre-pandemic years.⁷⁷ Whether the various studies show progress or regression in learning for the total student population, they include a consistent finding:

The pandemic's impact has been far more negative for economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students with disabilities and English language learners than for the student population as a whole.

A June 2021 report by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, focuses on the disparity. "...there are two headlines about COVID-19's impact on America's students: First, the pandemic posed profound challenges for nearly all students and schools in every part of our country; and second, the disparities in students' experiences are stark. Those who went into the pandemic with the fewest opportunities are at risk of leaving with even less."⁷⁸

The USDOE report indicates the following:

- For many elementary and secondary school *students with disabilities*, COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education and related aids and services needed to support their academic progress and prevent regression. And there are signs that those disruptions may be exacerbating longstanding

⁷⁶ Sarah Schwartz, "'Learning Loss, in General, Is a Misnomer': Study Shows Kids Made Progress during Covid-19," Education Week (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., April 23, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/learning-loss-in-general-is-a-misnomer-study-shows-kids-made-progress-during-covid-19/2021/04> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷⁷ Lewis.

⁷⁸ "Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (U.S. Department of Education, June 9, 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>, 51 (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

disability-based disparities in academic achievement.

- Even before the pandemic, many *students learning English* struggled to participate on equal terms in the classroom as they confronted the dual challenge of mastering grade-level content while continuing to learn English. For many English learners, the abrupt shift to learning from home amid the challenges of the pandemic has made that struggle even harder.
- COVID-19 appears to have deepened the impact of disparities in access and opportunity facing many *students of color* in public schools, including technological and other barriers that make it harder to stay engaged in virtual classrooms.⁷⁹

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Based on their needs, students with disabilities have specific challenges that require interventions outlined in IEPs (Individualized Education Programs)⁸⁰ and 504 Plans.⁸¹ Delivering these services during school closings and periods of remote instruction have posed challenges to school districts and educators.

“As the Government Accountability Office detailed in fall 2020, the school districts they surveyed reported encountering ‘a variety of logistical and instructional factors [that] made it more difficult to deliver special education services during distance learning,’” the USDOE reports. “And for students whose needs require hands-on, face-to-face interaction—like occupational or physical therapy—COVID-19, in some cases, brought services to a stand-still.”⁸²

Nonetheless, in New Jersey, many school districts overcame obstacles.

In an interview published this summer in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, Dr. Michael Nicosia, director of special services for the Butler Public Schools,⁸³ described how the district overcame obstacles in the early days of the pandemic when remote provision of services was not permitted and, later, when virtual delivery was allowed.

“With virtual therapy not being an option, and in-person instruction also off the

⁷⁹ “Education in a Pandemic,” iv.

⁸⁰ Required by state and federal law, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the IEP is a “set of prescribed instructional activities and services developed by a child study team together with teaching staff and parents for the identified needs of a learning or physically disabled student.” From “Glossary of Education Terms and Acronyms” in *Fundamentals of School Board Membership*, NJSBA, 98 (members-only).

⁸¹ A 504 plan is a “set of accommodations, or changes in the classroom environment, to help your child follow the regular curriculum. It is less formal and involved than an IEP and does not change the instruction itself.” From “Special Education: A Glossary of Terms and Acronyms,” Exceptional Lives, Sept. 4, 2019. https://www.exceptionallives.org/blog/special-education-a-glossary-of-terms-and-acronyms?gclid=Ci0KCCQiwpl2IBhDkARIsAGVo0DIILHfjEGnZtwgiPrQ2VnTogvkUcdGNpEOeKrXiGMSY15b6uOrEtg8aAnMgEALw_wcB (accessed Aug. 20, 2021). It is based on Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1972 and implementing regulations.

⁸² “Education in a Pandemic,” 25.

⁸³ At the time of the interview Dr. Nicosia was transitioning to a new role as superintendent of the Bloomingdale Public Schools.

table, our therapists seamlessly pivoted to 'prevent regression' mode," Nicosia explained. "Individualized learning plans were created for each student, therapists held office hours for parents to provide training, and Google Classrooms were developed with a plethora of tasks and activities to target student goals."

When remote delivery was permitted, staff pivoted "seamlessly," he said.

"Green screens, which allowed added video effects, and boom cards (interactive lesson plans) were used to deliver therapy," Nicosia explained. "Our students' parents, grandparents and siblings, in a sense, became paraprofessionals who assisted with therapy sessions."⁸⁴

As the 2021-2022 academic year approaches, the USDOE provides the following direction to school districts:

Whether offering instruction online or in person, school districts must continue to provide special education and related services to eligible students with disabilities in accordance with the requirements of Section 504, which may include implementing an appropriately developed IEP. Districts should continue to provide these services in a way that protects the health and safety of students with disabilities and those who provide education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students.

Many disability-related accommodations, modifications, and services may be effectively provided in remote learning. These may include, for example, extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing.⁸⁵

In New Jersey, recently enacted laws respond to the pandemic's impact on special education students by extending age-eligibility for services and allowing parents to request grade retention for their child.

- Legislation enacted on June 16, 2021⁸⁶ allows schools to provide one year of additional or compensatory special education and related services to students with disabilities beyond the age of 21 (the current age limit for eligibility) through the 2022-2023 school year.

"The law requires boards of education to offer up to one year of additional or compensatory special education and related services, including transition services, to students with disabilities if a determination is made by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and the student's

⁸⁴ Alan Guenther, "Finding Solutions in the Fall for Special Education Students," *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/finding-solutions-in-the-fall-for-special-education-students/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

⁸⁵ "Education in a Pandemic," 52-53.

⁸⁶ "P.L. 2021, C.109 (S3434 2R)," Office of Legislative Services (State of New Jersey, June 16, 2021), https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/PL21/109_.HTM (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

parent that the student requires such additional or compensatory special education and related services,” states an Aug. 4, 2021 NJDOE memo to school district administrators.⁸⁷

Prior to enactment of the legislation, NJSBA successfully sought an amendment providing that the extension of services would be paid for by federal monies, rather than local or state funds.⁸⁸

- Signed into law on June 30, 2021, *P.L. 2021, c. 141* permits parents or guardians to request that their child repeat a grade during the 2021-2022 school year. The new law affects students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. Parents can submit a written request to the principal, asking to have their child held back.

The request must be evaluated by the school counselor, IEP team or child study team, and the student’s teachers, to determine whether holding the child back a year will meet the academic and social-emotional needs of the student.⁸⁹

- In June 2020, Governor Murphy signed legislation,⁹⁰ which established a Bridge Year Pilot Program for students who met graduation requirements in 2021 and 2022. The law, which allows students to defer graduation from high school for one year, also applies to special education students.

Implementation guidance from the New Jersey Department of Education states the following: “Students with disabilities who receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act must be granted the opportunity to participate in a district’s Bridge Year in accordance with federal and state special education requirements. Regarding Bridge Year’s age requirements...the department reminds districts that students with disabilities who have satisfied their state and local graduation requirements but may need an extra year of services, and will not turn 21 years old before June 30, may receive services for another year as determined by the student’s IEP team...”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kathy Ehling and Kevin Dehmer, “Implementing *P.L. 2021, C. 109*: Providing Additional or Compensatory Special Education and Related Services to Students with Disabilities,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, Aug. 4, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/aug/4/ImplementingPL2021c109-ProvidingAdditionalorCompensatorySpecialEducationandRelatedServicesToStudentswithDisabilities.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁸⁸ “Governor Signs Bill Extending Special Education Benefits for 8,700 Students,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, June 22, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-22-2021-vol-xliv-no-49/governor-signs-bill-extending-special-education-benefits-for-8700-students/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁸⁹ “Legislative Update: Murphy Signs Bill Permitting Parents to Ask that Their Child Repeat a Grade,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 14, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/july-13-2021-vol-xlv-no-1/legislative-update-murphy-signs-bill-permitting-parents-to-ask-that-their-child-repeat-a-grade-chapter-44-measure-signed-senate-approves-regionalization-bill/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

⁹⁰ “*P.L. 2020, C. 041* (s2383 SCS 1R),” Office of Legislative Services (State of New Jersey, June 26, 2020), https://www.nileg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/PL20/41_.HTM (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁹¹ “Bridge Year Pilot Program (*P.L. 2020, C.41*) Implementation Guidance,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, January 2021), https://www.nj.gov/education/covid19/boardops/docs/NJDOE_BridgeYearGuidance.pdf (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

For English learners, virtual instruction can cut off opportunities for academic progress, according to the USDOE Office of Civil Rights.

"In many cases, virtual learning effectively foreclosed opportunities for English learners to engage in English-language conversation with adults and with peers, receive intensive language instruction at frequent intervals, and encounter conversational and formal language in a range of social and academic contexts," states the USDOE in its June 2021 report.⁹²

"To meet their obligations under Federal law," the USDOE Office of Civil Rights advises, "the school districts must ensure that English learners have the language services and supports they need to promote their English language development and meaningfully access their content classes that are held remotely. And districts must ensure that parents, guardians, and caregivers have access to any information about district programs, services, or activities in a language they can understand.

"That includes information related to school health and safety measures, information about COVID-19 and actions the schools are taking in response to the pandemic, and information about remote learning and how to contact and communicate with teachers."⁹³

The New Jersey Department of Education's "Learning Acceleration Guide" cites innovative programs ("Principles in Action") implemented by the state's school districts to address the various challenges inherent in providing education during the pandemic. Examples include programs to engage English learners and their families and culturally responsive practices.⁹⁴

Members of the NJSBA Committee also shared local school district practices. For example, at Cliffside Park High School, where English learners comprise approximately 12% of the student population,⁹⁵ a variety of interventions was adapted to meet the needs of the students during the pandemic. Below is a description of the educational process for English learners, along with modifications adapted during remote instruction.

- To be placed correctly in the school program, incoming English learners are interviewed and tested remotely using WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment), which measures English-language development.
- Transcripts from the nation of origin are professionally translated to determine the students' academic foundation. Students with the greatest needs are placed in "sheltered classes," which provide push-in support (i.e., support in the general education classroom), preferably with a native-language-speaking teacher, who provides specific modifications for science,

⁹² Education in a Pandemic, 20.

⁹³ Education in a Pandemic, 51.

⁹⁴ Learning Acceleration Guide.

⁹⁵ "Fall Enrollment Reports, 2020-2021," New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, October 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/enr/index.shtml> (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

social studies and mathematics.

- At the beginning and middle of the year, teachers administer online diagnostic tests, which support and measure writing and critical thinking skills.
- Teachers also use a computer program to monitor students' use of online instructional vehicles.
- They use data-driven instruction. Based on data obtained from the assessments, students who are remote receive hard-copy, "leveled" learning materials, such as modified novels, workbooks, journals, and *Scholastic* magazines. (This aspect of the process also addresses the needs of students who have no computer devices at home.)
- Cliffside Park High School provides English learner SAT preparation. The students can use their specific language dictionaries and receive directions in their native language. In addition, the high school also offers a Students Interrupted Formal Education program for those with a measured gap in learning of at least two years below grade level.
- English learners may also participate in the Latino Promise Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, which offers an Associate's Degree for Spanish-speaking students and provides transition to a four-year degree program.
- English learners interested in trades, such as plumber or electrician, can advance to the Bergen County Adult Vocational Program after graduation.⁹⁶

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR

"Emerging evidence also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a strikingly negative impact on academic growth for many students of color, widening the pre-existing disparities...More recent evidence shows that the gap continued to widen sharply through winter 2021 for many Black and Latinx students," states the USDOE Office of Civil Rights in its "Education in a Pandemic Report."⁹⁷

The Office attributes the gap to lack of access to technology, internet and full-time in-person instruction, limited mental health services and greater vulnerability to the financial impact of the pandemic.⁹⁸

While showing achievement gains in math and reading for all students during the pandemic, an April 2021 report by Renaissance, a provider of student assessments, also indicates a slower rate of growth for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, as well as for English learners and students with disabilities.

"When you think about some of those communities, there have been really hard impacts of COVID. Education importantly is one of those..." said Katie McClarty,

⁹⁶ Information was provided by committee member Janes Gaffney. Mr. Gaffney is president of the Bergen County School Boards Association, a member of the Oakland Board of Education, and an administrator at Cliffside Park High School.

⁹⁷ *Education in a Pandemic*, 15.

⁹⁸ *Education in a Pandemic*, 11-14.

vice president of research and development for Renaissance, in an article published by *Education Week*.⁹⁹

CLOSING LEARNING GAPS/OVERCOMING BARRIERS

The NJDOE Learning Acceleration Guide places a strong focus on “safeguarding educational equity and access in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.” It cites several evidence-based practices for “creating access to and opportunity for a well-rounded education.”

- Leverage opportunities for extended learning, including extended day, summer learning programs, and one-on-one tutoring.
- Create summer programs that provide academic support and the ability for students to preview and be exposed to advanced content in upcoming courses.
- Offer enrichment activities that include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) experiences, career and technical programs, youth development, physical fitness and health education, and arts programs.
- Remove barriers by making programs free, inclusive, and supportive of families by including free transportation and meals.
- Implement policies that support the enrollment, placement, and credit accrual for students who frequently move among schools and LEAs.
- Provide push-in support or co-teaching for students with disabilities and English language learners in general education classrooms.
- Utilize evidence-based and research-based strategies to ensure that grade-level content is accessible for all students.
- Review policies around Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Career and Technical Education pathways, and dual enrollment to remove barriers and establish programs to provide students with meaningful support.¹⁰⁰

A number of New Jersey school districts have implemented strategies based on these concepts. For example, the Learning Acceleration Guide cites efforts by 13 New Jersey school districts to reach economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities, as well as acceleration efforts to address academic and social-emotional learning gaps among all students.

“While COVID-19 may have further limited those opportunities, a number of summer programs have recently been developed by New Jersey LEAs using federal funding to remove barriers to advanced coursework and prepare students for advanced coursework at the secondary level,” states the NJDOE Guide.¹⁰¹

Further examples can be found in an article in the Summer 2021 edition of NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, which focused on the efforts of three lower-income New Jersey school districts to address the technology gap, as well as strategies for the

⁹⁹ Schwartz.

¹⁰⁰ Learning Acceleration Guide, 13.

¹⁰¹ Learning Acceleration Guide, 12.

coming school year.¹⁰²

In April, the U.S. Department of Education issued a school reopening guide¹⁰³ that offers a framework for addressing learning gaps resulting from lost instruction time. It includes information on the following steps:

- Accelerating learning through instructional approaches, tutoring and expanded learning time.
- Supporting equitable access and effective use of technology.
- Using data to help target resources and support.
- Addressing resource inequity.

The pandemic's impact on learning can vary widely among school districts, schools and individual students. Therefore, the NJSBA Committee believes that strategies to address learning gaps among vulnerable populations must be determined locally, comply with state and federal requirements and, as appropriate, reflect guidance offered by the state and federal education agencies.

¹⁰² Alan Guenther, "A Quieter Evolution," *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/a-quieter-evolution/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

¹⁰³ "ED COVID-19 Handbook: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs," Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development (U.S. Department of Education, April 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf> (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

PLANNING, FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTING RECOVERY

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School districts should consider developing multi-year financial plans that extend beyond the expiration of American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding to ensure continuation of effective programs to meet students' post-pandemic learning needs.
- The planning, implementation and evaluation of district plans to address social-emotional and academic learning gaps should be based on proven practices that are inclusive and collaborative, enhance effective organization structures and promote healthy school climate and cultures.
- Schools should use the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding and related planning to ensure a continued focus on equity throughout the educational system.
- To ensure adequate transportation services when students return to school full-time, the federal and state governments should address the shortage of school bus drivers by revising requirements for the commercial drivers' license-acquisition process, removing requirements that are unnecessary for school bus drivers.

On Aug. 12, 2021, the U.S. Department of Education approved New Jersey's application¹⁰⁴ for the \$2.7 billion available to the state's local school districts¹⁰⁵ through the third round of federal coronavirus relief funding—the American Rescue Plan/Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund. (ARP/ESSER).¹⁰⁶ School districts must submit use-of-funds plans by Nov. 24, 2021.¹⁰⁷

“...the ARP ESSER requires [a school district] to reserve not less than 20 percent of

¹⁰⁴ Angelica Allen-McMillan, Ed.D., “State Plan for the American Plan Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund,” New Jersey Department of Education, July 26, 2021. <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/New-Jersey-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan-Final.pdf> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ “American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund: Mandatory Sub-Grant Awards as of May 18, 2021,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 18, 2021), https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/ARP_ESSER%20II%20Fund%20Allocation%20Table.pdf (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER), New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/arp/index.shtml> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹⁰⁷ Kathy Ehling and Kevin Dehmer, “American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Funds Application and Update,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 24, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/may/24/ARP-ESSERFundsApplicationandUpdate.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

its total ARP ESSER allocation to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student groups," states the New Jersey Department of Education's ARP/ESSR information page.¹⁰⁸

The remaining ARP ESSER funds may be applied toward the same uses as those allowed by the previous federal coronavirus relief packages, ESSER and ESSER II, according to an NJDOE fact sheet comparing the three programs.¹⁰⁹ Permitted uses include hiring new staff and avoiding layoffs, as well as social-emotional learning initiatives.¹¹⁰

When it announced its approval of the New Jersey plan on Aug. 12, the USDOE referenced three areas of focus for state:

- Supporting Students Most Impacted by the Pandemic
- Addressing the Academic Impact of Lost Instructional Time
- Investing in Summer Learning and Expanded Afterschool Programs¹¹¹

ENSURING EQUITY

Much of the research considered by the NJSBA Committee finds that the pandemic has magnified past inequities in the provision of education. Both the USDOE and the New Jersey Department of Education have stressed the use of ARP/ESSER funds to advance equity.

"[NJDOE] will provide guidance and technical assistance on the use of ARP ESSER funds that highlight how allowable activities may be used to advance educational equity," states the federal education department's announcement of the approval of the New Jersey plan. "As part of their ARP ESSER Use of Funds application, [local education agencies] will be required to provide information on their plans to use ARP ESSER funds to implement an equitable and inclusive return to in-person instruction."¹¹²

The American Rescue Plan Act includes "maintenance of equity" provisions:

¹⁰⁸ American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief.

¹⁰⁹ "Comparison of ESSER Fund (CARES Act), ESSER II Fund (CRRSA Act), and ARP ESSER (ARP Act)," New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 24, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/ESSERFactSheet.pdf> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹¹⁰ A list of the 16 "Allowable Uses of Funds" by local school districts is available on the New Jersey Department of Education's ARP ESSER webpage at <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/arp/index.shtml>. (Scroll down to the "Allowable Uses of Funds for LEA" bar and click on the arrow at right to see the full list.)

¹¹¹ "U.S. Department of Education Approves New Jersey's Plan for Use of American Rescue Plan Funds to Support K-12 Schools and Students, Distributes Remaining \$923 Million To State" (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-approves-new-jerseys-plan-use-american-rescue-plan-funds-support-k-12-schools-and-students-distributes-remaining-923-million-state> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹² U.S. Department of Education Approves New Jersey's Plan, Aug. 12, 2021.

Maintenance of equity provisions will help ensure that schools and [districts] serving large proportions of historically underserved groups of students—including students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness—receive an equitable share of State and local funds as the Nation continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact.¹¹³

In a May 2021 posting, the Education Resource Center stated that, in light of the pandemic, the “depth, breadth, and inequity of student need is greater than ever before” and advised an “equity-centered approach to understanding federal education stimulus dollars.” Its major points include:

- Deeply understand how student need has changed during and as a result of COVID, and use this information to drive ESSER spending decisions.
- Target new ESSER funds to schools and students with the greatest needs.
- Use ESSER funds to disrupt long-standing inequities that existed long before COVID...¹¹⁴

FORMING A LONG TERM PLAN

A June 2021 working paper published by the Brookings Institute characterizes the pandemic's economic impact as the deepest worldwide global recession since World War II. It cites estimates of slow recovery through 2025, along with employment losses, declines in economic spending and deterioration of local economic conditions in the United States.¹¹⁵

As they plan strategies to address post-pandemic academic and social-emotional learning, including the use of federal ARP/ESSER funds, school districts should be mindful of economic trends and the health emergency's financial impact on their students and families.

A January 2021 study published by Education Resource Strategies provides an early estimate of the cost of academic recovery. Nationwide, on average, a strategy involving increased learning time and social-emotional supports would cost approximately \$12,000 to \$13,500 per pupil over five years, or an average increase of approximately \$2,500 per pupil per year.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ “FAQ: Maintenance of Equity Requirements,” American Rescue Plan/Elementary and Secondary School Relief Program (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 6, 2021), https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/08/Maintenance-of-Equity-updated-FAQs_final_08.06.2021.pdf (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁴ “An Equity-Centered Approach to Investing Federal Education Stimulus Dollars,” Education Resource Strategies: Urban School Resource Organization and Transformation (ERS, May 17, 2021), <https://www.erstrategies.org/news/blog/equity-centered-approach-stimulus-dollars> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁵ Eduardo Levy Yeyati and Federico Filippini, “Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19” (Brookings Institute, June 9, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Social-and-economic-impact-COVID.pdf> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁶ Tiffany Zhou, Tomas Molino, and Jonathan Travers, “The Cost of COVID: Understanding the Full Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Districts and Schools” (Education Resource Strategies, Jan. 13, 2021), <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/4709-cost-of-covid-updated-2.pdf> (Aug. 23, 2021).

The ERS report also cites “the new triple squeeze” facing school districts:

- New costs for both remote and in-person instruction
- Declining revenue
- Greater student needs.

For many New Jersey school districts, the 2021-2022 state budget, signed June 29, offers some respite from revenue concerns by providing a \$578 million increase in formula aid. The state funding increase is largely due to the infusion of federal aid through the American Rescue Plan and the previous sale of bonds.¹¹⁷ Additionally, school districts statewide are eligible for the \$2.7 billion in federal APR/ESSER subgrants, which can be released through September 2024.

Nonetheless, the need for programs and services to address the impact of the pandemic on all students—and to resolve past inequities exacerbated by the health emergency—may extend well into the future. Therefore, the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning believes that school district fiscal plans must provide for continuation of effective programs after the federal emergency funding expires.

AFTER ARP FUNDS EXPIRE: HAVE A PLAN

During discussions at planning meetings on local district use of the ARP funds, hosted by the New Jersey Department of Education this summer, stakeholders addressed key strategies:

- Developing five-year financial plans that, at a minimum, encompass the year following the closing of the ARP/ESSER funding window.
- Throughout each year, creating priority lists of items for consideration that clearly identify “needs/musts” rather than “wants/additional programs.”

Questions to Guide Local School District Development of Plans

Based on discussions at NJDOE strategy meetings

- | | |
|---|--|
| • What is the current financial state of the school district? <ul style="list-style-type: none">– What are short-term versus long-term needs?– What is the status of the district strategic action plan? | – Are programs being planned to specifically address COVID-related impacts? |
| • Where does the school district invest its funds? | – Will these programs also have sunset provisions? |
| • How can the district maximize the impact of the federal ESSER funds? | • What supports for students, teachers, and families were in place prior to the pandemic? What new supports are being considered for these sub-groups? |
| • What is the balance of investing in normal, regularly recurring operations <i>versus</i> the funding of new programs? <ul style="list-style-type: none">– How/will these new programs be funded when federal funds cease? | • How is the district re-thinking the delivery of education based on lessons learned during the pandemic and the needs of 21st Century learners? |

¹¹⁷ “New State Budget Contains \$125 Million More to Meet Extraordinary Special Education Costs,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 13, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-29-2021-vol-xliv-no-50/new-state-budget-contains-125-million-more-to-meet-extraordinary-special-education-costs/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

In addition to guidance offered by the state and federal education departments, the experience of the district's student population should factor into local plans to address post-pandemic learning needs, including the use of the federal ESSER funds, the NJSBA Committee believes. It suggests a process to identify student needs, effective strategies, opportunities for additional instructional time, and costs.

FOUR STEPS TO PLANNING*

- Identify individual and group learning gaps through analysis of formative assessments. This information will enable educators to assess student progress toward meeting standards and determine where they would have been without disruptions caused by the pandemic.
- Determine the most effective instructional strategies to address gaps by recognizing the learning styles of individual students.
- Identify the learning opportunities, practices and programs that can provide additional instructional time during and beyond the school day, including weekends and summer vacations.
- Determine the costs based on programming needs.

* Based on Discussion of the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning

A STUDIED AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

In developing plans to address learning gaps, school districts should consider taking a studied approach to decision-making, while considering the concerns and viewpoints of employees and management, the NJSBA Committee believes.

One strategy involves the use of the four frames of organizational leadership, introduced in 1991 by Lee Bolman, an author and educator, and Terrence Deal, an expert on leadership. The four frames can serve as guideposts in identifying efforts to address learning gaps.

Each of the frames addressed by Bolman and Deal—*human resources, politics, symbolism and structure*¹¹⁸—provides an opportunity to examine the challenges of post-pandemic learning gaps and social-emotional learning. The process can give school district leaders the opportunity to develop values, programs and analyses of outcomes that advance academic achievement and social-emotional learning.

- The *structural frame* speaks to control that is either too loose or too tight and how structural change is episodic.
- The *human resource frame* allows the end-user to examine how *people* impact the success of the organization.
- Examining *symbolism*, when considering the importance of perception, offers leaders the ability to comprehensively approach an issue.

¹¹⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 4th edition. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008).

- The *political frame* provides an example of what takes place when factions of stakeholders coordinate on an issue.

Viewing challenges through the four frames can promote a deeper understanding of organizational behavior and guide a school district through complex issues.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

Referencing the work of the New Jersey Labor-Management Collaborative,¹¹⁹ the NJSBA Committee also agrees that the more inclusive and collaborative the processes used to develop plans to close learning gaps, the greater they will be embraced and implemented with fidelity. Therefore, school boards, educators, central office administrators and building administrators must all be included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of efforts to address academic and SEL learning gaps.

Positive outcomes from labor-management collaboration include improving student achievement, boosting school safety, and reducing staff turnover. Although the pandemic has put a strain on schools, districts participating in the New Jersey Labor-Management Collaborative have been able to respond more favorably to the challenges because they had collaborative structures in place.¹²⁰

Based on its review and discussions, the NJSBA Committee believes districts with current multi-year strategic plans—especially those that have reviewed and revised those plans based on post-pandemic needs—are better positioned to maximize the use of ESSER funds.

TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES 2021-2022

With all students expected to attend school full-time and in-person this fall, the NJSBA Committee also considered the transportation challenges facing school districts.

Prior to the pandemic, a number of school districts and bus contractors across New Jersey indicated that they were experiencing difficulties securing an adequate number of bus drivers to meet their transportation needs.

¹¹⁹ "Program on Collaborative School Reform," Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations (Rutgers University), <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/faculty-research/center-study-collaboration-work-and-society/program-collaborative-school-reform> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

Founded in 2014, the initiative facilitates collaboration among unions and management at the state and district levels to strengthen and improve teaching and learning. The collaborative includes the NJSBA, the NJEA, AFTNJ, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association and Rutgers University. Dr. Saul Rubinstein, director of the Center for the Study of Collaboration in Work and Society at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, spearheaded the project.

¹²⁰ "U.S. Education Secretary to Attend N.J. Public Schools Labor-Management Collaborative Conference," *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, March 16, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/march-16-2021-vol-xliv-no-35/u-s-education-secretary-to-attend-n-j-public-schools-labor-management-collaborative-conference/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

"In February [2020], *School Transportation News* reported that 80% of school bus companies and school districts surveyed were having trouble finding enough drivers," states NJSBA's first report on education during the pandemic, "Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools."¹²¹

Concern continued during the pandemic. According to NJSBA's second report on education during the pandemic, "Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children," over one-quarter of superintendents and school business administrators responding to a survey anticipated a shortage of school bus drivers.¹²²

Most recently, NJSBA's *School Board Notes*¹²³ and the *NJ.com* news website¹²⁴ featured articles focusing on the bus driver shortage facing many of the state's school districts as they reopen for the 2021-2022 school year.

To drive a school bus, an individual needs a commercial drivers' license with school bus endorsement. One reason for the shortage is a lack of available individuals with commercial drivers' licenses, according to the *NJ.com* article. Growing demand among online retailers for delivery persons with CDLs has contributed to the shortage for schools.

Previous NJSBA reports indicate that the shortage could be eased with changes in the lengthy process for securing a CDL to drive a school bus.

"A number of school officials cited the need to change regulations pertaining to school bus driver certification," states NJSBA's August 2020 report.¹²⁵ "However, changing regulation does not mean eliminating necessary security and safety procedures, but rather eliminating unnecessary requirements... A concern has been expressed that some CDL requirements—for example, training in the repair of buses and ability to make such repairs—are not applicable to driving a school bus and slow down the licensing process."

The National School Transportation Association, which represents school bus contractors, has been "lobbying the federal government to allow a license just for school bus drivers that would remove a repair-oriented, under-the-hood vehicle inspection requirement under the CDL test that is only relevant to long-haul truckers," according to an Aug. 12, 2021 ABC News report.¹²⁶

¹²¹ "Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools," New Jersey School Boards Association, May 20, 2020, <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SearchingForNewNormal.pdf>, 20 (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²² "Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children," New Jersey School Boards Association, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/August-31-FINAL.pdf>, 6 (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²³ "National School Bus Driver Shortage Affecting New Jersey Schools," *School Boards Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, Aug. 24, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/august-24-2021-vol-xlv-no-4/national-school-bus-driver-shortage-affecting-new-jersey-schools/> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

¹²⁴ Larry Higgs, "Bus Driver Shortage Has Schools Changing Schedules, Putting Teachers behind the Wheel," *nj.com* (New Jersey Advance Media, Aug. 20, 2021), <https://www.nj.com/news/2021/08/bus-driver-shortage-has-schools-changing-schedules-putting-teachers-behind-the-wheel.html> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²⁵ *Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children*.

¹²⁶ Meredith Deliso, "Why School Districts Nationwide Are Facing Bus Driver Shortages," ABC News, Aug. 12, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/school-districts-nationwide-facing-bus-driver-shortages/story?id=79124876> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

Other reasons for the driver shortage include layoffs and furloughs during periods of school closings, which resulted in a number of employees not returning, and concern among older drivers about exposure to COVID-19.¹²⁷ In addition to changing the CDL requirements for school bus drivers, possible strategies to address the problem may include changing school starting and ending times to increase the number of routes covered by a single driver and vehicle, increasing shared services with neighboring districts and/or through educational services commissions,¹²⁸ and restructuring jobs into full-time positions.¹²⁹

The NJSBA Committee agrees with findings of the Association's previous reports, which support changes to streamline the CDL-acquisition process for school bus drivers that would not impair student safety.

¹²⁷ Dalia Faheid, "Bus Driver Shortages Worsening for Many Districts as Schools Reopen," *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., May 21, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/bus-driver-shortages-worsening-for-many-districts-as-schools-reopen/2021/05> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²⁸ Higgs.

¹²⁹ Faheid.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

RECOMMENDATION

In developing programs to address post-pandemic education, local boards of education should review recommendations and suggestions contained in the New Jersey School Boards Association's research reports on school safety, special education, student achievement, mental health and the career-focused learner, as well as the five reports on education during the pandemic that have been issued since May 2020.

Today, New Jersey's local school districts have a unique opportunity: Taking the lessons learned from the pandemic—that is, the experiences of school leaders, educators, students and their families—and transforming them into strategies to ensure that we continue to provide for the growth, learning and well-being of all of our students.

The New Jersey School Boards Association produced this report with two goals in mind: to provide guidance to those districts that are in the process of developing plans to address gaps in learning and the use of federal emergency funds, and to support districts that have adopted strategies to enhance social-emotional learning and character development, learning acceleration, and related practices.

District planning should encompass many components, including:

- Communication that is transparent and honest and considers the numerous challenges that students, their families and educators must confront.
- A culture of caring that emphasizes empathy.
- Information for parents about programs, practices, and progress.
- Professional learning opportunities in social-emotional learning and academic practices.
- Consideration of the growing body of research on the positive impact of formal collaboration on learning, school culture, teacher retention, and climate.

These principles are not new. They are reflected in the findings and recommendations of NJSBA's body of research, starting with the 2013 report "Special Education: A Service, Not a Place" and continuing with projects on school safety, student achievement, the career-focused learner, and mental health services in our schools, right up to our current series on education during the pandemic.

In addition to reviewing the resources listed throughout this document, school leaders should review the suggestions and recommendations contained in the

NJSBA's reports as they assess their districts' programs during this unique period of opportunity. (All of the NJSBA research projects can be accessed at www.njsba.org/research-projects.)

Effective planning requires us to take an unvarnished look at the impact of the pandemic on our students' academic progress and social emotional health. However, we should also recognize—and celebrate—the accomplishments of the past 18 months and the work of our students, teachers, school administrators, and board of education members. The work of rebuilding opportunities for students has begun.

RESOURCES

Reports, articles, briefing papers and other sources used in this report are listed below. The works cited directly in the report appear in **bold**. However, all sources listed were considered by the NJSBA Committee when developing findings and recommendations.

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- Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide (Oct. 23, 2020)
- Choosing the Best 'Road Back' for Our Children (Aug. 31, 2020)
- Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health (Jan. 27, 2021)

All NJSBSA research reports are accessible at <https://www.njsba.org/research-projects>.

IDENTIFYING ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS

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October 19, 2021

**SPAN Parent Advocacy Network Comments to the
Joint Committee on Public Schools**

The SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is a 33-year-old non-profit organization focused on empowering families and engaging professionals to ensure that all children and families receive the services and support they need to flourish and thrive. We serve as New Jersey's federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC), Family to Family Health Information Center, Parent to Parent program, and Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health State Organization and are also funded by the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide technical assistance and support to the network of almost 100 parent centers and 59 Family to Family Health Information Centers around the country.

In our role as the PTIC we receive thousands of calls and contacts for technical assistance, information, resources and training from both parents and the professionals that support them. We are here today to share some of what we are hearing from the field.

First, there still seems to be a lot of confusion and mixed messages with parents' understanding of the legislation that required the consideration of expanded eligibility for students with disabilities who were transitioning out of their education entitlement. Equally difficult have been families' attempts to secure compensatory education for inadequate or undelivered services.

We have received multiple calls regarding transportation issues for both general and special education students. This issue calls for a systemic approach versus each school district trying to figure it out on their own. There was a shortage of bus drivers before the pandemic, and this has only exacerbated the problem. Districts have tried different approaches, but they do not always work for all families. Aid in lieu of transportation is great if you have the ability to provide that transportation, but we are hearing from some families who are also being required to obtain an umbrella insurance policy if they are going to transport their student and be reimbursed for it. Bus passes or other mass transit where it is available is fine if that student can travel independently. But that is not the case for younger students or many students with disabilities. Besides the issue of affordability, how many parents can spend an hour or two taking their child to school and then returning to pick them up each day? It is not conducive to most work schedules. Again, for students with disabilities who are not educated in their neighborhood school, the trip back and forth to an out of district school could involve hours of travel for the parent.

We agree that most students need to be in classrooms with their peers for the most successful learning experience. The announcement that all schools and all students had to be in person all day has caused a great deal of consternation for families across the state, especially for families of children with mental health issues, anxiety, school phobia, bullying, and safety concerns, not to mention those students or family members with compromised immune systems. Many families requested that a virtual or hybrid learning experience continue for this year. Some were just flatly denied, saying their hands were tied and they could not offer it. Other families reported information being relayed on how to obtain home instruction if they did not want their student to attend school in person. Let me note some barriers requiring documentation from doctors and then approval from the school physician. Some calls were about refusal for home instruction requests without any avenue for appealing

the decision. The minimum requirement for students with IEPs is ten hours of home instruction per week; for

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students without IEPs it is only 5 hours. Even though that is explained as the floor or minimum requirement, the fact is that is what most schools deliver to these students. We have also heard from families concerned about sending their children to school that they could dis-enroll their students and home school them if they wished, or they were threatened with being reported to child protective services or truancy officer for absence from school.

We are also hearing about shortages of both teaching, related service providers and support staff. Students not always being in typical classroom settings but relegated to larger rooms where they can be supervised by fewer staff – and not with certified staff and not participating in a direct instruction model. IEP services not being delivered.

We continue to be concerned about the lack of transition planning for students returning to school. This again is especially difficult for many students with disabilities. Many of the students, and staff for that matter, have experienced loss, isolation, socioeconomic concerns and countless other traumas. Trauma informed practices in schools as well as promised social emotional and mental health programs or supports are either not accessible or not apparent to families. These programs cannot be sporadic across the state but need to be an investment in children across the board.

Although it is impossible to address all of the calls we get in 3 minutes of testimony, I include in these written comments some of what we have received from parents with the personally-identifying information redacted. We do understand that this public health emergency has created huge issues, but we remain confident that they can be addressed with robust partnership including all stakeholders. We emphasize that the calls we are receiving cover all types of students, but disproportionately those students and families who were already hurt most by the pandemic – students with disabilities and special healthcare needs, students of color, immigrant and English language learning students, low income students, and others who have the most to lose if we do not provide what they need to recover and thrive.

We very much appreciate the invitation to share our experiences and we look forward to assisting in any way we can. Thank you for your commitment to New Jersey's students and families.

Respectfully submitted,
Peg Kinsell, Policy Director
SPAN Parent Advocacy Network
201-724-4454
pkinsell@spanadvocacy.org
www.spanadvocacy.org

Some additional input received from the special education roundtable participants:

- student performance data shows severe learning loss for students, particularly for students with disabilities, English learners, students of color, and young children, and school districts are not mobilizing resources and funding to provide accelerated learning/tutoring services to those who need them
- students are academically behind and yet district are conducting "business as usual" as if the pandemic did not happen and there was no unfinished learning/COVID slide;
- teachers have been frequently absent, and substitute teachers are "warm bodies" in the classroom hence missed instructional time and further regression for students;
- districts are not addressing the effects of long periods of social isolation on students' mental health and social emotional well-being;
- the IEPs are not being implemented as agreed upon. The districts are stating the services are dependent upon schedules, staffing, etc. which is not true. Parents do not know/understand how to assert their rights and rely on the districts for information/answers. There is a huge problem with districts misinforming parents about the special education rules and violating their due process rights;
- parents cannot get the district to respond to their attempts for contact/information. District staff simply does not return calls/ignores parent communication;
- districts are not communicating with families who are not English speakers; there is no interpretation available and often information is shared only in English, including homework, letters from the school, etc.

Here is what I have experienced on the warmline calls.

Transportation issues- districts have told parents they cannot provide busing; no option for virtual if the child cannot get to school.

Children are having behavior issues, and districts are not performing FBA's and adding PBS in IEP's and looking first to send the child/youth to an ODP.

My son is immune compromised. Our principal required a doctor's note for Aiden which we got in the hopes they could figure out a plan for him but still no plans were made for him. I was left with 2 choices and 2 days to decide.

I either send him to school and risk his life or I remove him from the school and teach him completely on my own with ZERO help from the school. So here we are stumbling through not knowing if we are on trend with what his classmates are learning in school. He is 8 years old and already being let down by the adults who should be doing the complete opposite. Virtual choice until the at risk children could be vaccinated should have been a no brainer.

To start off my oldest child is 15 in 10th grade and has an IEP. He has a learning disability, anxiety, depression, mood disorder and ADD . Right when the schools closed from COVID and we all went virtual my son expressed his wish to take his life

We immediately got him therapy and worked through healing him. The fact that he was able to continue to do school virtually literally saved his life and got my son to a better mental health status and better education. He excelled these last two years in virtual and so many of his anxieties were gone and he was able to focus on his work and do what he needed to do in a comfortable and safe environment. As the start of the school year was approaching and we still had no option to select virtual my child became extremely anxious.

My son told me the day before school started for him (he went 1 week after school started because we were quarantined from a close contact) that being back in the school building he felt was going to take him back to the place in his head that made him want to take his life. I did look into every option of doing virtual but I literally cannot afford it and he would lose his IEP along with all his much needed therapies he gets with it. I immediately emailed his school psychologist and advised her what he said and I asked to look I to home Instruction for Him and was told they would get back to me about it. I was never approved or never told about the

process of how to even go about doing it. Last Friday my son had a complete meltdown about having to be in person in school and once again threatened to take his life. The stress and anxiety that being in person does to him is horrific and to see him at his complete worst fight Seeing my son standing in the kitchen wielding the biggest knife he could find out of my butcher block was like a knife going through my heart. Can you imagine how that made me feel?

Not only is he struggling with his mental health he is also petrified of Covid and being in person magnifies all of these fears, these anxieties and struggles that he faces. Where is his reopening plan?

My son has been out of school for one week struggling with his mental health while we get him set up with a program that's a partial hospitalization program and I'm already getting calls from the vice principal telling me that he's missed too much school. A virtual option would avoid all of this and to be threatened about an attendance policy while my child is struggling with mental

health. It is absurd. How do you think as a mother I feel having no other choice but to send my child to school and now have him want to take his life because of it? Could you possibly imagine what that feels like? This is a child that needs to finish out his education and graduate with a true virtual option only and not in person.

We have had a very overwhelming few weeks with our kids being under home instruction, it has been rough. Not being able to get the full education for Our sons has been very difficult, we are trying our very best to make it work. This isn't what our sons deserve for education. Not being able to participate in person because of their disabilities is quite unfair for the schools district not to open other options. This is definitely a very restricted environment and our children should be considered more than just at home instruction. I do hope that other options are offered to families. This is concerning, soon we will have to request for extensions for at home instruction due to the fact that it is only good for 60 to 90 days.

Thank you for caring for all families, this is very much appreciated.

If our children matter to you in the slightest you need to speak up for us. Homeschooling is not the right answer for us and neither is in person learning. Masking and vaccinating will not change this for our family and it will not make us feel safer

In relationship to the reopening of schools: 1. Due to the bussing crisis parents are struggling to get their children to school and some Individuals with disabilities are not getting the transportation support services creating a repel effect on attendance, mental health. 2. For children who attend school they are recognizing learning loss, anxiety and depression, lack of trauma informed teachers, low self-esteem.

3. We are in an educational crisis, family dynamics have changed due to the pandemic (loss of job, and homeless), Children are easily startled, due to the lack of parallel play and are failing to thrive.

Thanks so much for hearing the voice of the community.

7lox

To Whom it May Concern;

Here is a brief summary of why this school year's reopening plan is a failure to my children and many more. How No virtual and Homebound instruction is the most restrictive environment and how the impacts of not having a virtual component can be for my special needs and compromised children.

I am the mother of three children. Two of them have IEP's. One has a very intensive IEP and the other has slowly transitioned over the years and his IEP is limited.

My middle child does not have an IEP. However all three of my children are having impacts from the school reopening plan for the 2021-2022 school year. I have two children that are at high risk. My middle child a Premie has Moderate Persistent Asthma, polyclonal gammopathy, non reactive antibodies, pneumococcal deficiency and renal issues, had she not been virtual these last year I have no doubt he/she would be hospitalized by now, she does not have an IEP.

My other high risk child, my youngest, my other Premie has multiple severe forms of epilepsy and ones involving rare brain diseases. He cannot be subjected to any potential person that can spread covid vaccinated or not. He does have an extensive IEP.

My oldest for years he has struggled in person. A young man who has High Functioning Autism and struggled academically, socially and with his health when in person. For the 2020-2021 School Year he made the Honor Roll all four marking periods. Prior to covid he was lucky to pass a class. My child struggled in person. This child was bullied and harassed daily. Does he not matter either? He was engaged, he participated, he thrived in that world and it was taken away with the Reopening plan that was given. He enjoyed every moment of being Virtual after IDA hit until October with his classmates and teachers.

Two of my children are very compromised and I had to apply for Homebound Instruction, this service is not guaranteed. I am glad my district chose to take my children's health risks seriously enough to give us some safety from in person learning. However it is the Most Restrictive Environment Virtual during 2020-2021 was very successful for us it was not restrictive at all to my children. They thrived, had perfect attendance, made the Honor Roll and my child with the most intensive IEP made 22 IEP goals. Something NEVER achieved in person. The environment they had last year worked.

My children work after 3pm with a single teacher. The children with therapy have to be available during school hours for therapies. From 8am to 8pm we are at home with very minimal interaction. By the time the children are done with their school work, all their friends are already getting ready for the next day. Their friends get out by 3=4pm and mine just begin their days.

Where is their reopening plan? Knowing how parents send their children to school sick does not allow for a safe in person learning environment for my children. Why are these other viruses going around the schools if masks work? While I know I feel safer with a mask it is not stopping the spread of anything in school Why? Because parents send their kids sick because of ridiculous attendance policies.

Some children do not matter weighs on the Students, Parents and Teachers and is only a short term fix and everyone should be calling to fix this wrong. We need options that keep our kids safe while still being educated properly.

I wish to acknowledge our District for doing an outstanding job trying to educate our children. My children and their Instructors for home instruction virtually do amazing jobs. However this could have been better served as a virtual option included with their classmates through the school day. We thank god every day our District cares about our children and that they have the balls to stand up to the Governor for being ridiculous and making assumptions that all kids need to be in person.

If our children matter to you in the slightest you need to speak up for us. Homeschooling is not the right answer for us and neither is in person learning. Masking and vaccinating will not change this for our family and it will not make us feel safer. How would you feel if you had children in this situation?

Parents of children with IEP's, 504's, IHP's and parents of children without were forced to send their children in person or remove them to homeschool. Parents are emailing us daily with the Covid cases in their schools from the notifications they receive via school emails and it seems as though no one cares for their concerns. Some parents have no communication that their child was potentially exposed to covid. Many of them have children who were denied Homebound Instruction who have legitimate medical concerns and were denied accommodations. Denied their child with a transplant, heart condition, being compromised and the list goes on. Parents who themselves may be at risk for their children were denied as well and had to send them in because they felt that they could not educate them at home.

Our children are not one size fits all and neither is their education. The one size fits all agenda is not for our children. Reopening plans failed to follow covid guidelines, failed to provide an equal right to an appropriate education and many parents are being subjected to visits by Child Protection Service and the Police. Is this fair? Is this an appropriate thing to do when Parents are choosing to keep the children safe? Children of all walks of life and all learning abilities are being affected by IN person learning or being on Homebound Instruction.

Parents should have the say of what kind of education and where their children receive that education only. We understand many did not do well and they should go in person, however many need better options than what is being given to them. It is not fair, it is not right and it by far is not an appropriate education.

Many children with special needs and compromised health are being denied a free and appropriate education. Education is not One Size fits all and neither are our children. This is why we have IEP's and 504's. Every family in New Jersey should have had a choice and not someone else doing it for them. It was unfair, wrong and a disaster.

I am aware of Covid-19, and the various variants and the increasing numbers of people, minors, that are being infected/affected. I do not feel comfortable sending my children to school knowing all of this. I have 3 Special Needs children with IEP and 2 General Education children.

The students are allowed to remove their masks during mealtime. Can they not contract Covid-19 or any of the other variants during this time? I do not want my children to contract Covid-19 or any of the other variants. My children do not want to contract Covid-19 or any of the other variants. They just want to learn.

I live in a town where I am eligible for free public schools, offering live teaching (as expected). I should not have to seek other equivalent online (because of my valid concerns for my childrens' safety) learning options (paid) that may or may not offer live teaching, when my children already live in NJ and are eligible for free education with live teachers.

The only setback to their current schools is, "Virtual" has been removed as an option. Even a virtual option without live teachers are not being offered by New Jersey, for free. Why??

Please advocate for me as a New Jersey parent, that I am allowed the option to choose "Virtual or Virtual with live instruction" as the preferred learning option for my children, beginning as soon as possible.

I have a seven year old typical child named and a five year old with Down Syndrome named. When she was born she had to spend a few days in NICU because she couldn't breathe on her own. As an infant she was hospitalized for bronchiolitis for ten days in PICU.

Later she developed Infantile Spasms, which after treated, left her with global developmental delays. She had a few more hospital stays because she had a hard time breathing after getting an upper respiratory infection. Last year she was hospitalized in January and then on February after developing pneumonia. The

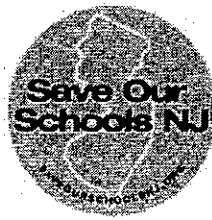
in the process of requesting home instruction

Since March 2020 until May of this year, my family and I have been sheltering in place. We didn't receive any visitors and only went out to doctors appointments. Thank God none of us got sick. We have been vaccinated. Survived a fire to our apartment a subsequent move but now faced with no real good choice for education. If we were given the option to do remote learning until our kids were fully vaccinated against covid-19 we would have taken it. I know we are risking our kids health for the sake of their social and emotional well being but that shouldn't be the case. By the way both schools have different protocols when it comes to Covid exposure. I wish they had given us the option to keep our kids home at least those who are immunocompromised.

These are but a few examples of what we are receiving at SPAN. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or would like to discuss further.

Peg Kinsell, Policy Director SPAN Parent Advocacy Network
pkinsell@spanadvocacy.org
4454

201-724-



Julie Larrea Borst
julieborst@saveourschoolsnj.org

19 October 2021

Joint Committee on the Public Schools

Thank you to the Committee for the invitation to provide testimony today. My name is Julie Borst and I am the executive director of Save Our Schools NJ Community Organizing. Save Our Schools NJ is a grassroots organization of 37,000 parents and other public education supporters across the state who believe that all children in New Jersey should have access to a high-quality public education.

I'd like to first recognize the incredibly difficult work that teachers and administrators have done over the last 18 months. We see you and we thank you.

All during the height of the pandemic, while students were learning from home, the state and national narrative was that this time could, and should, be used to rethink and reimagine what public education looks like. That has not happened.

(See Linda Darling Hammond's Top 10 Policy Moves for examples:

<https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/covid-new-deal-education-top-10-state-policy-moves>)

We are missing the opportunity to rethink how we educate our children.

We hear a lot from parents and caregivers.

Testing. In spite of calls of concern for the social emotional health of students (and the adults in the building), they were greeted back to school with standardized testing. Thankfully, a much shorter version than NJSLA, but still a test that's been advertised to detect "learning loss." The Start Strong test has yet to be validated and it appears to be administered differently from district to district. We have reports from parents that their children who are in classes like Algebra 2, are being given the Algebra 2 test. What does anyone hope to gain by giving a test to students who have been in a class for less than 8 weeks is anyone's guess. Meanwhile, other districts are appropriately giving the test that corresponds the math class the student took the year before. When the reporting of the scores come out, expect the data to be entirely skewed. We hope that these scores do not end up in QSAC. And since Start Strong is being used for some form of federal compliance as a summative test, it's magically both formative and

80x

summative.

In younger grades, that aren't subject to the state standardized testing, little ones are doing standardized benchmark testing.

Over the last several years, thousands of testimonies from parents have asked for shorter standardized tests, fewer of them so they match the federal compliance, for the elimination of the high school exit exam, and calls for the state to participate in USDOE's pilot for alternative assessments. There has been no leadership on assessment and students are stuck with the least helpful and informative data collection.

Mental Health. We know that SEL is best when infused into the curriculum and when school climate and culture are cultivated to be inclusive and supportive, not only for students, but for teachers and staff. We want to see more counselors in schools and communication to families about what supports are available for their children.

Special Education. We expect SPAN will be providing testimony today on the many challenges these students have faced. We only want to add that we are hearing about students with IEPs not getting their accommodations for PSAT because of failures by case managers or guidance counselors not informing parents, nor providing the paperwork needed. In one case, the lack of accommodations led to the student doing self-harm during the testing period. We know that staff are overwhelmed, but there is no excuse for not upholding a student's rights as guaranteed by IDEA.

We are also hearing parents are being counseled to drop their children's IEP for various reasons, including lack of a 3-year evaluation. For the Committee's understanding, IEPs do not expire and evaluations demonstrating that a student no longer needs services and supports are necessary for a district to terminate an IEP.

If child study teams are overwhelmed with other duties, we expect NJDOE to step up and provide help or further guidance.

Poor Communication. The ARP/ESSER funding requires community engagement for the use of those funds. Parents are reporting they have little to no engagement at all. These are missed opportunities for district leadership to find out what matters most to the communities in which they operate.

We applaud the districts that have set up committees to carry out this engagement and we consider continued engagement to be vital for any school district.

Confusion. There appears to be mixed messages throughout the state about the need to quarantine and what educational support can be provided to students when they must be out

of school for 10 days. In August, NJDOE released guidance which included an acknowledgment of the considerable efforts to connect every student to the internet. And, that students should be offered a virtual learning experience if they are quarantined. That does not appear to be happening in every district, including some arbitrary decisions made by local leadership to not offer any educational engagement if it's determined that the student was not exposed to COVID in school. This has further led to students being assigned unexcused absences while properly quarantining. We hope this is simply confusion over the guidance, but also expect NJDOE to step up and make sure that every student is being offered the education they have a right to.

Another consequence of the messaging about no virtual instruction has been parents disenrolling their children from school. The instances we have seen of this have been due to either the student being high risk or a family member in the home being at high risk. We understand the concern that there might be a rush of people who would choose to keep their children on virtual instruction, but surely there must be a way to set the bar high for this accommodation in order to keep students connected to school.

We know that staffing shortages have made the re-opening of schools that much more difficult. Perhaps the extra duties that administrators have had to take on, like contact tracing, should be done by the state so they can support teachers who have been overwhelmed. Perhaps special licenses should be created for bus drivers.

Regardless of the specific solutions, we hope the Legislature will take the time to engage parents, students, and the professional organizations to provide the most meaningful help.

Thank you to the Co-Chairs, Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey, and to the entire Committee, for your time and consideration today.

Julie Larrea Borst
Executive Director
Save Our Schools NJ Community Organizing

PLAINFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1200 Myrtle Avenue, Plainfield, NJ

Dr. Diana Mitchell, Superintendent

ENROLLMENT STATUS – As of October 25, 2021



SCHOOL	ADDRESS	PRINCIPAL	NUMBER OF TEACHERS	CAPACITY
BARLOW	2 Farragut Road, 07060	Mr. Wilson Aponte	27	369
CEDARBROOK	1049 Central Avenue, 07060	Dr. Frank Asante	48	672 (trailer)
CLINTON	1302 West 4 th Street, 07063	Dr. Janice Grooms	29	333
COOK	739 Leland Avenue, 07062	Dr. Caryn Cooper	29	456 (trailer)
EMERSON	305 Emerson Avenue, 07062	Mr. Dion Roach	38	390
EVERGREEN	1033 Evergreen Avenue, 07060	Ms. Miguelina Landisi	34	450
JEFFERSON	1700 West Front Street, 07063	Ms. Telaya Parham	33	429
STILLMAN	201 West 4 th Street, 07062	Ms. Gwynetta Joe	23	274
WASHINGTON	427 Darrow Avenue, 07060	Dr. Anthony Jenkins	42	548
HUBBARD MS	661 West Eighth Street, 07060	Mr. Kwame Asante	51	629
MAXSON MS	920 East Seventh Street, 07060	Mrs. Lisa Armstead	63	859
PAAAS	1700 West Front Street, 07063	Dr. Angela Bento	39	392
PHS	950 Park Avenue, 07060	Mr. Kevin Stansbury	133	1999

83X

PLAINFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1200 Myrtle Avenue, Plainfield, NJ

Dr. Diana Mitchell, Superintendent

ENROLLMENT STATUS – As of October 25, 2021



SCHOOL	CURRENT POPULATION	OVERAGE	NUMBER OF CLASSROOMS	AVERAGE CLASS SIZE	POPULATION JUNE 30, 2021	POPULATION NOVEMBER 1, 2021
BARLOW	406	37	19	21	367	(11) 417
CEDARBROOK	667	0	35	22	638	(4) 671
CLINTON	339	6	26	19	345	(5) 344
COOK	396	0	20	18	384	(3) 399
EMERSON	467	77	24	22	479	(10) 477
EVERGREEN	611	161	26	28	592	(16) 627
JEFFERSON	456	27	25	22	468	(2) 458
STILLMAN	387	113	16	26	366	(5) 392
WASHINGTON	659	111	34	25	635	(9) 668
HUBBARD MS	807	178	47	25	727	(14) 821
MAXSON MS	864	5	52	25	819	(3) 867
PAAAS	384	under	27	18	415	0
PHS	1881	under	129	25	1600	(93) 1994

84x



Plainfield Public Schools "Schools in Status Report" September 21, 2021

D. Mitchell, CSA

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Regulations

Prior to schools being identified under the ESSA regulations beginning in 2018, schools in need of improvement **were** categorized as Priority and Focus Schools.

A Priority School **was** a school identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years, or any non-Title I school that would otherwise have met the same criteria.

Focus Schools had the overall lowest subgroup performance, a graduation rate below 75% and the widest gaps in achievement between different subgroups of students. Focus Schools receive targeted and tailored solutions to meet the school's unique needs.

ESSA Regulations began governing the identification of schools in need of improvement when *Priority and Focus designations were phased out*, and they were then classified as **Comprehensive** (schoolwide in the lowest 5%) or **Targeted Schools** (one subgroup in the lowest 5%)

What does it mean to be a school in Status?

Schools in Need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement CSI

- Bottom 5% of Title I Schools;
- Schools with less than 67% graduation rate; and
- Schools who have been designated as in need of targeted status for more than 3 years are identified in need of comprehensive support.

Schools in Need of Targeted Support and Improvement TSI

- Schools where one or more student groups perform at or below the bottom 5% of schools; and
- Schools with student groups who are "consistently underperforming" as defined by the state

Plainfield High School

Hubbard Middle School

Maxson Middle School

Cedarbrook K-8 School

Cook Elementary

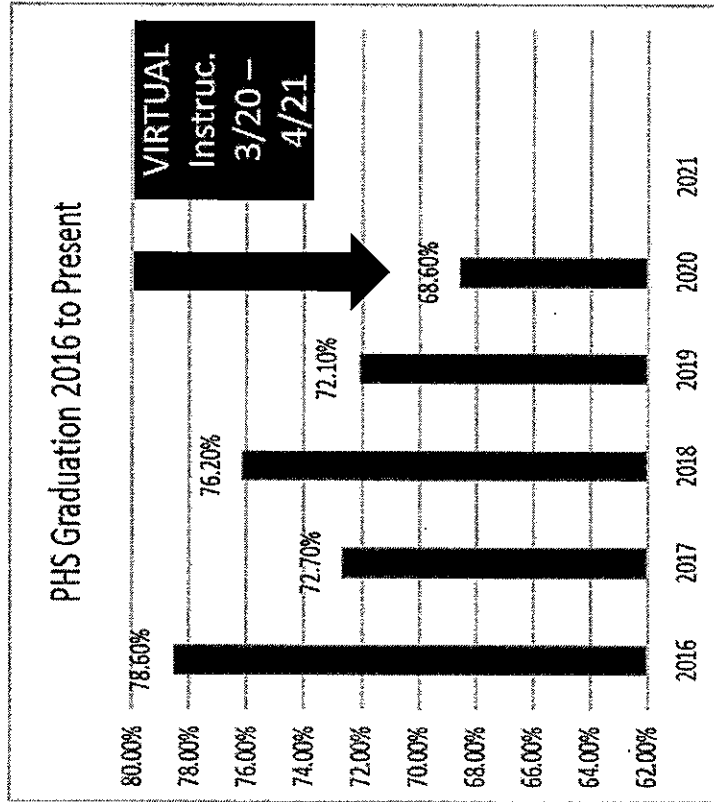
School	Principal	Years in Status	Reason for Status	Attend. Rates	Reports Provided by NJDOE via NISMART
Plainfield HS	5 Principals in 6 years				Graduation Profiles
2021-22	Kevin Stansbury	Extended to Year 4 due to COVID	Comprehensive Overall Low Performance		Enrollment Profiles
2020-21	Miguelina Gil-Landisi	Extended to Year 3 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	72.82% - Covid - Atten. Campaign	Assessment Profiles - NISLA (NJ Student Learning Assessment the WIDA Access 2.0)
2019-20	Dion Roach	Year 2	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	94.25%	Starting Points-Student List
2018-19	Dion Roach	Year 1	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	90.52%	School Performance Reports
2017-18	Phillip Williamson (Heather Jackson-Principal 1/2/18-06/30/18)	No		90.34%	
2016-17	Willie Worley	No		90.19%	

Leadership Superintendents - 8 Supts. in 5 years		BOE Members -		Eligible to Exit Status
FINAL DATA Available in Nov. Accountable Rate from NJDOE shows 72.19%	Dr. Diana Mitchell 2020 -21	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt		Pending USED Approval January 2022
65.50%	Pandemic 3/20 - 4/21 Dr. Diana Mitchell 2019-20	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Eric Andrews, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson- Miller		
69.70%	Dr. Ronald Bolandi, Gary Ottmann, Elizabeth Filippatos 2018-19	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Graziela Lobato-Creekmur, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson-Miller		
76.00%	Anna Belin-Pyle, Debra Sherard, Dr. Caryn Cooper, Dr. Ronald Bolandi 2017-18	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford		
70.80%	Anna Belin-Pyle 2016-17	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford		

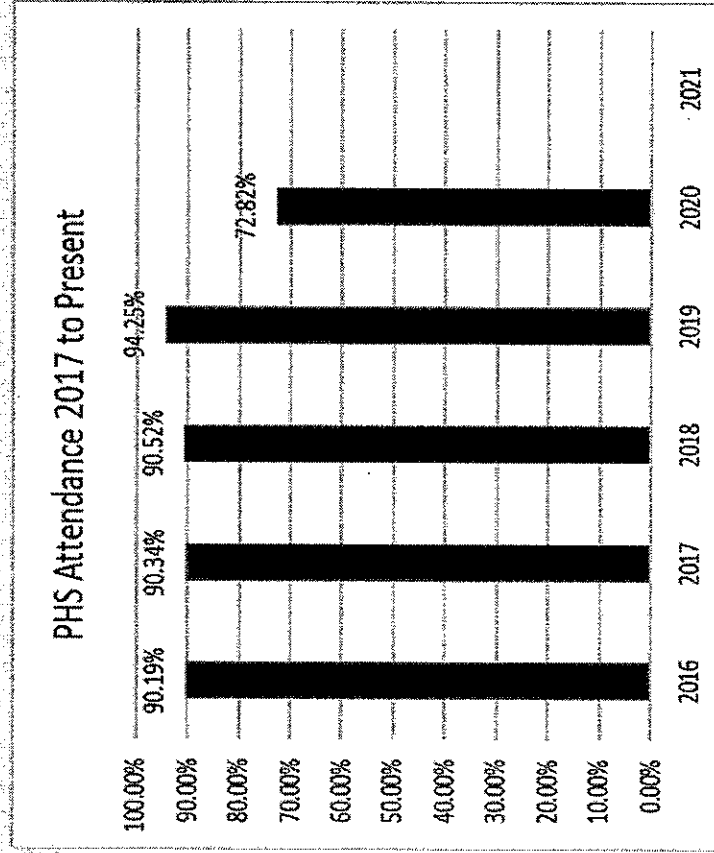
90X

Plainfield HS – Graduation and Attendance 2016 to Present

2021 Graduation Data Available 11/21



Schools CLOSED for in-person instruction 11-months Due to the Pandemic – Implemented Attendance Campaign for the entire District



9/16

Meeting & Exceeding Proficiency										
Schools/ Grade	Number tested ELA	Benchmark ELA Form A 2020-21	Benchmark ELA Form B 2020-21	Benchmark ELA Form C 2020-21	Number tested Math	Benchmark Math Form A 2020-21	Benchmark Math Form B 2020-21	Benchmark Math Form C 2020-21	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment Number Tested	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment R. Bolandi
Plainfield HS										
English I	154	18%	19%	30%		COVID – Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing.			382	19%
English II	188	15%	14%	17%					338	17%
English III	139	15%	9%	9%					11	55%
Algebra I		COVID – Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing.			180	4%	4%	3%	349	7%
Geometry				The students were back in school April to June for Benchmark Form C					216	4%
Algebra II					129	2%	9%	3%	29	21%
All Grades	481	16%	14%	19%	598	2%	4%	2%	ELA = 731 Math = 594	ELA = 18% Math = 6%

School	Principal	Years in Status	Reason for Status	Attend. Rates	Reports Provided by NJDOE via NISMART
Hubbard					
2021-22	Kwame Asante	Year 5 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance		Enrollment Profiles
2020-21	Kwame Asante	Year 4 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	90.05%	Assessment Profiles
2019-20	Kwame Asante	Year 3	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	95.67%	Starting Point Student List
2018-19	Kwame Asante	Year 2	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	93.86%	School Performance Reports
2017-18	Kwame Asante	Year 1	Priority-Lowest Performing 5%	93.80%	
2016-17	Kwame Asante			94.87%	
2016-17		Exited Status and Re-entered			

Leadership Superintendents - 8 Supts. in 5 years	BOE Members – 2017 to Present	Eligible to Exit Status
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2021-22	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josey M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	Pending USED Approval January 2022
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2020-21	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josey M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2019-20	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Eric Andrews, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson-Miller	
Dr. Ronald Bolandi, Gary Ottmann, Elizabeth Filippatos 2018-19	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Graziela Lobato-Creekmur, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson- Miller	
Anna Belin-Pyle, Debra Sherard, Dr. Caryn Cooper, Dr. Ronald Bolandi 2017-18	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorien Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	
Anna Belin-Pyle 2016-17	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorien Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	

94x

Schools/ Grade	Benchmark Data ELA Form A	ELA Form B	ELA Form C	Math Form A	Math Form B	Math Form C	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment ELA	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment Math
Hubbard	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	R. Bolandi	R. Bolandi
Grade 6	9%	7%	10%	3%	2%	5%	19%	10%
Grade 7	9%	9%	11%	3%	4%	6%	22%	9%
Grade 8	14%	17%	27%	4%	11%	15%	20%	16%
COVID – Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing Forms A and B The students were back in school April to June for Benchmark Form C								

95x

School	Principal	Years in Status	Reason for Status	Attend. Rates	Reports Provided by NJDOE via NISMART
Maxson					
2021-22	Lisa Armstead	Year 5 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance		Enrollment Profiles
2020-21	Kevin Stansbury	Year 4 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	91.82%	Assessment Profiles
2019-20	Kevin Stansbury	Year 3	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	92.90%	Starting Point Student List
2018-19	Kevin Stansbury (Acting Principal - Wilson Martinez 5/31/18-07/3/18)	Year 2	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	93.37%	School Performance Reports
2017-18	Janet Grooms	Year 1	Focus-Lowest Subgroup	92.85%	
2016-17	Juan Pablo Jimenez (Interim Principal)			93.62%	

96X

**Leadership
Superintendents - 8 Supts. in 5 years**

**BOE Members -
2017 to Present**

Eligible to Exit Status

Dr. Diana Mitchell 2021-22	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	Pending USED Approval January 2022
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2020-21	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2019-20	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Eric Andrews, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson-Miller	
Dr. Ronald Boland, Gary Ottmann, Elizabeth Filippatos 2018-19	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Graziela Lobato-Creekmur, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson- Miller	
Anna Belin-Pyle, Debra Sherard, Dr. Caryn Cooper, Dr. Ronald Bolandi 2017-18	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	
Anna Belin-Pyle 2016-17	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	

97x

Schools/ Grade	Benchmark Data ELA Form A	ELA Form B	ELA Form C	Math Form A	Math Form B	Math Form C	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment ELA	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment Math
Maxson	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	2020-21	R. Bolandi	R. Bolandi
Grade 6	8%	11%	15%	4%	9%	7%	22%	11%
Grade 7	9%	11%	42%	6%	6%	12%	29%	8%
Grade 8	10%	12%	18%	4%	3%	1%	27%	11%
Algebra I				58%	42%	42%		94%
COVID-Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing Forms A and B								
The students were back in school April to June for Benchmark Form C								

School	Principal	Years in Status	Reason for Status	Attend. Rates	Reports Provided by NJDOE via NJSMART
Cedarbrook K-8					
2021-22	Frank Asante	Year 5 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Low Performing subgroup		Enrollment Profiles
2020-21	Lisa Armstead	Year 4 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Low Performing subgroup	93.51%	Assessment Profiles
2019-20	D. Smith-Snead (Acting)	Year 3	Comprehensive-Low Performing subgroup	94.66%	Starting Point Student List
2018-19	Mark Williams	Year 2	Comprehensive-Low Performing subgroup	94.94%	School Performance Reports
2017-18	Gwynetta Joe	Year 1	Comprehensive-Low Performing subgroup	94.34%	
2016-17	Gwynetta Joe			95.14%	

99X

Leadership Superintendents - 8 Supts. in 5 years	BOE Members – 2017 to Present	Eligible to Exit Status
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2021-22	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	Pending USED Approval January 2022
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2020-21	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2019-20	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Eric Andrews, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson-Miller	
Dr. Ronald Bolandi, Gary Ottmann, Elizabeth Filippatos 2018-19	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Graziela Lobato-Creekmur, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson- Miller	
Anna Belin-Pyle, Debra Sherard, Dr. Caryn Cooper, Dr. Ronald Bolandi 2017-18	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	
Anna Belin-Pyle 2016-17	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	

100X

Schools/ Grade	Benchmark Data ELA Form A 2020-21	ELA Form B 2020-21	ELA Form C 2020-21	Math Form A 2020-21	Math Form B 2020-21	Math Form C 2020-21	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment ELA R. Bolandi	2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment Math R. Bolandi
Cedarbrook K-8	8%	75%	66%	83%	62%	75%		
Grade 1	40%	38%	37%	36%	27%	16%		
Grade 2	12%	9%	12%	21%	14%	16%	18%	23%
Grade 3	23%	19%	26%	16%	12%	3%	24%	21%
Grade 4	12%	15%	20%	20%	10%	3%	29%	12%
Grade 5	10%	15%	20%	3%	3%	11%	21%	10%
Grade 6	24%	30%	35%	12%	7%	3%	47%	10%
Grade 7	21%	19%	36%	0%	3%	0%	34%	8%
Grade 8				32%	47%	37%		32%
Algebra I								
COVID-Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing Forms A and B		The students were back in school April to June for Benchmark Form C						

10/1 X

School	Principal	Years in Status	Reason for Status	Attend. Rates	Reports Provided by NJDOE via NJSMArt
Cook					
2021-22	Caryn Cooper	Year 4 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance		Enrollment Profiles
2020-21	Caryn Cooper	Year 3 due to COVID	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	93.75%	Assessment Profiles
2019-20	Caryn Cooper	Year 2	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	95.51%	Starting Point Student List
2018-19	Caryn Cooper	Year 1	Comprehensive-Overall Low Performance	93.46%	School Performance Reports
2017-18	Caryn Cooper (Johan Rojas - Acting Principal 8/23/17-12/31/17)			94.47%	
2016-17	Caryn Cooper			96.06%	

102x

Leadership Superintendents - 8 Supts. in 5 years	BOE Members - 2017 to Present	Eligible to Exit Status
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2021-22	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	Pending USED Approval January 2022
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2020-21	Eric J. Andrews, Board President, Lynn Anderson-Pearson, VP, John Campbell, Josely M. Castro, W. Pat Hembree, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Jacqueline Workman, Richard Wyatt	
Dr. Diana Mitchell 2019-20	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Eric Andrews, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson-Miller	
Dr. Ronald Bolandi, Gary Ottmann, Elizabeth Filippatos 2018-19	Richard Wyatt, President, Cameron E. Cox, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, John C. Campbell, Terence J. Johnson, Graziela Lobato-Creekmur, Emily E. Morgan, Carmencita T. Pile, Dr. Avania A. Richardson- Miller	
Anna Belin-Pyle, Debra Sherard, Dr. Caryn Cooper, Dr. Ronald Bolandi 2017-18	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	
Anna Belin-Pyle 2016-17	Emily E. Morgan, President, Dorian Hurtt, VP, Lynn B. Anderson, Terrence S. Bellamy, Sr., John C. Campbell, Carletta D. Jeffers, Carmencita Pile, David M. Rutherford	

Schools/ Grade	Benchmark Data		ELA Form B		ELA Form C		Math Form A		Math Form B		Math Form C		2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment		2018-19 NJSLA State Assessment	
	2020-21	ELA Form A	2020-21	73%	2020-21	37%	2020-21	92%	2020-21	53%	2020-21	45%	2020-21	ELA	2020-21	Math
Cook																
Grade 1	87%		73%		37%		92%		53%		45%					
Grade 2	61%		44%		48%		50%		42%		34%					
Grade 3	21%		10%		10%		24%		24%		24%					37%
Grade 4	24%		22%		30%		32%		23%		30%					16%
Grade 5	39%		32%		36%		32%		24%		24%					27%
COVID-Students were not in School from Sept to March. All virtual testing Forms A and B			The students were back in school April to June for Benchmark Form C													

Continuation Moving Forward.....

1. Collaboration with NJDOE and Comprehensive School Network with Annual School Plans (ASP).
2. Continue with Administrative Retreats for turnkey Professional development
3. Continue with Instructional coaches to support teaching and learning.
4. Overhaul of all ELA Curricula – 20-21 purchased HMH 6-12 ELA; K-5 Ready Math
21-22 – implemented K-5 HMH; Grade 6-9 Envision Math; 9-12 McGraw Hill Social Studies; 6-12 Stem Scope Science; K12 SiLas Social Emotional Learning Curriculum – All in English & Spanish
5. HQ Social Studies, Math, and Science Supervisors and Director of Curriculum and Instruction



Plainfield Public Schools "Champions for Students"

Diana Mitchell, Ed.D.
Chief Schools Administrator
October 18, 2021

1060x



Mission: The Board of Education in partnership with its community will do whatever it take for Every student to achieve High Academic standard. No alibis, No excuses, No exceptions!

- Annual Budget: 220 m
 - Schools: 13
 - Pre-K Centers: 14
 - Student enrollment: 8,238
 - Employees: 1,520
- Free and Reduced Meals – 80%
- Students with Disabilities – 16%
- English Language Learners – 42%
- Former Abbott District

Data Source: NJSMART



Plainfield Public Schools (NJ) "Champions for Students"

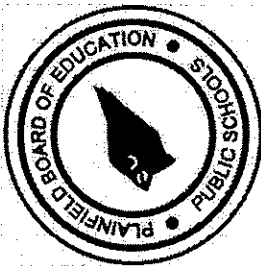
Student Demographics:

African American – 23%

Hispanic – 75.5%

Other – 1.18%

Multiple Races - 0.34%



Plainfield Public Schools (NJ) “Champions for Students”

YEAR	TIMELINE	New Student Registrations
2021-22	July 1 – October 15 (3 months)	818
2020-21	July 1 – June 30 (1 year)	271
2019-20	July 1 – June 30 (1 year)	785
2018-19	July 1 – June 30 (1 year)	394
2017-18	July 1 – June 30 (1 year)	329

818 New Registrations from July 1, 2021-October 15, 2021





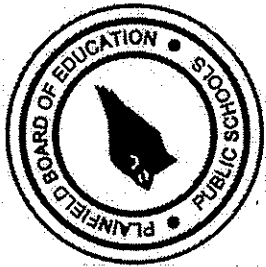
Plainfield Public Schools

Effects of Increased Student Enrollment



Employee Morale-COVID protocols adding to stress of high enrollment-social distancing almost impossible





Plainfield Public Schools Transportation Concerns

1/2x

37 Buses/16 Drivers

Students not getting home until 6:00 p.m.

Students not being transported

Soliciting bids from contractors ineffective

From \$500 to \$1000 a day for a single student transport



Plainfield Public Schools Teacher Shortage

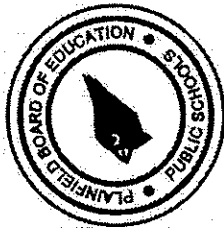
1/3x

30 Vacancies for teaching positions

Lack of substitute teachers

Delays in certification processing

Additional staffing required for vaccine/COVID management

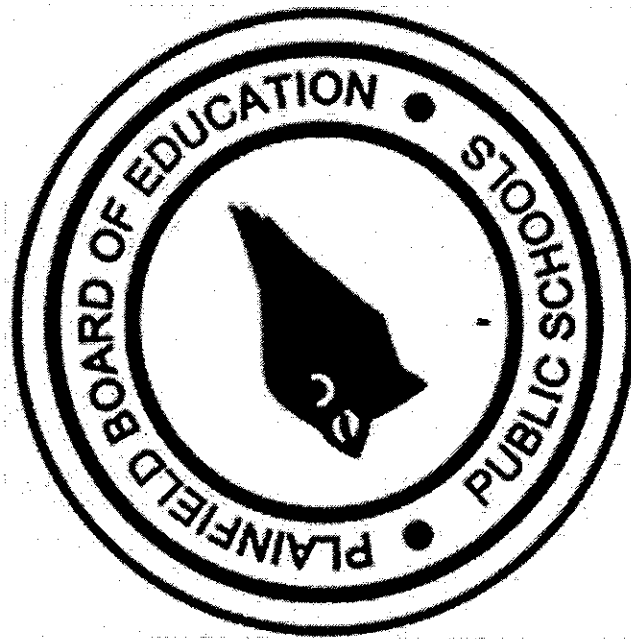


Plainfield Public Schools (NJ)
“Champions for Students”

Concerns are ADDED STRESSES ON TEACHING AND LEARNING – Which is Why we come to work daily.

114x

Questions





Tony Trongone
Superintendent of Schools
110 N. 3rd St.
PO Box 5010
Millville, NJ 08332
tony.trongone@millville.org
856-327-6001

October 19, 2021

Good morning members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Tony Trongone, and I am the superintendent of Millville Public Schools in Cumberland County. I am also proud to serve as New Jersey's Commissioner for Military Connected Students and President-Elect of NJASA, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators.

In Millville, we just completed a successful PreK-12 summer learning program. We had close to 800 students enrolled that included meals, an academic program, enrichment activities and a social emotional program from 8:00AM to 2:00PM, four days a week for 5 weeks. We are looking forward to doing the same if not better in the summer of 2022.

For the current 21-22 SY, we reduced class sizes in grades K to 5 to keep kids in school, a full day, five days a week. We have a cap of 15 students in grades PreK to 2 and a cap of 18 in grades 3 to 5. Previously we had class sizes upwards of 29 students in a class. In total, we hired 24 more teaching staff utilizing CARES Act and ESSER II funding. We are currently planning on sustaining those positions by tightening our belts fiscally to KEEP those positions when the Cares Act Funding goes away.

We have had a successful opening of school and also implemented weekly COVID testing for unvaccinated staff and the community on Oct 4th. We are in our third week of covid testing.

I polled various superintendents across the state and here are their concerns.

- CDL licensing and bus drivers.
 - We need to lobby the federal government to remove the portion of the test which requires "under the hood" knowledge. As you know. Bus drivers drive buses not repair them.
 - Due to the lack of access and frequency to the CDL testing process, Motor Vehicle Commission needs to reallocate staff to expedite licensing
- Staffing
 - Reallocate more NJDOE staff to expedite teaching and substitute certification.
 - The process has been very slow and there is a significant backlog in ascertaining requisite licensing.
- Postponing the NJQSAC cycle to 22-23 SY
 - Almost all of the auditing in Finance, Personnel, Governance and Facilities already takes place on an annual basis

- Instruction & Program portion is heavily weighted on state assessment data and the last administration of data is from 18-19 school year.
- Reallocate dept of ed staff in county offices to support schools in their instructional programs and oversight of a facilities checklist via a walk through
- The legislative branch needs to work with the executive branch to utilize the billions of dollars the federal government has allocated to the STATE to address infrastructure needs such as HVAC and drinking water in ALL schools.
 - Simply follow the existing Regular Operating District (ROD) Grant process and include Schools Development Authority (SDA) districts in the ROD grant program,
 - Instead of the state funding 100% of all capital HVAC projects in SDA districts, have them pay a percentage based on the school districts ability to pay based on the school funding formula.
 - For example, Millville would leverage its ESSER III funding for its 27% funding formula share of cost and state provides 73% of costs of a capital project. Of course, there needs to be a vetting of needs of which the SDA is currently assessing, so there will be a checks and balances in the process.
 - As previously mentioned, Millville would be responsible for 27% of capital infrastructure projects. Bridgeton 7% Newark 16.2% and the cap for local contribution would be 60%, which, as mentioned, is the current ROD grant process.
 - The current process had 429 emergent projects that have been submitted to the SDA with the SDA only funding 15 of the 429, submissions. However, 414 were submitted incorrectly as emergent projects when in fact they were either capital maintenance or capital improvement projects.
 - By utilizing the school funding formula to determine local fair share of capital improvement cost is fair and financially feasible to everyone.

Again, Thank you for your time today.



Tony Trongone
Superintendent

Joint Committee on Public Schools
Tuesday, October 19, 2021
Testimony Lisa Rodgers - South Brunswick, NJ
Current Board of Education Member
LMRODGERS2@gmail.com

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Public Schools. My name is Lisa Rodgers and I am a resident of South Brunswick and a current member of the Board of Education.

I'd like to start by stating that the following is based on discussions I have had with parents, teachers, our district administration, and other districts.

Over the last 18-months, districts have felt that the NJDOE has not been as supportive as it should be and that the department has missed an opportunity to step up and lead during the entire course of the pandemic. Instead, they continue to issue extraneous mandates that seem senseless. They should be instead, identifying ways to mitigate the impact of these mandates on the schooling of our children. If this is not accurate, and the NJDOE has been lobbying, let it be suggested that they should overtly share where appropriate.

So, here is how the NJDOE can assist. Instead of being an impediment the NJDOE needs to recognize the issues that are happening in districts, and that this committee review current legislation and enact change as soon as possible.

Let's start with Transportation:

Schools need the State to make huge and instantaneous strides with transportation. To start we need "teeth" behind every bus contractor who is supposed to complete their contracts and follow the Governor's Executive Orders. For example:

- We have received word from contractors that they will not comply with EO 253. If this is the case, there needs to be a clear and easy mechanism to force compliance or face severe penalties, which must include loss of their charter to do business in the state until they comply.
- If a contractor wants to break a contract, the penalty should also be that they cannot perform any work in the state and their licenses are pulled until they comply with their contracted routes for every district.
- Anything short of real consequences that result in work stoppage for these behaviors will prove to not be a deterrent and will continue to cause districts to both hemorrhage money as well as not have the ability to get students to schools.

Next, regarding COVID Color Coding:

The State needs to step in to address the antiquated method NJ is using to color code districts for Covid. Currently, our district, South Brunswick which is part of Middlesex County remains with Ocean, Monmouth, and Union Counties to determine Covid rates which is completely illogical. It is not conceivable that the State has yet to be able to use other more advanced methods to make such determinations.

- South Brunswick remains in "orange" yet, our cases, covid numbers, and vaccination rates are extremely positive. In fact, over 91% of our staff is vaccinated – that's over 1100 members. Further, over 75% of our eligible student body is vaccinated. The State and DOE are not supporting districts to help bring things back to a state of normalcy. They continue to use extremely outdated data systems and continue to be silent on this matter. It is unacceptable

Joint Committee on Public Schools
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- At some point, the DOE needs to assess every educational broadcast they put out to consider the need for such a request. Each week every district receives a mountain of items that clearly could wait or be cancelled altogether. When brought to the attention of the DOE, there is no response.

Third, QSAC –

The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum or QSAC, is, as you know, the DOE's monitoring and district self-evaluation system for public schools. Since the system focuses on evaluating districts in five areas, including Instruction/Program, Fiscal, Governance, Operations, and Personnel, how can it evaluate the data that in some cases does not exist for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. Well, it seems that the DOE will be using data from over three years ago. So why are districts going to be held accountable for student achievement pushing districts to make immediate improvements from old data? How will the DOE identify any improper practices from three years ago? QSAC needs to be put on hold as this is costing districts time and money. Data from three years ago, quite frankly is useless.

Finally, Labor

Right now, districts may be flush with "covid-cash", but it must be noted and understood that this money will soon run out. However, what is changing and will be changed **permanently** are the new wages that will be set for many district positions. Positions such as cafeteria workers, bus drivers, and para-professionals to name a few, will require significant and substantive pay increases as the new wage structures fall into place. Regardless of the reason why, an ability for a district to keep up with the necessary wage increases will be hitting a brick wall in about two years.

- Between the extended unemployment benefits and Covid assistance money, people are not interested in working in these positions or are receiving higher wages from other districts or companies. Did you know, there are more than 7,000 individuals in NJ that carry a CDL license, that could be bus drivers once "S" certification is achieved, that are collecting unemployment.
- Districts cannot offer a salary increase, because of the restrictions that have been placed by the State. Consider for a moment if a business experiences an increase in labor costs and/or supply costs increase, they can pass those costs onto the consumer as a price increase. Public schools cannot do this. Our hands are tied due to the 2% cap. It is time to review this cap. It either needs to be eliminated or increased. Because when Covid 19 money runs out, many districts including South Brunswick, will be running in the red, and this is just not sustainable.

So, I am asking this Joint Commission to recognize these issues that all districts are facing and provide the necessary support to ensure public schools are no longer affected by the inaction of the DOE.

Again, thank you for taking the time to listen.