

APPENDIX

## **Testimony before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools**

**NJDOE Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan**

**Tuesday, February 9, 2021**

Good Morning, Co-Chairs Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey, as well as the entire Committee. Thank you for inviting me today to share how New Jersey can successfully reopen schools while addressing the learning gaps and the social emotional impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the students and educators here in New Jersey.

The New Jersey Department of Education worked tirelessly on *The Road Back* plan during this past summer to ensure that school districts had a road map to re-opening their schools this academic year. To date, the Department has continued to emphasize the importance of local decision-making based on consultation with local health officials. Our priority remains the same as it has been throughout the pandemic: supporting close collaboration between school districts and their local health departments to address local needs based on local circumstances. Since June, we have continuously emphasized the importance of monitoring and responding to shifts in the public-health data in a manner that recognizes both the value of in-person learning and the fact that school communities are best equipped to make

decisions regarding the form of instruction that best suits them. In August, Governor Murphy's Executive Order 175 codified those commitments by requiring districts to open for in-person learning if they are able to meet health and safety standards, while allowing districts to begin the year remotely as they build capacity to physically re-open.

To that end, our resources aim to empower districts to return to in-person instruction and to support students during periods of remote learning. \$300 million in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding, \$100 million in Coronavirus Relief Fund grants, \$60 million in digital divide grants, competitive grants dedicated to remediating disruptions in learning, snapshot assessment tools, digital learning tool kits, social emotional learning and mental health resources, and other supports have helped to serve our students and educators, academically and emotionally.

But most important to school reopening efforts has been the ingenuity and resilience of our educators and parents and care givers.

- Their efforts have all but closed the digital divide in our state with more than 230,000 students estimated as needing connectivity or

a device over the summer, only 413 students remained in need as of the end of January 2021.

- While there have been changes in learning models as the COVID transmission data evolves, we have also seen districts working to safely return their students to in-person learning. In September, just over 280 districts were all-remote; as of yesterday, that number has decreased to 190. In the same span of time, the number of fully in-person districts jumped from just under 80 to 95, and the number of districts employing a hybrid learning model jumped from 400 to 491.

While we celebrate this progress in safely returning students to in-person instruction, we are well-aware that the pandemic has only exacerbated learning gaps that already existed. Recent research conducted by the nonprofit assessment organization Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), for example, suggests that the transition to remote learning in the 2019-2020 academic year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – combined with expected summer learning gaps for students across all grade levels – will likely result in major losses in student learning and academic achievement.

And we know that these challenges will not affect all students equally. Under normal conditions, health and economic struggles tend to disproportionately affect low-income families and families of color. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing societal inequalities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has reported increasing evidence that some racial ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, which is linked to inequities in the social determinants of health. Consequently, many of New Jersey's economically disadvantaged and minority students have inevitably returned to school in 2020-2021 with not only more dramatic academic achievement gaps, but also with the emotional effects of sickness or the loss of a family member, giving rise to heightened social emotional learning and academic needs.

The recently signed federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act gives us an opportunity to combat these harms and to invest significantly in our students' academic and social-emotional needs. The law provided New Jersey an additional \$1.2 billion in K-12 funding under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, the vast majority of which is sent directly to districts to utilize flexibly to respond to and recover from COVID-19. For the portion reserved for state initiatives, the Department of Education

has been working diligently to devise a strategy to leverage those funds in a manner that creates meaningful, equitable opportunities for districts to accelerate learning and address the social-emotional and mental health needs of their students and educators.

These initiatives would be grounded in research-based practices with demonstrated success accelerating learning, such as supporting districts in implementing high dosage one-on-one tutoring, extended learning opportunities, cultivating a growth mindset in students, professional development opportunities for educators, and multi-tiered systems of supports that empower districts to serve students' mental health needs through tailored interventions. We are finalizing these plans as I speak, and anticipate releasing additional information shortly.

We understand, however, that it is impossible to accelerate learning if you cannot measure it, either with statewide assessment data or with local information on student performance. At this time, the Biden Administration has not signaled any change to the U.S. Department of Education's previous position that it would not waive federal requirements to administer standardized assessments. We continue to monitor federal guidance closely, and most importantly, to engage with our stakeholders in order to make assessment decisions that best serve

the needs of our students and educators. Having learned valuable lessons from our administration of an optional formative assessment this past fall, namely the “Start Strong” assessment, we are exploring how to norm formative assessment this year and ways to expand formative assessment options next school year.

The NJDOE will continue to collaborate closely with legislators, with key stakeholders, other state and federal agencies, and with those in the field to ensure that we employ the most appropriate measures to identify and mitigate the social, emotional, and academic learning gaps caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also committed to assisting our students and educators return safely to their schools and offices.

I am happy to take your questions.

Thank you.

Joint Committee Meeting  
February 9, 2021

Good Morning. My name is Christine Burton, Superintendent of Schools for the Millburn Township School District. Today I'm providing testimony on behalf of the Garden State Coalition of Schools regarding how schools have successfully reopened while addressing the learning loss and the social emotional impact the pandemic has had on the students and teachers of New Jersey.

As policies, regulations and testing are being contemplated, we need to put into perspective the school environment that has suffered a tremendous shock to the system. The initial reality check was in the fact that this wasn't going to be two-weeks at home and we'd all be back in school. No, this would be far from the case when the months of March through June came and went, as did the summer while the tragedies of lost loved ones and colleagues continued. The natural reaction is to try to stop the bleeding of these events; eliminate the hurt, confusion, anxiety and loss. The reality is that we are still in the midst of this pandemic attempting each day to keep students returning to school, instead of staying home in fear.

Our start to the year in Millburn was stymied by not having the number of staff available to be in the classroom due to having pre-existing medical conditions. This led to hiring classroom managers, to supervise students while teachers taught from home. We were able to get all students into school by November through a hybrid schedule allowing staff to keep their distance while providing the nurturing environment that teachers thrive in every day.

The reality is that the teachers' focus is on meeting the social emotional needs of students in school each day with their masks, hand sanitizers and in some cases desk sneeze guards. At the same time, teachers are addressing the needs of the virtual students on the screen that are streaming in live, and for our youngest learners, navigating with the help of their parents. We know that our students in Millburn are among the lucky ones who have the availability of Chromebooks given to them by the

Joint Committee Meeting  
February 9, 2021

district as well as a hot spot for connectivity where needed. While our students have not had connectivity issues that hundreds of thousands of students have had, however they are still impacted by the same difficulties with anxiety, depression, trauma, and grief as their peers around the state. These mental health realities have required supports from guidance counselors and the child study teams. So, what are schools doing today and what is most important that they do in the future to address these learning delays and the additional social and emotional impact on our students as a result of this pandemic?

Before we can address the head, we have to commit to repairing the heart. Students have had their childhood or young adult worlds turn upside down. Our response as a school is to passionately create a routine that feels as normal as possible for students. They need to know and feel that they are going to be okay, as are their families. In the classroom, we've provided a daily structure that they can count on being the same each day with staff who check in on them and provide time to ask how they are doing and to let them put down their backpack of burdens and fears for a while.

This past summer the curriculum required a transformation that included a compacting of the most essential standards and expectations of skills, knowledge and understandings. This was in response to the time limits of the school day and the new reality of the virtual classroom. Teachers had multiple opportunities to prepare for this new reality that would most definitely push their teaching practices to new levels of patience, pragmatism and perseverance. Our staff have been amazing as they have stepped up to these new challenges with a fierceness and resolve that has been commendable. Like their students, they have learned in new ways that they never thought possible. They have helped students navigate the tumultuous waters of this pandemic by assessing where students were when they arrived at their classroom doors or virtual screens in September. Then they strategically moved them forward with

Joint Committee Meeting  
February 9, 2021

Google Classroom assignments, Nearpod presentations, and breakout rooms activities. Just like we had to bring our schools back into operation with the slow, steady and safe approach, so did our staff bring their instructional expectations to our students.

So, educators have been asked how do we measure this “learning loss”? I pose the question as to whether now is the right time and what the purpose is if we know that there have been students who have not been in their buildings since last March. Isn't it obvious that there is going to be a delay in what they've been able to learn? Does testing students to reveal the obvious pose an even greater detriment to students' mental health? As I ponder the notion of having students take on-line assessments at home, I can only equate it to when we underwent the field testing for the PARCC assessments. Even with days of preparations with the on-line tools, during the tests there were students in elementary through high school who were in tears over their frustration in not being able to navigate the on-line testing expectations. Is this the environment that is best able to address students' current fragile mental health in the middle of a pandemic? Will these scores be valid and reliable data of student performance? In a recent webinar sponsored by LinkIt, the comparison of student performance from in-district assessments from a year ago suggest that there is no change in ELA and a slight decrease in Mathematics for students in grades 4-8<sup>th</sup>. I point to the work of Dr. Maurice J. Elias, Director of Rutgers University's Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab and Co-Director of the Academy for Social-Emotional Learning in Schools. His research suggests that schools who focus on social-emotional and character development skills, have students who have shown improved attitudes about self, others, and school; positive classroom behavior and experienced 10-11 percentile-point gains on standardized achievement tests. By meeting the needs of our students' mental health, we will also be simultaneously addressing their academic performance metrics.

Joint Committee Meeting  
February 9, 2021

One way that our district is addressing students' needs is by capitalizing on a pandemic opportunity. Last winter our district was engaged in an investigation on later school start times. While developing our schedule for reopening schools, we decided to implement an 8:00 start time which is later than the original 7:40 time and to rotate the set of the 4 classes each day to give students a different class to start their day. This revised schedule became a preliminary pilot of a later start time that has given our students more time in the morning and initial insights by students report that it has reduced their stress.

So, what are the immediate needs of schools? If we expect to maintain classroom learning for our students, it is critical that our teachers and support staff remain healthy. With access to the vaccine, we can assure the safety of our schools on our road back, which will immeasurably benefit our students, staff and families and even the greater school community. We certainly acknowledge the importance to provide vaccinations for first responders, healthcare professionals, senior citizens and individuals with high risk medical conditions. We must also recognize that the educators are essential frontline workers who directly interact with a substantial number of students and adults each day. Vaccinating staff who work closely with our students will allow us to significantly increase the possibility of a return to in-person learning in our classrooms across the state. In turn, this will enable us to address concerns about learning loss, social, emotional and academic effects on students.

In closing, while we do not yet see the end of this road, our districts have made the best path forward for our students, staff and communities. We can use more mental health supports, more appointments for vaccinations and less stressful standardized testing of students. I know that with my superintendent colleagues in the Garden State Coalition of Schools, around the county and state, we stand ready to assist to make this a reality.

Joint Committee Meeting  
February 9, 2021



*Dr. Christine Burton*  
*Millburn Township*  
*Superintendent of Schools*

## Remarks to Joint Committee on Public Schools – February 9, 2021

Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity to address the committee on the opening of our schools in a COVID 19 world. I am Peg Dolan, superintendent of Westfield Public Schools and president of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators.

Education on a good day is challenging, rewarding, purposeful, collaborative, broadening, uplifting. In the past year, ensuring that our students receive standards-based learning rooted in the curriculum in the midst of a global pandemic has proven frustrating, anxiety-producing, seemingly impossible, frightening, and... challenging, rewarding, purposeful, collaborative, broadening, and uplifting. Every day I witness heroic acts in classrooms across my district of students and teachers who have settled in with determination to navigate hybrid and remote learning and with patience for the required technology and its inevitable shortcomings.

There is no doubt, however, that this year has been difficult for everyone, especially for students who are younger or have specific needs. I do not minimize the challenges of students on computer screens for hours, of parents juggling the needs of their children with employment and other responsibilities, of staff members going above and beyond even as they struggle with their own personal responsibilities, of a community cooped up and fed up and frustrated.

In Westfield, we opened in September with a hybrid model of instruction and have worked hard to maintain that important level of in-person instruction while working to ensure the health and safety of our school community. I think that some lessons from this year will inform decisions about next year.

In order to be able to open safely, much work has focused on checking and improving the ventilation in our buildings. Two of our buildings are over 100 years old and 3 of them are over 80 years old. In addition to continuous cleaning and disinfecting, we invested in bipolar ionization filtration systems in all classrooms at a cost of \$364,745. We also have some areas of the district that have rooftop air-handling units, for those we have installed ultraviolet light filters, at a cost of \$33,000. The Board of Education recently reviewed a \$9.8 million plan for a ventilation and air conditioning project for nurses' suites and elementary school multipurpose

rooms throughout the district. Due to the high cost, the project will be broken up into multiple phases over the course of several years. To accomplish this, other projected capital improvement will be delayed.

Another cost challenge was the purchase of devices for students. A decision was made to provide devices to students for their individual use to prevent sharing devices and to assist in at-home learning. We also provided hot spots for families without internet access and teacher webcams. The cost of this technology was just short of a half million dollars.

While we are offering hybrid instruction, approximately 60 of our 600 teachers are not able to work in person because of their own health issues. This number does not include staff members who notify us that they are required to quarantine because of exposure. When teachers are healthy enough to teach remotely, we hire in-person substitutes to be in class with the students. The first challenge is finding individuals who want to be substitutes during a pandemic, the second is finding money in the budget to pay them. We project that our substitute costs will be \$300,000 higher than we had budgeted.

If I am honest, right now in my district, I have a number of parents of younger students who are unhappy with the current hybrid schedule. While I have been able to bring back young students with significant needs for 5 half days a week, at this point, other elementary students attend class in-person for 3 half days one week and 2 half days on alternating weeks. These students are learning remotely the rest of the time. The current CDC guidelines continue to recommend 6 feet as the optimal distance between desks, along with mask wearing and handwashing. With this guidance, I am able to fit 10-12 students in a classroom at a time. The CDC has promised updated guidance for schools this week and I look forward to seeing what other options might be possible going forward.

I have summarized some of the challenges we continue to face, but I would like to make clear that our teachers are teaching and our students are learning. Regardless of your profession, I think you might agree that the pandemic has forced us all to rethink our procedures, schedules and priorities. This is certainly happening in education. Administrators work with teachers to identify “non-negotiables.” Let me give examples of how this is being done in just 2 academic disciplines.

In science, the message to the teachers has been to keep strong focus on the Science Practices outlined in the standards. These practices are the skills that students take with them as they progress year to year in science. These practices are consistent across classes and independent of the content. These skills include planning and carrying out investigations, analyzing and interpreting data, and engaging in argument from evidence.

For Language Arts, we are doing what so many educational guidelines have suggested, which is to focus as much as possible on skill-building and anchor texts. That means we are continuing to meet our curricular goals with regard to writing instruction, critical reading instruction, analysis, research and overall class engagement.

Teachers at the intermediate and high school levels are paying close attention to quality summative assessments to gain a clear barometer of where students are in their growth. In Grades 1-5, we are using the online reading assessment, Literably, to assess our elementary readers, which has allowed teachers to collect actionable data to drive instruction. And our K-2 learners receive phonics instruction through the use of Foundations, with unit tests administered at the end of each instructional unit, allowing teachers to provide additional instruction for those students who may require it.

In all subjects, students are receiving instruction grounded in essential skills at each grade level.

This work in the classrooms is being supported by the new technology skills we have all acquired. Teachers, students – and even administrators have become facile utilizing a myriad of software programs and apps that are providing a deeper understanding and a welcome efficiency. Technology is supporting differentiation and providing an ease for real time formative assessments that allows for better planning for the next lesson. These lessons are going to stay with us and improve instruction going forward.

Even as we focus on providing an academically meaningful level of instruction, we also worry greatly about the emotional well-being of our students and staff during this isolating time. School counselors and child study teams are working overtime, trying to deliver the same level of emotional support in a totally new way. They are connecting one-on-one with students via virtual platforms or by reaching out with a phone call.

Teachers are collecting information on a daily basis about how students are experiencing workload. We have provided our parents and students with mental health resources and have worked with the community to provide opportunities for speakers to share guidance and suggestions with parents and students.

From the beginning, the question we continue to ask ourselves is how do we safely reopen our schools and how will we address both the educational and emotional needs of our students and staff as they begin to return to full time, in-person learning? Here is where partnership and direction from the State will be invaluable:

1. Clear guidance as to what constitutes a safe and healthy classroom environment as vaccines become more available, yet new variants of COVID emerge.
2. Coordination with mental health providers to support not only the students, but their families.
3. Full funding of extraordinary aide to reimburse districts for the instruction and related services that have been provided to students this year.
4. Programs to support our staff, many of whom have set aside their own health and emotional well-being needs to tend to those of their students.
5. Funding. Additional monies outside the regular school formula to provide for after school and summer learning programs.

These are just a few of my thoughts as we look to the future.

**Joint Committee on Public Schools  
February 9, 2021 Testimony**

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Marie Blistan, a proud teacher of students with special needs in Washington Township and currently the elected president of the 200,000-member New Jersey Education Association. I thank this committee for taking up this important issue.

As you may know, for the last several months, education stakeholders from across New Jersey have been meeting to discuss what we as leaders need to do to help ensure that our students emerge from this pandemic strong and ready to face the future. We been working collaboratively and diligently to understand the support and resources they will need to overcome the challenges of this past year and the challenges that are going to persist even as the pandemic fades.

If you have not already read our open letter, which was sent to you yesterday, I encourage you to do so. Throughout our work together, we have been driven by a single, overarching question: what do our students need? But that question takes many forms:

- What do they need to make up for the educational opportunities that have been delayed because of the pandemic?
- What do they need to feel safe – and **be** safe! – in their school buildings?
- What do they need us to learn from the last year so that the schools we rebuild together are not just as good as the schools we had pre-pandemic, but better and more responsive to the needs of our students and our communities?

The pandemic has made one thing very clear: in addition to meeting our students' academic needs, we must also meet their social and emotional needs. In fact, we know that **before** we can meet their academic needs we must **first** meet their social and emotional needs.

That is one of the primary messages of Learning Policy Institute report called Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond by Linda Darling-Hammond, Abby Schachner and Adam K. Edgerton that served as the starting point of much of our work. In that report, the authors wisely note that "[t]eachers will need to take stock of all of students' experiences and needs—social, emotional, health-related, potentially trauma-related, and academic—as they build safe and welcoming communities."

The authors also note that "[s]ocial and emotional skills, coupled with mental health supports and restorative practices, are critical for supporting children, youth, and adults as they cope with the challenges, uncertainty, and stress presented by the pandemic, the economic crisis, and systemic racism."

I'm pleased to note that this approach is already beginning to take hold in New Jersey. The Clayton School District and Clayton Education Association members in Gloucester County have developed a model that is spreading elsewhere in the county. There is legislation co-sponsored by members of this committee to emulate that model around the state, which will benefit our students greatly if it is implemented correctly and backed up with the supports and resources needed for success.

With that background, much of what I am going to share with you today is focused on what we can do to mitigate everyone's stress, protect their health and safety, look out for the social, emotional *and* educational needs of students and prepare our students to thrive after this pandemic.

First, I must address the very concerning issue of standardized testing. As of this moment, the New Jersey Department of Education is still planning to administer statewide standardized tests this spring, despite being invited by the Biden Administration to apply for a waiver from the federal mandate that drives that testing.

There is simply no excuse for the state's failure to seek that waiver on behalf of our students. It is hard to imagine a worse use of precious instructional time than administering hour after hour after hour of standardized tests in the least standardized school year anyone has ever experienced. Given the disruptions in our schools, which have gone on for nearly a full year and will continue in too many places for the rest of the school year, there is no way to gather any reliable, usable data from those tests. That \$30 million expenditure, at a time when schools have so many other pressing needs, will do nothing to support students, help educators or guide the Department of Education.

Those tests will, however, add to the stress under which our students are already breaking. They will take away even more instructional time from a year that has already had that disrupted too much. They will exacerbate the inequities of a school year that has already privileged students with access to safe, modern school buildings and state-of-the-art technology while disadvantaging those without. We do not need a standardized test to tell us what our eyes can plainly see: our students are hurting, and they need our support more than ever.

That is why educators have offered to work with the Department of Education to gather reliable data that can be used in real time to meet real needs. Data that will help us understand the scope and extent of our students' needs and help us determine the supports and interventions necessary in the months and years to come. One key principle of the Learning Policy Institute Report is to "support locally relevant assessments, rather than selecting a single statewide assessment for all students."

In the words of the authors: "Formative assessment processes are an essential part of effective teaching and learning. While states may feel some pressure to provide a statewide measure of student learning early in the year, a summative test that delivers only a set of scores or proficiency levels will not help educators or students as much as tools that diagnose where students are in more fine-grained ways and inform decisions about teaching. Moreover, they distract teachers from valuable instruction time by introducing both testing and preparation time that could be better spent connecting with students, understanding their learning needs, and moving them forward."

That effort can take many forms, including implementation of *locally-determined* assessments to collect data on where students currently stand in relation to the curriculum standards. Districts have existing contracts with various tools and have been implementing their trusted assessment tools year after year. These tools are aligned with NJ-SLS (New Jersey Student Learning Standards) and provide immediate results, unlike the NJ-SLA. The NJ-SLA is a summative assessment and only provides a final view ("an autopsy") is it not designed for, nor can it accomplish, diagnostic or formative purposes. However, locally designed and well-balanced assessment systems provide districts with the data they need to support and strengthen students.

Districts must also be looking at their curriculum and engaging in ongoing collaborative discussions to continually monitor and respond to on-demand student needs. Curriculum standards are intentionally aligned and spiraled so that prerequisite knowledge and skills can be revisited and reinforced, as needed.

Joint Committee on Public Schools – February 9, 2021

17x

Key standards are prioritized, as they have the biggest “bang for the buck.” Remember, that you do not need to know all of the parts of a car to effectively operate a vehicle. We must prioritize the key knowledge, skills, and understandings students need to be successful in life and not simply in a game of Jeopardy or Quizzo.

There is growing information surrounding “opportunity to learn indicators” presented by Scott Marion at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. According to the report, Opportunity-to-Learn Indicators are a “concept that has evolved from a focus on whether students have had sufficient access to instruction or content linked to particular concepts, to a more robust conception regarding the conditions and resources provided to schools to enable students to succeed.”

Marion recommends embedding these questions into the existing assessments. However, that does not solve the problem. It would be beneficial for the NJDOE to collect and analyze opportunity to learn indicator data in lieu of and outside of the assessment system to determine where need for support is greatest. The communities with the most limited access/opportunities would be prioritized to receive the greatest funding and support.

Examples of Opportunity to Learn Indicators include:

- Data on device access
- Data on internet access
- Data on student absences
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning for Students with disabilities and English Language Learners
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning for historically marginalized communities

In short, there are many ways to meaningfully assess students, even during this pandemic year. There are also many ways beyond traditional assessment to determine the needs of individual students, subgroups, schools and districts, as well as New Jersey students as a whole.

Standardized tests, particularly this year, are not one of those ways. That is why the National Assessment Governing Board, the body that oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has elected *not* to assess students this year. Haley Barbour, Chair of the NAGB and former Republican governor of Mississippi released a statement about the decision to suspend NAEP this year. It said, in part: “We have closely followed the trajectory of the virus to determine whether NAEP could be administered in 2021 in ways that would accurately report student achievement and progress. Given the important data NAEP provides to the public, we waited as long as possible to make a final decision, but the spread of COVID across our communities is getting worse—not better. Unfortunately, it is now clear that we cannot fulfill the mandate to assess reading and mathematics, given NAEP’s unique design and methodology.”

What is obvious to the people who administer NAEP should be just as obvious to those charged with statewide assessment in New Jersey: it is not possible to fairly administer assessments or to gather reliable data from them. So, I am urging all of you to add your voices to our voices, to the voices of parents, to the voices of administrators, to the voices of advocates for children like the Education Law Center, and demand that the Department of Education apply for a federal testing waiver immediately.

The sooner we do that, the sooner we can return our full focus to supporting our students' immediate and urgent social, emotional and educational needs. The sooner we can turn our collective attention to the future and work together to create the supports they will need even once the pandemic passes. The sooner we can begin rebuilding our public schools to be even better, stronger, more responsive and more relevant than the ones that were already the nation's best.

We also have to address the health and safety concerns that exist today and will continue to pose a danger to students even after the pandemic.

For example, there are 300 school buildings in New Jersey with no full-time nurses.

300!

That is a crisis during a pandemic, but it's a scandal that it existed before the pandemic and it cannot be allowed to stand after the pandemic. And it does not need to. Consider this: for the \$30 million the state is poised to pay to administer a pointless and invalid standardized test this spring, it could instead pay the full salary of a certified school nurse in every one of those buildings for the rest of this year and all of next year.

It's not about a lack of resources; it's about misplaced priorities that put bureaucrats' desire for data above the health, safety and educational wellbeing of students.

And beyond just a lack of school nurses, we have to address myriad other health and safety issues in our schools. After decades of underfunding and neglect, far too many schools have acute issues that need to be addressed. The Schools Development Authority has not addressed most of them. Local communities have not addressed them and in many cases cannot afford to. It must be noted that while concerns exist statewide, the areas of greatest need are too often in communities with the fewest resources. The disparate impact on students of color in particular is real, and it must not be allowed to continue.

Because New Jersey has 2,500 school buildings, there is no single solution to those challenges. But there are some common threads.

In the immediate term, every building needs to be physically safe. That means that the ventilation is not just adequate, but exceptional enough to help protect against a highly contagious and rapidly-mutating airborne infection. It means that the classrooms, hallways and other common areas are large enough to allow for full social distancing at all times. It means that the building can be kept immaculately clean, with all of the additional cleaning supplies, safety precautions and sanitation measures needed at this time. It means that all students and staff have access to the PPE they need to remain safe. It means that our communities are doing everything in their power to lower the rate of infection outside the schools, as the CDC says is necessary to make schools themselves safer. And it means that where those things are not possible or have not happened, we must continue to prioritize and protect everyone's health and safety by not forcing them into unsafe conditions.

It also means that we must do everything possible to prioritize vaccine access for educators. While we understand the challenges and hard choices facing the state as it distributes scarce supplies, we also know how essential is for schools to reopen -- and **stay** open -- for in-person instruction as soon as that is safely possible. Vaccinating educators is one of the most important steps we can take to make that possible.

With nearly 1.4 million students and more than 200,000 adults, one out of every six people in New Jersey is in a public school on any normal school day. Add in the people in the households they go home too and much of New Jersey is "in contact" with our public schools. That is a lot of people we can better protect by getting vaccines to educators as soon as possible. With numbers like that, the return on our investment in vaccinating educators will be invaluable to our entire state.

Longer term, of course, we need to focus on making all of our school buildings safer and better suited for teaching and learning. That is why we have long supported efforts to fund the Schools Development Authority and have always been so vocal about upgrading and replacing unsafe and inadequate school facilities across the state.

Had New Jersey done a better job of that in the last two decades, this pandemic might have played out very differently for hundreds of thousands of students. While it is too late for some of those major infrastructure projects to help us right now, this is exactly the right time to invest in much-needed repairs and rebuilding so we are never caught unprepared again.

That is my vision for this moment in time and for the future that awaits us. And that is the vision of the 200,000 extraordinary professionals I represent.

I look forward to working with you to achieve our shared vision for the students who are counting on us more than ever today.

# An open letter from public education advocates to New Jersey families and communities:



We write on behalf of New Jersey's public education stakeholder groups to share our reflections on the challenges our schools and students have encountered in the last year and to offer a vision for how to help our students emerge from this pandemic emotionally strong and academically successful.

The COVID-19 global pandemic affected every aspect of public education in New Jersey. Virtually overnight, our public schools transitioned to educating more than 1.3 million students remotely. We have had success under very trying circumstances, but the tumult of the last 10 months has also made plain the many inequities we still need to address in order to deliver on the constitutional guarantee of a "thorough and efficient system of free public schools" for every New Jersey student in every New Jersey community.

In order to address those inequities and fulfill that promise, we have come together as advocates for students and public education to explore a plan for public education after the pandemic. We have committed ourselves to thoughtful, coherent and honest analysis of the issues and problems we face. We have begun the search for solutions based on research and on the actual experiences of educators, students, parents, boards of education and communities. We did so in the interest of providing policymakers with guidance from educational experts on what is needed now and in the future for our students to grow, learn and thrive.

This has been an intentional and inclusive effort, bringing together educators, administrators, parents and policymakers for multiple conversations, and we are just beginning! We used a report from the Learning Policy Institute called *Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond* authored by Linda Darling-Hammond, Abby Schachner and Adam K. Edgerton as the starting point for our initial discussions. We not only held multiple meetings among the stakeholders, but many of the groups represented are holding meetings with their constituencies to ensure that a broad range of voices, perspectives and New Jersey experiences are included in our work and reflected in our evolving beliefs.

## **From these initial discussions, we share the following beliefs:**

- While New Jersey is known for its great public schools, the challenges of the last 11 months have heightened the need for intervention, particularly in communities where economic, social and equity issues exist.
- Adequate and equitable funding is essential to pursue policies that support all students, communities and families.
- Specific mandates without the resources to meet them are an obstacle to success.

## **Actions we take must be focused on:**

- Building a better future by reimagining a more equitable, inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment;
- Meeting the social-emotional needs of students, educators and families;
- Building systems of shared leadership that include the voices of students, parents, communities, teachers, other staff and administrators;
- Ensuring equitable access to, and participation in, a well-rounded education focused on the needs of the whole child anchored in the nine New Jersey Student Learning Standards;
- Implementing a comprehensive system of assessment that supports the use of quality, formative assessments in our classrooms to enhance learning; and,
- Using systemic analysis of practice-based evidence and research to develop intentional, coherent efforts to achieve long-term goals.

To have a meaningful positive impact on the learning conditions for students, and based upon these beliefs, we recommend that any policy adoption by the state must ensure that there is additional resource support in state budget appropriations for consistent implementation at the local school and district level.

While the Learning Policy Institute report is a useful research-based resource to inform statewide policy consideration, we note that there are New Jersey-grounded resources that can likewise be used to inform policy and support implementation. Examples of these other resources are appended to this letter.

We will continue to work collaboratively with all interested stakeholders to promote state policy and school/district level actions to support growth in student learning.

In solidarity,



American Federation of Teachers New Jersey



Arts Ed NJ



New Jersey Center for Teaching and Learning



Education Law Center



Garden State Coalition of Schools



Latino Institute, Inc.



NAACP New Jersey State Conference



New Jersey Association of School Administrators



New Jersey Association of School Business Officials



New Jersey Education Association



New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association



New Jersey School Boards Association



New Jersey Parent Teacher Association



Save Our Schools New Jersey



Tigris Solutions



New Jersey SPAN Parent Advocacy Network



New Jersey Work Environment Council

## APPENDIX:

Resources from Task Force partners to support the work of building strong Post-Pandemic public schools based on the goals of the task force message

### American Federation of Teachers (AFT) New Jersey

- [A Plan to Safely Reopen America's Schools and Communities](#) – report of National AFT on school reopening

### Arts Ed NJ

- [September Ready Guidance for Arts Education](#) - a comprehensive, 126-page document offering practical guidance for K-12 school administrators and arts educators seeking to provide meaningful arts instruction for students in the COVID and post-COVID environment.
- [Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning](#) - The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning (ArtsEdSEL) is dedicated to illuminating the intersection between arts education and social emotional learning to facilitate the embedded, intentional, and sustained application of SEL-informed arts education.
- [Statement of Principles: The Value of Arts Education](#) - The Statement of Principles outlines the eight principles that form the bedrock for quality arts education in New Jersey as agreed to by the New Jersey Association of School Administrators New Jersey Education Association New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association New Jersey School Boards Association New Jersey PTA and Arts Ed NJ
- [Arts Education & Social Emotional Learning Framework](#) - This Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning Framework is designed to illuminate the intersection between arts education and social-emotional learning to allow for the intentional application of appropriate teaching and learning strategies, with the overarching goal of enhancing art education.
- [Arts Ed NJ Professional Learning](#) - A listing of professional learning opportunities supporting the implementation of arts education, curriculum development, culturally relevant arts education, and social emotional learning.
- [Protect Arts Ed Now](#) – Strategies to help school districts make arts education a priority in a post-COVID environment.

### New Jersey Association of School Administrators

- [Vision 2020](#) – a detailed description of NJASA's vision for strong public schools.
- [New Jersey Consortia for Excellence Through Equity](#) – a program which uses an equity lens to help districts discover and implement creative strategies designed for elevating the school and life success of every student.
- [New Jersey CSA Residency Program](#) – support for aspiring educational leaders.
- [New Jersey Leadership Academy](#) - a cohort-based learning opportunity that provides a process for continuous improvement through professional learning that encourages the sharing of expertise across leadership roles and responsibilities tied to the core attributes within the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and the Teacher Leader Model Standards to strengthen leadership skills.
- [SEL Health Series](#) – support for school district leaders as they navigate the challenges of Social-Emotional Learning

### New Jersey Center for Teaching and Learning

- [Emerge Strong](#) – This landing page serves to route students, parents, teachers, and administrators to NJCTL's proven online resources that are tailored to help them enhance learning now and prepare to emerge strong from the pandemic.

### New Jersey Education Association

- [Education Recovery Plan](#) – comprehensive NJEA report on school reopening. (August 24, 2020)
- [Healing-Centered Schools](#) – As opposed to “trauma-informed care” which broadly refers to a set of principles that guide and direct how we view the impact of severe harm on young people's mental, physical and emotional health, “Healing-Centered Engagement” is a healing-centered approach that is holistic involving culture, spirituality, civic action and collective healing. (December 1, 2020)
- [NJEA Learning](#) – a comprehensive archive of online professional learning resources to support educators in the pandemic environment and beyond.
- [Priority Schools Initiative](#) – a program to improve instructional practices in addition to working to remove barriers by creating healing communities focused on the needs of the whole student to increase student achievement. (April 28, 2020)
- [Guidance Regarding Reopening School Buildings](#) – A guide to intentionally planning for school success during COVID-19 and beyond with health, safety, student learning, and equity at the forefront from the National Education Association (NEA). (June 11, 2020)
- [Teacher Leader Academy](#) – Teacher leadership offers a paradigm shift that not only allows teachers to support their peers from a nonevaluative position, but also to influence the entire system. Teacher leadership gives educators a voice at the decision-making table on instructional issues at the school and/or district level.

### **New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association**

- The Connected Action Roadmap - A Systems Approach to Strengthening Teaching, Leading, and Learning – is a process that empowers PLCs to operate more effectively in schools and leads to improved student learning through the development of a viable curriculum that aligns standards, student learning objectives, instructional design, and assessments. This framework has been endorsed by the major educational organizations in NJ. The NJDOE also supports this vision.
- NJ Leadership Academy Series 7 - Leading for an Equity Revolution: Learning from Our New Realities – a series of three professional learning sessions, participants will be challenged to develop strategies and actions to leverage what we have learned to build sustainable and equitable learning structures across all schools, prepare for challenges, and maximize new learning structures to meet individual student needs, with a focus on students who have been (traditionally) marginalized.
- NJEXCEL - NJ Expedited Certification for Educational Leadership – a state-approved, innovative, non-traditional program leading to certification for Supervisor, Principal, Director of School Counseling Services, Teacher-Leader and School Administrator, for those who have a minimum of a master's degree in a related educational field and four years of full-time experience as a teacher and/or educational specialist.
- New Jersey Teacher Leadership Certification – this FEA program provides certified teachers the opportunity to earn a State-approved teacher leader certification endorsement with eligibility to assume various teacher leader roles in their schools, districts and communities.
- New Jersey Leaders to Leaders (NJL2L) – is the sole State-approved comprehensive mentoring and induction program for new school leaders that provides trained mentors and a range of continuing professional development program and services to support new school leaders in successful completion of the State-required Two-Year Residency for Standard Principal Certification.
- NJPSA/FEA Professional Learning Catalog of Virtual Events – a list of professional learning opportunities through March includes multiple sessions on equity; culturally responsive practices; social-emotional needs of students, educators, and families; school climate; and student and staff mental health.

### **Save Our Schools New Jersey**

- In the Fallout of the Pandemic, Community Schools Show a Way Forward for Education – by Jeannie Oakes, Anna Maier, Julia Daniel for Learning Policy Institute
- Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools - An Assessment of the Impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative (Rand Corporation)
- ROI of a Community School Coordinator: A Case Study by Apex and ABC Community School Partnership
- Coalition for Community Schools: Policy brief highlighting critical findings

### **New Jersey School Boards Association**

- Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools: How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State addresses the safe reopening of schools, students' mental health, academic and extracurricular programs, budgetary issues, and preparations for the future. (May 20, 2020)
- Choosing the Best 'Road Back' for Our Children 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. (August 31, 2020)
- Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide looks at the challenges facing school districts in delivering instruction remotely to all students during the pandemic and beyond. (October 23, 2020)
- Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health shows how mental health programs are helping students withstand the pandemic. (January 27, 2021)

### **New Jersey Work Environment Council**

- National Schools Reopening Guidance: A National Call to Action, The Pandemic v Schools



**Testimony of Patricia Wright, Executive Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools  
February 9, 2021**

Good morning Chairman Rice, Chairwoman Jasey and members of the Joint Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share the perspective of school principals, assistant principals and supervisory employees on important issues that keep them up at night – the safe reopening of schools for all students, preparing for the types of trauma and emotional needs our students will bring with them as they walk through our schoolhouse doors, and the most effective approaches to restoring safe, securing and welcoming learning environments for our students.

Before I begin, I want to share some personal observations after working with our over 8,000 building-level school leaders since schools were closed last March. First and foremost, all educators must be commended because schooling continued. Educators in every role in the school stepped up, learned new technologies and adapted their teaching, school policies, services, programs and school efforts to meeting the needs of students and families during this ongoing pandemic. Principals were creative in keeping their student, staff and parent communities connected with morning videos, home visits, school house raps, and other school spirit efforts. School staff have been supported through professional learning and sometimes just an open door and a caring listener. In short, I am extremely proud of the tireless efforts of our members to first safeguard and then engage our students in learning in a variety of learning environments and schedules under extremely diverse and challenging circumstances with a stretched and stressed staff.

**Defining the Priorities – Students First**

With that context in mind, there has been a lot of talk lately about “learning loss.” How will students catch up? What will educators do when all schools are finally able to return to full in-person instruction? How will they know where students are and what they will need to fill the learning gaps?

**I would like to suggest that we first reframe those questions and then propose some solutions that will truly benefit our students and our school communities.**

The central question should be, what will students **need** when they return to in-person learning? They will need support – both academic and social and emotional. They will need to feel good about surviving the pandemic – a frightening, lonely and difficult time for everyone, even their family members and the adults who will be welcoming them back to their schools and classrooms. They will need to know they are safe and secure and that they have learned so many things during this time that will help them to be successful moving forward. Social and emotional learning,



trauma-informed instruction, and the creation of healing centered environments need to be at the top of every school's priority list.

**Students do not need to feel like they are now susceptible to failure or that their future is in jeopardy because they may not have fully grasped certain skills and knowledge.** Educators know that students need to see themselves, not just making up what they may have lost, but moving forward and accelerating their learning. Educators know how to do this work. They do it every day. Schools across the state are already collecting student data, examining and revising their curriculum, and making plans to continually use assessment information throughout the next school year to inform their instruction. This will allow them to provide the necessary interventions and supports to ensure students can continue to accelerate their learning. This is the professional practice of education, something we do very well in New Jersey.

The NJPSA wants everyone to keep the focus on what is best for our students who, through no fault of their own, may find themselves a little lost as they begin the 2021-2022 school year. We, like our students, don't want to focus on what is broken because of the pandemic. **We want to focus on lessons learned that can inform us in developing an even more robust educational system going forward. This means that the state must be proactive by providing the tools that will be most helpful in reaching our collective goal, ensuring students are successful in learning and in life.**

### The Issue of Testing

We know that every stakeholder, including parents, educators and legislators, wants to know exactly where students stand in terms of their learning. However, we must consider whether giving students the state-wide standardized assessment this spring would answer that question. Are we willing to put already stressed students in a situation that may compound their anxieties? Will we receive valuable data that will inform instruction in the fall? This data will certainly fail to be reliable given the number of variables impacting the test-taking environments during a pandemic. Academic integrity issues must be reconciled. It will be impossible to ensure the results yield meaningful information about all categories of test takers, including students from low-income families, racial and ethnic subgroups, and students with disabilities.

Falling back on pre-pandemic practices, like continuing with state-wide testing, is easy. But, dare I say it again, we are in a pandemic, and we are not operating schools in traditional ways. This moment in time calls for a different approach.



State testing is summative; in other words, it is *assessment of learning*. Schools will need to depend on formative assessment, which is *assessment for learning*. It is currently used by educators to identify where students are in relation to the academic standards that are required in their current grade level. **All learning gaps will not be evident from one end-of-year test. And using those assessments results to focus on remediating deficits is a mistake. Time spent focused solely on remediation may actually cause students to fall further behind.**

Formatively assessing students throughout the year will allow educators to bridge the learning gaps as students continue to move forward, focused simultaneously on remediation and acceleration. Having a full year of in-person instruction informed by the use of formative data will allow students to “catch up,” to gain confidence and to get the targeted assistance they need through intervention and extended learning. This will put the system on track for collecting new baseline summative data from state testing in 2021-2022.

#### **Necessary Tools for Educators – NJDOE Key Role**

**Next, we should all be asking, what do educators need to provide the best possible in-person experiences for students beginning in the fall of 2021?** During this crisis, so many decisions have been left to local control. Flexibility and local decision making is needed. However, the NJDOE can assist all schools by providing essential tools and not leaving every district to reinvent the wheel. The NJDOE has long voiced the desire to be more than an agency of compliance, but one that is a resource to schools and districts. In the last few years, the DOE has made efforts to provide standards-aligned units of study in Language Arts and Math across all grade levels. Now is the time to create more tools that are standards-aligned, like common formative assessments, a platform for educators across the state to share best instructional strategies and resources, and professional learning experiences to build the capacity of educators. Tools can also be built at the state level to support social and emotional learning and tiered systems of support. **Providing such tools to all districts begins to address the issue of providing equitable instruction for all New Jersey students. NJPSA stands ready to assist the NJDOE in this important work in whatever way we can.**

Instead of funding the spring testing administration, let's be proactive and use that money to develop the tools that will truly inform instruction in 2021-2022. And imagine, God forbid, we would ever find ourselves in this situation again, we will be ready because we will have created a state-wide system of tools to support the work of teaching and learning, wherever it may occur.



Thank you for the opportunity to share our view of the pathway forward for learning in New Jersey post- pandemic. I would be happy to answer any of your questions.

Submitted by:

Patricia Wright  
NJPSA Executive Director



Written Testimony from SEL4NJ  
Joint Committee on the Public Schools  
February 9, 2021

Social-Emotional Learning for New Jersey (SEL4NJ) would like to thank the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for providing this opportunity to provide testimony in regards to this critical issue facing our students and educators.

SEL4NJ, a statewide coalition with over 1100 members is an affiliate of a national organization, SEL4US, which was founded in 2018 and now comprises 19 state affiliates. It is worth noting one of the founding members of SEL4US and SEL4NJ was Dr. Maurice Elias of Rutgers University and one of the nation's leading experts on social emotional learning and school climate. Included in your packs is information about SEL4NJ along with a one minute PSA video.

We start our testimony today knowing that research conducted prior to the pandemic has shown -- has proven without any question - that students' social and emotional needs must be met before they can learn.

It is also important to note SEL should not be perceived as something separate from academic learning- SEL is most effective when infused throughout the curriculum, modeled in every class, and in every hallway. SEL is not separate from academics - social-emotional skills are what allow us to be good problem-solvers, attentive listeners, valued team members, and provide the strength and resiliency to cope with adversity and uncertainty.

And the pandemic, with its accompanying wide-spread impact of stress and trauma has exacerbated existing inequities and has amplified the importance and the urgency of supporting the social and emotional well-being of all those in the school community - students, staff, and parents.

SEL4NJ defines social-emotional learning broadly, consisting of, but not limited to the five CASEL competencies which have been adopted by the NJ Department of Education - self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. All skills necessary to cope with our current situation as well as fundamental to success in work and life in the 21st century.

In addition to these 5 SEL competencies we include under the SEL4NJ umbrella positive school and classroom climate, core values that promote SEL as a goal, character education, whole child/whole school approaches, restorative discipline policies and practices, responsive classrooms, mental and physical health, anti-bullying practices, and social justice and equity.

All of these work hand-in-hand with a focus on developing the CASEL 5 skills to create an environment where teachers and students alike can teach, learn, and thrive.

We believe this committee should consider the following three points as foundational when planning for the resumption of live schooling. All three areas are supported by strong research.

1. SEL supports student learning and can reduce the achievement gap.

2. SEL is a form of trauma-informed practice which helps reduce stress and anxiety - for both adults and students.
3. SEL can help to address damaging inequities faced by vulnerable populations which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

These three priorities were identified by six issue-specific working groups as part of SEL4NJ's statewide landscape analysis that began in 2019. Over 90 representatives from 60 organizations throughout the state participated including representatives from NJ's key education associations, school districts, and leaders in the field of SEL. The complete report can be found on the SEL4NJ website. Recently the teams re-convened and updated their findings in response to COVID and equity issues. This coming Friday (February 12th) we will be holding an open meeting updating our constituents with the findings.

A successful return to school will need to be organized, efficient, and effective guided by clear priorities. To achieve this:

- The adults must be the first priority. We must prioritize adult recovery and social-emotional skills following the unprecedented levels of stress experienced this past year. It is important to focus on Adult SEL so that the adults can model and teach SEL skills to their students. Adult emotions are contagious to their students.
- The link between SEL and academic and life success needs to be clear to all - students, teachers, and families.
- Efforts to address the social-emotional well-being of students and staff need to be coordinated within each school, district wide, and communicated with the wider school community.

Specifically, our organization asks public leaders to publicly champion the importance of SEL and spread awareness via a public education campaign.

The following steps will help to accomplish this goal:

1. Provide resources and public support for a public education campaign on what equity-oriented social and emotional learning is; including its benefits, how it provides critical support to both teaching and learning during re-entry, as well as addressing inequities experienced by vulnerable populations.
2. Encourage districts and school leaders to set a clear vision for integrating an SEL lens into re-entry protocols and to plan for implementation that supports educators on the ground
3. Educate parents and families, who are deeply concerned about their children's well-being and learning loss, about how SEL skills have been associated with positive long-term academic and social outcomes, so these stakeholders are supportive of these strategies and practice them at home.
4. Encourage schools to collect data from students to understand and determine school-wide, classroom, and individual needs, and to gather information on student experiences during COVID, to determine the most appropriate interventions to address trauma, build resilience, foster community, and support learning on reopening schools.

We also underscore the importance of providing funding, training, and guidance for preparing all current and pre-service educators for the successful integration of SEL, which is facilitated through strategic planning of districts and schools committed to SEL.

1. Begin with adults by providing effective tools for processing and managing the stress experienced during COVID.
2. Provide funding to support effective professional development to support integrated and home-grown, responsive approaches to SEL, using common language and referencing common values in school-wide, classroom, and extracurricular settings.
3. Encourage approaches that involve parents and families in SEL skill development and reinforcement at home.
4. Identify quality SEL providers and products that enable schools to leverage funding effectively to positively impact their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share the work of SEL4NJ. Our recommendations are based on the recent landscape analyses completed by our work groups done through the lens of the role of SEL in addressing the impact of the COVID pandemic and the heightened focus on systemic racism and inequity in our society. Our organization stands ready to help address the great challenges facing education in New Jersey in any way that you see fit.

Submitted with respect by the Board of Trustees of SEL4NJ  
Elizabeth Hansen Warner, President SEL4NJ  
[SEL4NJ.org](http://SEL4NJ.org)



### **Contact Details**

Website – [SEL4NJ.org](http://SEL4NJ.org)  
Email - [lwerner@sel4nj.org](mailto:lwerner@sel4nj.org)

### **SEL4NJ Public Service Announcement**

Social Emotional Learning Public Service Announcement – SEL4NJ

### **Mission**

The mission of SEL4NJ is to continuously build a network of organizations and individuals in New Jersey that are committed to the importance of developing students' social and emotional competencies, and through this collaboration, promote a systematic and intentional integration of SEL, as broadly defined, in schools and other organizations, including before and after school programming.

### **Vision**

The vision of SEL4NJ is that all students in New Jersey have access to schools that provide a culture and climate that is respectful, caring, challenging, engaging, inspiring, safe and healthy. These schools are civic-minded and culturally responsive, promoting educational equity and help students and adults build social-emotional competencies and develop positive relationships connecting them to the school, their community, and each other.

### **SEL4NJ Board of Trustees**

Christy Tighe Biedron  
Maurice Elias, Ph.D.  
Stuart Green, DMH  
Alicia Raya-Hawrylak, Ph.D.  
Patricia Heindel, Ph.D.  
William Trusheim, Ed.D  
Elizabeth Hansen Warner  
Mark Biedron– *Founding Board Member (deceased)*



33x

# Pooled Testing Initiative for K-12 Schools

January 12, 2021



# Today's presentation

## Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

- Russell Johnston
- Lauren Woo

3/1x

## Department of Public Health/COVID-19 Command Center

- Dr. Catherine Brown
- Elizabeth Larsen
- Jeremiah Hay

## Shah Foundation

- Jill Shah
- Ross Wilson

## District Leaders

- Dede Galdston, Watertown
- Marice Edouard-Vincent and David Murphy, Medford
- Steve Zrike, Salem



# CONTENTS

01

Rationale and Overview

02

Overview of Pooled Testing in Schools

03

Statewide Contract for Pooled Testing  
Services

04

Required Preconditions

05

Lessons from Salem, Medford &  
Watertown

06

Next Steps and Q & A

01

# Rationale and Overview

36x

## Rationale

- Schools and districts across the state are working to implement the health and safety requirements for in-person or hybrid schooling models.
  - COVID-19 testing in K-12 schools is an additional mitigation strategy
    - Mobile Testing Unit for outbreak response
    - Abbott BinaxNOW Rapid Antigen Tests for symptomatic students/staff
    - Pooled Testing for surveillance/screening
- The use of these tools and resources will increase districts' capacity and resiliency to maintain safety for students, faculty and staff by keeping transmission in schools low.

37x



## Pooled Testing Launch

- During an initial 6-week period, participating districts and schools will receive the test kits, support from a testing services provider and the testing software at no cost.
- Following the initial 6-week launch, districts and schools may continue using pooled testing by purchasing the tests and any other accompanying testing materials and software from a statewide contract using their federal stimulus dollars.
- Districts and schools not participating in the 6-week launch can use statewide contract for purchasing these services once available.

28x



## Pooled Testing Participants

- Districts and schools are invited to participate if:
  - They are providing any form of in-person learning (full in person, hybrid, high needs only, etc.)
  - They are in a remote model but plan to move to in-person learning
- Public schools and districts are invited to participate in the early launch
  - Local education agencies (districts, charter schools)
  - Education collaboratives
  - Approved special education schools
- Private and parochial schools are not able to participate in the early launch, but they are able to purchase tests, materials, and software directly from testing services providers.
- Students, teachers, and all school staff are eligible to be tested through this pooled testing initiative.



02

# Overview of Pooled Testing in Schools

HDX

## Pooled Testing Overview

- Pooled testing involves mixing roughly 10-25 samples, or swabs, together in a “batch” or “pool” then testing the pooled sample with a PCR test.
- The test is performed once per week on an anterior nasal swab (“short swab”) and results are delivered in approximately 24-48 hours.
- The samples can be administered by any trained school staff.
- Students in certain age groups can take their own samples under supervision.

4/x

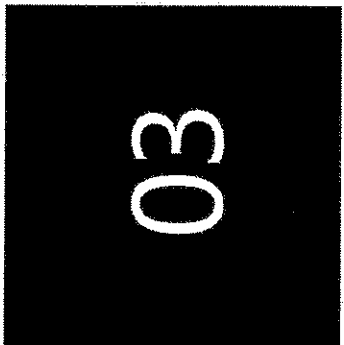


## Pooled Testing Protocol

- If a pooled test result is negative, then all individuals within that pool are presumed negative and may remain in school.
- If a pooled test result is positive, then all individuals in the pool are retested individually, called “reflex testing”
  - The Abbott BinaxNOW rapid point-of-care antigen test will be the primary source for this individual follow-up testing.
  - In the rare event that a positive pool yields all negative individual BinaxNOW tests, all individuals from that positive pool may be required to take an additional individual PCR test.

4/2x





# Statewide Contract for Pooled Testing Services

43x

## Statewide Contract & Included Services

### Testing Service Provider

- Onboarding and continuing training
- Lab processing
- Secure tech system
- Customer Support

44x

### Schools & Districts

- Coordination and direct administration of program
- Overseeing ongoing operations
- Conducting "follow up" tests on positive pools



## Statewide Contract & Included Services

- A statewide contract for Pooled Testing Service Providers is currently in development.
  - Approximate cost: \$5.00/swab minimum
- Testing Service Providers will manage the following:
  - Operations and logistics
    - Delivery of tests to schools
    - Testing hardware (tubes, labels, etc.)
    - Coordination/communication with the testing laboratory
  - Technology software associated with pooled testing
  - Training for school and district personnel
  - Customer service/support for school and district personnel

45x



## Additional Services for Pooled Testing

- In most cases, districts and schools will rely on their own, in-district personnel or contracted providers to complete the following services:
  - Manage all testing logistics, including overseeing test administration, data entry, software management (i.e., testing coordinator/manager)
  - Administer the specimen collection to students and staff
  - Administer any necessary follow-up testing with Abbott BinaxNOW (including reporting of results)
  - Transport tests to laboratory for processing (likely 1x/day)

46x



## Optional Services for Purchase

- If a district or school lacks the internal capacity or personnel to administer and transport the tests to the laboratory, they may be able to purchase the following services from the statewide contract:
  - Onsite testing coordinator/manager
    - The Testing Service Provider will provide an individual to support the onsite management of the test administration
    - Onsite test administrators/specimen collectors
    - The Testing Service Provider will provide the health professionals to administer the test to students and staff through, for example, a subcontract with an EMT service provider.
  - Transportation of tests from the school to the laboratory
    - The Testing Service Provider will develop a contract with a daily courier service or other shipping service to deliver tests to the laboratory.

47x



04

## Required Preconditions

48x

## Overview of Required Preconditions

- Prior to implementation of Pooled Testing, the following preconditions must be in place:
  - Appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)
  - Proper authorization and consent from staff and students
  - A system to offer reflex testing for individual students in positive pools (i.e., BinaxNOW)
- Once the preconditions are met, DESE will confirm that a district or school is permitted to begin Pooled Testing.

49x



## Appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Pooled Testing

- For healthcare personnel collecting specimens the following PPE is required:
  - Fitted N95 mask or higher-level respirator (a surgical mask can be used if a N95 is not available)
  - Eye protection
  - Gloves
  - Gown
- For staff observing collection in students the following PPE is required (6ft distance must be maintained):
  - Surgical mask

50x



## Proper authorization and consent from staff and students

- Districts and schools must obtain parent/guardian and staff consent for administration of Pooled Testing in school, including:
  - Consent to participate in pooled tests
  - Consent to transmit student information via tech platform
  - Consent for any necessary follow up tests, including administering the Abbott BinaxNOW tests and reporting their results.
- A sample authorization and consent form will be provided to districts and schools participating.

5/4



## Follow Up Testing for Positive Pools

- Districts and schools must have a process to individually test students in positive pools.
  - Follow up testing must be established prior to administration of pooled testing.
- The Abbott BinaxNOW rapid point-of-care antigen test will be the primary source of this individual follow-up testing.
  - The overview of the required preconditions can be found on the Abbott BinaxNOW page of the DESE website: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/covid19/BinaxNOW/>.
- Districts & schools should consider where follow up testing occurs.
  - Centralized school location away from classrooms/students (e.g., auditorium)
  - Outside (Consider temperature restrictions for Abbott BinaxNOW tests.)



52x

05

# Lessons from Salem, Medford and Watertown

53x

## Case Studies

- Steve Zrike, Salem Public Schools
- Marice Edouard-Vincent and David Murphy, Medford Public Schools
- Dede Galdston, Watertown Public Schools

574x



06

Next Steps  
Questions and Answers

## Next Steps

- By January 15, indicate initial interest in participation: <https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6123054/Pooled-Testing-Interest-Survey>
- Assess in-district resources to determine which services will be purchased from the statewide contract.
- DESE will send final approval to those who confirm participation.
- Support for prerequisites begins immediately.
- Questions may be sent to [K12COVID19testing@mass.gov](mailto:K12COVID19testing@mass.gov)

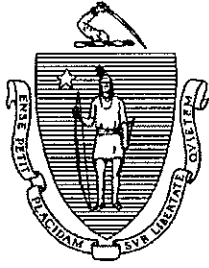


56x

THANK YOU



57x



Jeffrey C. Riley  
Commissioner

# Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906

Telephone: (781) 338-3000  
TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, and Leaders of Educational Collaboratives and Approved Special Education Schools  
**From:** Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education  
**Date:** January 22, 2021  
**Subject:** Pooled Testing in K-12 Schools – COVID-19 Mitigation Strategy

On January 8, 2021, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) introduced COVID-19 screening testing using a pooled testing approach in the school setting as an additional mitigation strategy for SARS-CoV-2. Districts and schools were invited to participate in an informational webinar on January 12 to learn more about the pooled testing program and were asked to indicate initial interest in participating by January 15. Documents and ongoing information regarding this initiative can be found on the new [Pooled Testing in K-12 Schools section](#) of the DESE website.

This memo provides more detailed information regarding the protocols for pooled testing, the statewide contract and early launch, the preconditions for participation, specific Pooled Testing Services Providers and associated costs.

After careful review of this memo, districts and schools that would like to participate should complete an [Application to be an Authorized School](#) and upload other required documents. DESE and EOHHS will match districts and schools with Pooled Testing Services Providers on a rolling basis as completed documents are submitted.

Questions related to this initiative should be sent to [k12COVID19testing@mass.gov](mailto:k12COVID19testing@mass.gov).

### Description of Statewide Contract, DESE-Funded Launch, and Preconditions for Participation

EOHHS and DESE are making pooled testing services available at no cost to participating districts and schools until March 28, 2021. After March 28, 2021, districts and schools may continue testing by purchasing pooled testing services from a statewide contract.

Before matching between schools and a Pooled Testing Services Provider can take place, interested schools must submit a Statement of Assurances about the administration of the pooled testing services program and formally apply to participate in the program. Districts and schools

that submit this application on or before January 28, 2021 will be given preference in the matching process.

- *Application to be an Authorized School:* To leverage economies of scale and geographic efficiencies, the district or school must submit an application to participate in the program. This application includes detailed information about the specific schools participating in the initiative, including the predominant learning model, number of students/staff to be tested, and preferences about the operations of the program at each school (swabbing location, need for shipping or other services, vendor preference if any, etc.). [Click here to complete the Application to be an Authorized School](#)<sup>1</sup>. Please note, districts and organizations with multiple schools should fill out one application on behalf of each school in their district or organization. Districts and schools must provide specific school-level information as part of the Application to be an Authorized School. The spreadsheet can be found on the [Pooled Testing section](#) of the DESE website, but it needs to be uploaded as part of the application.
- *Statement of Assurances:* To support the effective administration of this program, as well as the safe and effective administration of pooled testing, districts and schools must agree to a series of assurances before they are authorized to access the pooled testing program. The appropriate signatory must be an individual with the authority to agree to the terms outlined in the Statement of Assurances, such as the superintendent or executive director. The Statement of Assurances provides an overview of the responsibilities of schools and districts, and the requirements for the pooled testing program. Noncompliance with the assurances may result in the termination of services. Districts and schools will be asked to upload this document as an attachment to their Application to be an Authorized School. The document can also be found on the [Pooled Testing section](#) of the DESE website, but it needs to be uploaded as part of the Application to be an Authorized School (see above).

After districts and schools submit the application and Statement of Assurances, DESE and EOHHS will match Pooled Testing Services Providers (see page 4 and Appendix A, below) with districts and schools using a variety of factors, including, expressed preference, vendor capacity, geographic location, in-district capacity to administer tests, and number of staff and students being tested.

#### Preconditions for Pooled Testing:

In addition to the Statement of Assurances and Application of an Authorized School, districts and schools participating in pooled testing must complete the following three preconditions before testing begins.

1. *Obtain Consent from Individuals to be Tested and to Report Follow-Up Test Results to the Department of Public Health (DPH):*

---

<sup>1</sup> The full link to the Application to be an Approved School can be found here:  
<https://survey.alchemer.com/s3/6158744/Official-Application-to-be-an-Authorized-School-in-the-EOHHS-DESE-Pooled-Testing-Program>

Consent is required for an individual to participate in pooled testing and follow-up testing and to report follow-up test results to DPH via the Project Beacon system or the software platform provided by the Pooled Testing Services Provider. Individuals must agree to all terms to be tested.

Districts and schools must make advance preparations to obtain consent from individuals to: (a) administer pooled testing; (b) administer follow-up testing, and (c) share individual test results with DPH via the Project Beacon platform or the software platform provided by the Pooled Testing Services Provider. All three components of consent must be provided before individuals can participate in the pooled testing program. Individuals who do not provide all three components of consent cannot participate in the pooled testing program. Districts and schools may share students' personally identifiable information with Pooled Testing Services Providers *only* after receipt of consent from parents/guardians or individuals who can consent for themselves.

Districts and schools that use sample consent forms provided by DESE for pooled testing and follow-up testing do not have to separately complete the consent and reporting forms required for the Abbott BinaxNOW testing program released on December 4, 2020. The sample consent forms can be found on the Pooled Testing section of the DESE website.

## *2. Follow-Up Testing:*

Districts and schools must have a process to individually test students and staff in positive pools with a diagnostic test for COVID-19. The test must have FDA Emergency Use Authorization. The Abbott BinaxNOW rapid point-of-care antigen test will be the primary source of this individual follow-up testing. Districts and schools that are not already enrolled in the Abbott BinaxNOW initiative are invited to complete the preconditions outlined in the Abbott BinaxNOW K-12 Testing Program Memo & Checklist from the Abbott BinaxNOW section of the DESE website. (Please note, the preconditions for the Abbott BinaxNOW program contained in this memo have recently been changed to allow for easier entry into and administration of the program.)

A district or school that chooses not to administer the Abbott BinaxNOW follow-up test, must have a process to administer individual follow-up tests to students and staff shortly after receiving a positive pool result. While Abbott BinaxNOW tests will be provided to districts at no cost, districts will be responsible for the cost of a different follow-up testing approach if they chose not to use the Abbott BinaxNOW tests.

### Reporting Follow-Up Test Results:

All follow-up test results should be entered into a software system (either the Project Beacon system or the platform offered by the Pooled Testing Services Provider) as tests are performed, and by no later than the end of the day the test was performed. The software systems will report the results of all individual follow-up tests to DPH.

In addition to automated reports of all tests results to DPH, district and school staff must report follow-up test results<sup>2</sup> to the individual who was tested or, if the individual is a student, to the person who consented to the testing (i.e., the student's parent/guardian). Additionally, district and school staff must notify DESE's Rapid Response Help Center at 781-338-3500 of positive follow-up test results.

3. *Maintaining Adequate Supply of Personal Protective Equipment:*

All staff administering pooled testing must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when conducting tests and handling patient specimens. For personnel collecting specimens, the following PPE is required:

- N95 mask or higher-level respirator (a surgical mask can be used only if an N95 is not available)
- Eye protection
- Gloves
- Gown, when collecting specimens

For personnel observing the self-administration of specimen collection, the following PPE is required:

- Surgical mask

Refer to DPH Comprehensive PPE Guidance or contact your local board of health for further information regarding the proper use of PPE.

**Pooled Testing Services Providers:**

Under the statewide contract, districts and schools will work with a Pooled Testing Services Provider that will manage the following services:

- *Operations and logistics of pooled testing:* The vendor will procure, supply, and ship to the district the physical materials needed for testing, including swabs, test tubes, label printers, and any other necessary materials.
- *Training:* The vendor will conduct "train the trainer" style training to support school districts with launch, including how to collect, store, and label samples, as well as how to use the software associated with pooled testing. Training will also include an overview of the DESE/DPH approved protocols that schools should follow in the case of a positive or negative pool and in the case of a positive pool, the protocols associated with follow-up testing. Training will also include the steps to obtain consent. Each district is then responsible for disseminating the training information within their own school communities.

---

<sup>2</sup> A sample test reporting letter can be found in the Family Communications Toolkit for districts and schools.

- *Software associated with pooled testing:* The vendor will supply a software platform that schools will use to enter pool information, order supplies, track test results, and centralize other necessary testing information. The platform will return test results within 24-48 hours of the lab receiving the samples. The licensing fees for the software will be bundled into the overall cost and will be managed through the vendor.
- *Technical assistance/customer support to district/school personnel:* The vendor will provide customer service solutions for the district. They will work directly with the testing coordinator or other administrators at the district to troubleshoot on topics including delivery issues, specimen collection, labeling tubes, transporting samples, test results, isolation and quarantine protocols, and training.
- *Transportation of specimen from the school to the laboratory:* The vendor will offer a daily courier service or other same-day shipping service to deliver tests to the laboratory. In order to encourage efficiency, districts and schools in the same geographic location may be encouraged to collaborate on shipping logistics. Districts and schools that choose to organize their own transportation of collected specimens to the laboratory may opt out of this service.

For districts and schools that require additional support and capacity to implement pooled testing, the following optional services may be requested from the Pooled Testing Services Providers. DESE will endeavor to fulfill requests for these additional services; however, implementation may happen on a longer timeframe and capacity is not guaranteed:

- *Onsite test specimen collectors:* The vendor may provide the trained professionals to administer the test to students and staff through, for example, a subcontract with an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) service provider or other health staffing agency.
- *Onsite testing coordinator:* The vendor may provide an individual on an hourly basis to support the onsite management of the pooled testing program.

Please see Appendix A for the specific Pooled Testing Services Providers and an overview of the associated costs.

### **Overview of Pooled Testing and Protocols**

Pooled testing involves mixing several test samples together in a “batch” or “pool” and then testing the pooled sample with a PCR test for detection of SARS-CoV-2<sup>3</sup>. Pooled testing will be administered at school either by trained school staff, including school nurses, or onsite test specimen collectors. For staff and for students in grades 2 and up, the test will be conducted by self-administration. Testing for all consenting students and staff members must take place once per week with an anterior nasal swab<sup>4</sup>. Collected specimens are delivered to approved laboratories via same-day delivery, and results are returned within 24-48 hours. Please note, results may be returned by the Pooled Testing Services Providers’ software platform during non-school hours. It is the expectation that testing coordinator will review results and implement

<sup>3</sup> FDA, Pooled sampled testing and screening for COVID-19, (2020, August 24). Available at: <https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/pooled-sample-testing-and-screening-testing-covid-19>

<sup>4</sup> An anterior nasal swab is taken from the shallow, nasal walls of the nostril.

protocols during operating hours.

If a pooled test result is negative, then all individuals within that pool are presumed negative and may remain in school. If a pooled test result is positive, then all individuals in the pool must be retested individually. The Abbott BinaxNOW rapid point-of-care antigen test will be the primary source of this individual follow-up testing. Districts and schools that are not already enrolled in the Abbott BinaxNOW initiative are invited to complete the preconditions outlined in the Abbott BinaxNOW K-12 Testing Program Memo & Checklist from the Abbott BinaxNOW section of the DESE website.

*Considerations for Pooled Testing:*

- Based on guidance from DPH, staff and students who are in grades 2 and above are encouraged to self-administer pooled testing swabs under appropriate supervision and at the discretion of the trained observer. This limits the amount of PPE required for testing administrators and enables testing to be done more quickly, reducing the impact on student learning time. Tests must be administered with individuals at least 6 feet apart, as masks will briefly be partially lowered during administration.
- All district and school staff and students who submit consent forms are strongly encouraged to participate in weekly pooled testing. This includes contracted staff such as bus drivers. The only exception is that any individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 90 days should be excluded from pooled testing. Please note that at this time, out of school time partners are not eligible to participate.
- Districts and schools should determine pool size based on a number of factors, including vendor and current community/school incidence of COVID-19. Because the cost and logistical advantages of pooled testing are dependent upon a relatively low portion of pools being positive, schools in communities with high prevalence, or schools that have seen a high share of positive pools in previous weeks, should consider lowering their pool size. The pool size should not be lower than 5, and while most vendors will have a cap of 10, at least one vendor will allow pools larger than that.
- “Membership” within a given pool should remain as constant as possible. Teachers, should be pooled with their students, because a positive result on a pool full of teachers may cause staffing issues while each teacher gets individually re-tested. If districts or schools strongly prefer to create pools comprised exclusively of staff they are limited to a maximum of 5 swabs per staff-only pool and must have Abbott BinaxNOW tests available for immediate follow-up testing.
- Pooled testing should be conducted once a week – no more and no less.

*Protocols and Considerations for Follow-Up Testing using Abbott BinaxNOW:*

- Abbott BinaxNOW rapid antigen tests are recommended for the purposes of follow-up testing on positive pools. (Please note, Abbott BinaxNOW may be used *only* on individuals that are symptomatic or a member of a positive pool.)
- In the case where positive pool results are returned when students are out of school (i.e., weekend or remote days in the hybrid model), asymptomatic pool members may return to the school or a follow-up testing site for the sole purpose of follow-up testing. Some

districts currently piloting pooled testing have had success with a single, centralized drive through follow-up testing site.

- Symptomatic individuals should not return to school for any reason, including follow-up testing; instead they should follow the Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios.
- In the case where a positive pool returns no Abbott BinaxNOW positives upon follow-up testing, all members of the pool should receive individual PCR tests. Individuals should follow the Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios when interpreting individual PCR results. Each Pooled Testing Services Providers can offer, for an additional cost, follow-up PCR tests. DESE will fund these follow-up PCR tests *only* if all Abbott BinaxNOW tests on the individuals in the positive pool return negative results.
- Individuals in a positive pool must be retested individually. If an individual from a positive pool is not retested, they must follow the Protocols for Responding to COVID-19 Scenarios before returning to in person learning.

## Appendix A: Pooled Testing Services Providers Overview

This Appendix will be updated if any additional vendors are added to the state contract.

Prices are subject to change after March 28, 2021. It is likely that additional pooled testing services providers will offer services at that time.

Pooled Testing Services Provider	<u>CIC Health</u>	<u>Concentric by Ginkgo</u>	<u>Project Beacon</u>
<b>Description</b>	CIC Health is the largest COVID testing service provider to schools in New England, serving over 120 schools with results on average in 14 hours from arrival at the lab. We offer a “no-PHI” workflow that speeds collection and reduces labor and training requirements, while our small 10-swab pools limit disruption from positive pools.	Ginkgo has a plan to provide simple, affordable testing for every school in America. Our self-swab pooled testing allows for up to 25 swabs in a single pool and plugs into an integrated online portal where administrators can easily view results across classrooms.	Project Beacon is a social benefit organization focused on helping to increase the capacity, availability, accessibility, and affordability of COVID-19 testing in Massachusetts. We have no profit motive and any excess revenues over costs will be used to support public needs or, at the end of the project, donated to charity.
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://cic-health.com/schools">cic-health.com/schools</a>	<a href="https://www.concentricbyginkgo.com/">https://www.concentricbyginkgo.com/</a>	<a href="http://Beacontesting.com">Beacontesting.com</a>
<b>Processing Laboratory</b>	Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge MA	Ginkgo Bioworks, Boston MA	Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, Cambridge MA
<b>Maximum # of swabs per pool</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Costs</b>			
<i>Pooled test fee (per pool)</i>	<b>5-10 swabs: \$50</b>	<b>5-10 swabs: \$50</b>	<b>5-10 swabs: \$30</b>
		<b>11-25 swabs: \$85</b>	
<i>Setup fees (one time)</i>	<b>\$800</b>	<b>\$800</b>	<b>\$500</b>
<i>Admin / customer support fee (monthly)</i>	<b>\$250</b>	<b>\$250</b>	<b>\$500</b>
<i>Transportation costs (e.g., shipping/courier)</i>	Pass-through*	Pass-through*	Pass-through*
<i>PCR follow-ups (if needed)</i>	\$47.11 (physician order included), \$35.83 (physician order not included)	\$82.00 (physician order included)	\$26.50 (physician order not included)
<i>3<sup>rd</sup> party on-site support (monthly)</i>	Offered; costs vary (labor ~\$100+/hour)	Offered; costs vary (labor ~\$100+/hour)	Offered; costs vary (labor ~\$100+/hour)
<b>Consent Process</b>	Electronic or Paper-based	Paper-based; integration into tech platform in progress, expected by launch	Electronic or Paper-based
<b>Technology Platform for Pooled Testing**</b>	School choice whether to include personal information for pooled testing	Does not require personal information for pooled testing	Requires personal information for pooled testing
<b>Technology Platform for Follow Up Reporting</b>	Same system for pooled, Abbott BinaxNOW, and follow up PCR testing	Same system for pooled, Abbott BinaxNOW, and follow up PCR testing	Same system for pooled, Abbott BinaxNOW, and PCR testing

\*Pass-through costs are billed on a reimbursement basis. The state will cover pass-through costs until March 28.

\*\*Schools and districts must follow guidance and all applicable laws, rules, and regulations regarding privacy.



# 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

February 9, 2021

## NJSBA TESTIMONY to the JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Thank you Co-Chairs Rice and Jasey for inviting the New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of the state's public school districts, to testify at today's hearing. My name is Jonathan Pushman, NJSBA Director of Governmental Relations. The issues you plan to address are at forefront of our members' minds, and today's hearing provides an opportunity for stakeholders representing a variety of constituencies to offer their perspective on how we can collectively move forward.

We appreciate your invitation to provide feedback on how New Jersey can successfully reopen schools while addressing the learning loss and the social emotional impact the pandemic has had on the students and teachers of New Jersey. These are indeed weighty and sensitive issues that will take a concerted effort of all interested stakeholders throughout the educational community to effectively address. What I would like to do for the purposes of today's hearing is to highlight some of the work NJSBA has done over the past year in providing guidance and resources on the state of education during the pandemic, and what we will need to do as we move out of the emergency and into what we all anticipate will be a new normal for public education in New Jersey.

So far, the NJSBA has issued a series of four reports since our world was turned upside down by COVID-19:

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.

We believe each of these reports can serve as a vital resource to not only school board members, but to the broader educational community, as well as key policymakers such as yourselves, as we chart a path forward for our students. I hope you will give them due consideration, and let us know if you have any questions or would like to further discuss any aspect of the reports.

### Safely Reopening of Schools

It probably goes without saying that board of education members are eager to reopen their respective district facilities and return students to in-person instruction as soon as possible. Obviously, doing so safely and without risking the health of students or staff is of paramount importance. Once we are able to get more teachers and staff vaccinated, we can then return to in-person learning and districts will be able to focus their time, energy and

66x

resources on the issues that are the focus of today's hearing – addressing learning loss and the social-emotional impact of the pandemic on students.

Currently, it is unclear when enough people will be vaccinated to make a return to some semblance of normalcy possible. And unfortunately, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines has been disappointingly slow. Additionally, teachers and other school personnel have not been given the level of prioritization to receive the vaccine, which is essential to reopening schools to more in-person instruction. At the request of several of our members, the N.J. School Boards Association drafted a sample resolution urging the governor to give appropriate priority in the statewide administration of the COVID-19 vaccine to all public school district personnel. Many have or plan to adopt this resolution. Anything this body can do to give school personnel the priority we believe they deserve would certainly be helpful and appreciated.

No conversation surrounding the reopening of schools can occur without emphasizing what all school districts can use more of: financial resources. Districts have and will continue to incur expenses that they never could have planned or budgeted for when COVID-19 took hold of the world last March. Even before the pandemic, the state had failed to meet its existing obligations under the school funding formula. While we appreciate that the Legislature and Governor Murphy have made a concerted effort in recent years to increase overall education funding, we believe more needs to be done. Flat funding will not be sufficient for another year. It is critically important that the state prioritize increased funding for schools in the next state budget so they have the financial resources to confront the learning and social-emotional needs of students.

As state funding has fallen short of what districts need, federal assistance also remains woefully inadequate. Fortunately, our elected representatives in Washington passed the most recent, long-awaited COVID relief package in late December. In what we consider an important first step, New Jersey is slated to receive approximately \$1.2 billion of the \$54 billion dedicated to K-12 school reopening efforts in the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA) Act, which equals four times what the state received in the CARES Act approved last March. However, this amount falls significantly short of the \$200 billion our partners at the National School Boards Association estimate schools will eventually need. President Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus proposal would provide an additional \$130 billion toward K-12 schools, and we are hopeful that Congress will take swift action to approve this desperately needed assistance.

### **Social-Emotional Needs & Mental Health**

While the social-emotional needs and mental health of our students were serious concerns before the pandemic, they have garnered increased attention during this extended period of social isolation. Fortunately, as illustrated in the NJSBA's fourth report on the impact of the pandemic, a compilation of national and state data, anecdotal information from superintendents, and an NJSBA survey all show that, for the most part, the worst has not occurred.

Although student suicides and incidents of self-harm remain at disturbingly high levels, the coronavirus pandemic has apparently not created a new wave of incidents. A NJSBA survey of board members, superintendents and staff conducted this past fall showed that nearly half of the respondents said, "We do not see evidence of more students in crisis, but in general students are more anxious and depressed." In addition, nearly one-third responded, "In general, students are coping well. Our district has not seen increased evidence of serious crises."

This should not be interpreted to mean that the pandemic has not had any impact on the mental health of students. One national survey to assess the mental health impact on school-age children revealed that, since their school

buildings closed, young people's levels of concern about the present and future have increased, and indicators of overall health and well-being have suffered. More than one-quarter of students say they do not feel connected at all to school adults. A similar percentage do not feel connected to classmates or to their school community.

Another academic study published in the fall concluded that the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health may continue long after the pandemic ends. Loneliness (which has a strong linkage to mental health), quarantining and social isolation can lead to future mental health problems. Therefore, mental health providers should continue to provide services and monitor adolescents for lingering psychological effects long after the pandemic ends.

While more details can be found in the NJSBA's latest report, a summary of a few of our key proposals on how we can address students' mental health and social-emotional needs follows below:

- **More state and federal aid is needed.** As mentioned above, the most recent COVID relief package represents a welcome first step, but the NJSBA remains convinced that more assistance will be necessary to help districts effectively address the enormous and ongoing challenges caused by the pandemic.
- **Postpone high-stakes federally required assessments.** Such tests can be stressful for students, and administering them in this educational environment could also create a significant drain on resources better spent on providing mental health services for students and maintaining a high-quality education program.
- **Approve a pending five-bill package** to assist students with their mental health needs. This package, sponsored Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald, contains a variety of proposals intended to enhance mental health services and resources available to New Jersey's public school students.
- **Strengthen and preserve the School Based Youth Service Program (SBYSP).** Threatened with elimination in FY2021 state budget, but fortunately preserved by the Legislature, the SBYSP provides critical services, including mental health counseling and suicide prevention, in a school setting. With a proven track record of success, it must be maintained.
- **Develop a long-term recovery plan.** In conjunction with the state's major education groups and a diverse array of district representatives from around the state, the NJDOE should consider developing short- and long-term plans to help students recover from any delay in learning progression caused by the disruptive events of the past year.

The NJSBA's most recent report includes various examples of specific strategies districts have employed to help students deal with the stress and anxiety they have experienced over the past year. One district demonstrated its commitment to student mental health by hiring more counselors also address students' social and emotional well-being while teaching healthy coping mechanisms and strategies for navigating difficult circumstances. Another district has implemented a robust "Teen Mental Health First Aid" program that offers training sessions to help staff support students when they need help in dealing with their feelings. And one has demonstrated how building effective community networks to deliver meals to disadvantaged families has not only helped them cope with the economic fallout of the pandemic, but also served to combat the social isolation problem. These are just a few examples of how districts across the state are stepping up to help meet the needs of their students, staff and community at large.

### **Student Learning Loss**

The NJSBA believes strongly in the importance of assessing and remediating any learning loss, gaps or delays resulting from the pandemic. In the reports since the public emergency began, the NJSBA issued various recommendations centered around this critical issue:

- **Develop a Statewide Report on What Students Learned During the Shutdown and a Strategic Plan to Address Learning Loss.** Working with local districts, the New Jersey Department of Education should assess the level of student learning during the shutdown. Aggregated data should be collected to provide a clear statewide picture of what happened during that period. This would be an important step toward developing a funded strategic plan to help address remediation.

When the pandemic is under control, we must assess any delay in student learning progression. In that regard, the NJSBA has lent support to pending legislation, S-3214/A-5126, spearheaded by Senate Education Committee Chair Teresa Ruiz, which would require the Commissioner of Education to prepare two reports on how the coronavirus has affected student achievement. However, the NJSBA also recognizes the strain that the current emergency has placed on staff and resources. Along with other education organizations, the Association believes the timing for developing the reports required under this measure is critical, and has cautioned against the imposition of any additional, potentially burdensome responsibilities on staff that would take away from districts' top priority — advancing student learning and achievement while protecting the health and safety of students and staff.

- **Develop a statewide report on the delivery of special education services.** What was the experience of New Jersey's 246,693 special education students during the shutdown? What has happened as many schools have moved to virtual learning? How can we address the delay in learning progression for special education students? The NJSBA applauds the extraordinary efforts of special education service providers operating under the most difficult conditions, but once the pandemic ebbs, this is an area that needs to be studied and addressed.
- **Identify the components of high-quality of online instruction and develop a program to sustain and improve it.** Online instruction—whether it is a 100% virtual program or a hybrid of virtual and in-person teaching—is likely to be with the state's schools for months to come. Teachers need continuing professional development to effectively teach classes online. As the pandemic subsides, rather than returning to business as usual, how can we help districts incorporate digital discoveries into the curriculum and provide resources to assess and improve the quality of online instruction? Through necessity, many districts made great strides in providing online education. How can those innovations be maintained and enhanced?

We should also give consideration to how we might leverage virtual learning going forward to increase and add flexibility to the school day. Before-school, after-school and weekend programs have now become much more feasible after having nearly a year of experience with remote instruction, and the impediments to implementing these programs, such as insufficient technology and transportation challenges, have now become more manageable.

Thank you for your consideration of the NJSBA's perspective on these important issues. The NJSBA stands ready to work with this committee to develop effective policies and strategies to advance the achievement of all students.



*everychild.one voice.*

**Cathy Lindenbaum  
President**

**8 Quakerbridge Plaza, Suite F, Mercerville, NJ 08619  
(609) 587-0100 clindenbaum@njpta.org**

February 9, 2021

Happy New Year!

2021 has begun, and although we are still faced with many of the same challenges of 2020, we at New Jersey PTA are inspired to think that 2021 will bring a renewed strength and hope. With the anticipation that vaccines will help control the COVID-19 pandemic and with the tremendous efforts of our education leaders, educators, and school staff, these challenges will subside. Our struggles have not been few, and we have many challenges ahead of us, but we are here, and we continue to support all efforts to ensure children and families have a voice.

New Jersey PTA, along with our parent organization, the National PTA supports requirements for reopening schools with appropriate health and safety guidelines that protect every student, faculty, and staff member. We also advocate that each district has individualized plans for reopening their schools based on their communities and student needs. As seen from the broader side of things, not any two school districts in New Jersey are precisely the same. Teams must be working together to reopen schools, including stakeholders from the community, school staff, board of education, and most importantly, PARENTS and GUARDIANS. Parents and Guardians are the direct connection between the school district and the students. By including parents and guardians, these teams are showing that they want the input and ideas from the stakeholder that, at the end of the day – will decide if their child will be entering the school building or not.

Through 2020 we have joined forces with the New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey Education Association, New Jersey Principals and Supervisor's Association, New Jersey Association of School Administrators, and the New Jersey Association of School Business Official. Along with these organizations and many state-level advocacy organizations, we have set it as our continued mission to ensure that our children's education remains a priority, supports students and staff, and keeps them safe.

New Jersey PTA knows there have been and will continue to be many challenges in the future that we must continue to address. In light of this all, we must focus on a fair and equitable education for all students regardless of the school building or zip code. We need to ensure that school districts are equipped and continue to make educational technology and broadband capabilities available to each student in need of it. There is no possible way for education in 2021 to be fair and equitable if not every student has the availability to complete their assignments on a school-issued device with appropriate broadband capabilities to ensure they can take part in the educational program or assignment or task.

National PTA and New Jersey PTA's primary focus area is researching and advocating for funds and resources to address all students and staff's health, safety, and welfare. As schools reopen in one

form or another, we must always be thinking about addressing learning gaps and our students' social and emotional needs. As you all probably know, Social-emotional learning is the process through which people learn to manage their emotions, interact with others, and achieve goals. New Jersey PTA believes that social and emotional learning needs to be well integrated into what children experience in schools and classrooms, increasing student well-being and academic achievement. Evidence shows that those positive life outcomes persist over time in all socioeconomic and racial groups. Through the pandemic, if not in the past but now more than ever, these avenues and availabilities must be well-funded for students and staff state-wide.

What can we do as an education community to help our students and families as they return to full-time in-person learning? Students, as well as their families, need to feel safe. When placing their children in the hands of the school district after what we have seen as the worst health pandemic in our lifetimes, parents need to feel safe. Students need to feel safe and secure to learn. These two areas together make up whether any reopening plan is successful. If the parents feel safe sending their students back into the building, they are more likely to be positive when discussing with their students about going back into the building.

Teachers and Staff Members must be provided with the tools they need to provide the academic support that every student needs and is afforded to. School staff must be afforded the opportunities for thorough professional development in technology, SEL, and the support needed to assess students' academic needs after such time that they may be back in in-person learning. Even in districts where in-person learning has been present since September, we still have a large cohort of students that, even in February 2021, have not set foot into their school building since last March. What are we doing for these students to ensure a safe and appropriate transition and ensure that they can be on the same page with every other student in their class?

There needs to be a focus on the mental aspect of children and families who have suffered gravely from depression due to the lack of socialization provided to them with in-person learning. This will also take the burden off the teachers who are trying to get back on track. Many families and students may have experienced loss during this time. It is of grave importance that we foster these students and ensure there are procedures to have check-ins that may not continue to interrupt their learning.

Of course, all of these recommendations can only be achieved with increases to school budgets and how much the state and federal government will be willing to invest in getting the job done. We cannot place more financial burdens on our school districts without assistance from the State and Federal Governments. If these resources are not made available, then many currently run programs and resources will need to be removed from future budgets, which would have a counterintuitive effect on our students' learning environments.

We will always have common objectives through it all, and PTA works hand and hand with our schools to accomplish their goals. In this case, the safe reopening and continued opening of our school buildings. New Jersey PTA is always here and will continue to stand as the premier child advocacy association with our mission directly geared to ensure that Every Child's Potential may indeed become a reality.

Sincerely,



Cathy Lindenbaum  
President  
New Jersey PTA

## New Jersey Public Charter Schools COVID Response 2020-21

### Overview

It is an extremely difficult time for so many New Jersey families, particularly low-income families, as the health and economic impacts of the pandemic have devastated the state. Unquestionably, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted urban communities across New Jersey. Three out of four public charter school students come from low-income backgrounds and attend schools in our urban centers in Newark, Camden, Paterson, Trenton, Jersey City, and Plainfield. During this challenging time, public charter schools have gone above and beyond to meet the needs of students and families.

### Findings

In fall 2021, the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association (NJPCSA) conducted a comprehensive survey to determine how charters are responding to the challenges caused by COVID-19. Below are some high-level findings:

- **In-Person Learning:** While most urban districts in the state are providing only virtual instruction, some public charter schools in Newark, Camden, Paterson, Trenton, and Jersey City are providing much needed hybrid, in-person school options for families.
- **Technology Investments:** New Jersey charter schools invested significantly in both devices (\$8.6M) and hot spots (\$800K) in an effort to close the digital divide and ensure students could remain connected.
  - Schools investments on devices varied widely from \$10K to a high of \$2M.
  - Schools also issued a significant number of hot spots; three schools issued 400 to 700 hot spots and one school issued more than 1,300. School investments varied widely from \$500 to a high of \$238K.
- **School Meals:** Charter schools are working diligently to ensure that students—both while on campus and learning online at home—are able to access their free meals.
  - Schools have distributed meals via campus pick up, home delivery, or by partnering with a community organization for pick up or delivery.
- **Attendance:** Of schools surveyed, 90 percent stated that their average daily attendance rate was 90 percent or higher.
- **Student Engagement:** Schools have innovated this year to increase student engagement. Charter schools are:
  - Working more directly with students and families (e.g., more check-ins, home visits, student cohorts, community building activities, one-on-one virtual conferences with families, monthly small group events, regular check-ins by counselors, talking and community circles, student incentives, and lunch groups)
  - Increasing staffing (e.g., two teachers in each room, live mandatory teacher engagement, and smaller class sizes);
  - Monitoring attendance closely and virtual assemblies to reward attendance; and
  - Providing more engaging and creative instruction.
- **COVID Testing:** Some schools provided COVID testing, but the cost was prohibitive for most public charter schools.

- Of schools surveyed, 19 percent indicated that they had done COVID testing for staff while six percent had completed COVID testing for students.

## School Examples

In exchange for high levels of accountability, public charter schools typically have more flexibility over school operations than traditional districts. Greater autonomy over staffing, budgets, and curriculum have allowed public charter schools to better meet the unique challenges of teaching and learning during COVID.

### In Spring 2020, when the pandemic first hit, charter schools quickly pivoted to meet the needs of students:

- **College Achieve Asbury (Asbury Park):** Teachers work alternate schedules to provide night instruction for students who are not able to login during the day.
- **Cresthaven (Plainfield):** Teachers carry out mandatory daily check-ins with students with disabilities and English learners.
- **Discovery (Newark):** "We call every single student, every single day."
- **Learning Community (Jersey City):** "We opened our building on Fridays to provide tutoring, enrichment, and reteaching for students in need of greater support. These students learn in small group pods for a half day. Teachers are compensated with hourly stipends for giving up planning time."

### In Fall 2020, schools have provided innovative solutions:

- **Scheduling**
  - **KIPP TEAM (Newark):** KIPP is providing kindergarten at night for families who are unable to login during the day.
- **Tutoring**
  - **College Achieve Paterson (Paterson):** "We are providing a daily virtual tutoring program for all scholars in grades K-9."
- **Remote Learning Hub**
  - **Great Oaks Legacy (Newark):** "We opened a learning hub for students in September to assist families who were struggling with the remote learning program. While teachers continue to teach remote learning classes, school leaders (academic and operational) monitor students daily. We had a few students who had not logged into a single class, but once the hub opened up, were fully engaged in the remote learning experience. They simply needed a safe, technology-enabled place to go."
- **Parent Support and Collaboration**
  - **Cresthaven Academy (Plainfield):** "We have promoted a teacher to Dean of School Culture to continue to support SEL, monitor attendance, and lead special events. Additionally, we offer daily tech support office hours and parent training sessions around Google Classroom in both English and Spanish. Teachers send out a weekly email to parents letting them know how many assignments were completed the week before and how many sessions their student attended."
  - **Hatikvah International Academy (East Brunswick):** "We are running more parent meetings to keep lines of communication open with the leadership team and, based on attendance, parents really seem to appreciate this. Teachers have discovered ways to mimic much of what they do during in-person instruction so that they still

have students in small groups and "visit" each other's classrooms to collaborate on work. They have done virtual fieldtrips and have helped students maintain activities that allow them to work with each other in the classroom through tools in both Zoom and Google."

- **Mental Health and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**
  - **Burch Charter School of Excellence (East Orange):** "Our school counselor has a SEL 'hotline' and a SEL class every day for our scholars."
  - **Paul Robeson (Trenton):** "An advisory system was set up to facilitate 1:1 check-ins at least weekly with every student and family. Investment in online tools, such as pear deck, were critical in increasing student engagement. Mental health screeners and the submission of advisory notes are used for student support. Family surveys are issued regularly to assess COVID impact, learning program successes, and needs. All systems and programs have been moved virtually, including SEL through morning homeroom, regular community circles, and grade meetings."
  - **Link Community (Newark):** "We are constantly stretching ourselves thinking about ways to engage scholars and their families and support our teachers and staff. All our 8<sup>th</sup> grade families are meeting virtually with our high school director. We have a breakfast zoom call dedicated to building connections and supporting social-emotional wellbeing. We are securing book donations and delivering them to our scholars. We deliver elective and art supplies each quarter to our scholars. We received a donation of a minivan and are using it to get materials and supplies to our scholars. We bring joy to the in-school program every day with music and little breaks to stretch. The adults in each grade level check in regularly to ensure every student is seen."
- **Professional Development/Investing in New Instructional Platforms**
  - **Central Jersey College Prep (Somerset):** "We have Hired more teachers for synchronous online and in-person instruction. Administrators do daily check-in with teachers at 3:30pm to gain feedback on instructional challenges or best practices they have to share. We have purchased more interactive online instructional platforms to assist younger students who need assistance with reading and writing."
- **COVID Testing**
  - **LEAP Academy (Camden):** LEAP Academy has a health center on site that provides free COVID testing for students and staff.

### **School Needs Today and Beyond**

- **Vaccination Priority for All Teachers -District and Charter:** Many districts and public charter schools are currently providing in-person instruction. They would like to remain in-person, but staff concerns over COVID continue to rise. The only way to increase teacher confidence is if they are able to get the vaccine. Additionally, more schools would open for in-person instruction if their teachers could get vaccinated.
- **Free COVID Testing:** Some public charter schools provided COVID testing, but the cost was prohibitive for most schools. State officials should be providing free COVID testing to schools as has been done in other states such as New York and Massachusetts. In New York, they have instituted mandatory random weekly testing in all reopened school buildings as of December 7, 2020. The number of people to be tested depends on the size

of the school, but consists of 20% of a school's population each month, students and staff included. Massachusetts is providing pool testing to K-12 schools.

- **Increased Funding including Facilities Funding:** Due to COVID, operational costs for all schools have skyrocketed. Schools are facing increased staffing costs, technology costs, costs related to new health protocols, and facility upgrades. Regardless of whether schools are in-person or remote, charter schools are going above and beyond to meet student needs. Schools report spending 10 to 15 percent more than what they had planned for, which has put downward pressure on their finances. Public charter schools remain deeply underfunded compared to traditional districts. They receive, on average, about \$4,300 less per-pupil than the school districts where their students reside. Additionally, New Jersey charter schools do not qualify for facilities funding and debt service aid like traditional school districts. This means that of the \$12.5B authorized for Schools Development Authority (SDA), suburban, and vocational districts in 2000 and 2008, charter schools received zero dollars. State officials should increase funding for all public schools, including charter schools, and fix the facilities funding inequity for charter schools specifically.
- **Staffing Solutions:** NJPCSA fully supports Senator Ruiz's teacher diversity bill which provides more flexibility on teacher certification. Ongoing teacher shortage issues are deeply concerning for all public schools. The passage of this bill will provide schools with an increased pool of teachers to select from, particularly teachers of color.



**Joint Committee on the Public Schools  
Hearing on School Reopening  
February 9, 2021  
Testimony presented by Judy Savage  
Executive Director, NJ Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools**

Good morning Senator Rice, Assemblywoman Jasey and members of the Joint Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the NJ Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools. Our 21 career-focused public school districts serve more than 35,000 secondary students who are pursuing a broad range of career programs.

Many of these are in essential areas such as health care, construction trades, advanced manufacturing, and public safety, which have been front and center over the past year as our state responded to the Covid-19 emergency. Other programs in careers like engineering, computer science, business, and digital media support key industry sectors that will drive New Jersey's post-pandemic economic recovery.

The past year has been tremendously challenging for all schools and their teachers, administrators, and students. The level of disruption experienced throughout the education system was just unthinkable – until it became a reality.

The challenges of quickly pivoting to remote instruction were staggering, but in many ways, the process of reopening schools has been even more difficult. Without a common statewide or regional approach, school districts have largely been on their own to navigate the process, and must contend with many different stakeholders and perspectives on what is needed.

The core mission of county vocational-technical schools is provide career and technical education programs that blend technical training, career readiness skills, and academic learning to prepare students for careers as well as college. In addition to all of the regular high school content – from mathematics to physical education – students earn industry certifications and participate in work-based learning and statewide competitions to reinforce their technical skills.

We have all surprised ourselves with adaptability this year, but you can imagine the difficulties of teaching and learning hairstyling, automotive repair, or welding via Zoom? Our teachers were nothing short of heroic last spring, as they quickly learned new tech skills and adapted hands-on lessons to a virtual environment.

The commitment and creativity have been inspiring – everything from teachers donning “Go Pro” cameras for live demonstrations of automotive repair, to sending home “go-boxes” of kitchen tools for culinary students, face mannequins for cosmetology, and fiber optic kits for green building students to practice wiring and programming home thermostats. Across all career areas, CTE teachers went the extra distance to make remote learning meaningful and engaging.

While remote learning is still in the mix, county vocational-technical schools have prioritized in-person CTE instruction so that students could get back into their highly-specialized shops and labs this fall. Our districts are using a range of approaches, including hybrid schedules, to ensure small classes and social distancing as needed.

Because students come from many different sending school districts, the scheduling is incredibly challenging, especially for those students who take academic classes at their local high school and CTE at the county vocational-technical school. Due to hybrid and remote schedules, most of them cannot travel to their vocational school daily, and so they attend 2-3 days a week. Though most students are experiencing less time in CTE labs this year, their teachers and administrators are doing their best to maximize their hands-on experience.

One area that is really suffering this year is work-based learning. Exposing students to on-the-job learning is an essential facet of CTE, and understandably, it has been extremely difficult to get those placement opportunities this year. Many employers are either operating remotely or reluctant to bring in additional people because of social distancing, which dramatically limits internships, site visits, and job shadowing opportunities. Still, schools are doing everything they can to find authentic work experiences for students, including remote or in-school opportunities.

As they have done for the past 11 months, our schools will continue to go above and beyond expectations to meet students where they are and help them to achieve their full potential. We know that in all school districts, there are students who are struggling academically or emotionally, and students who have just “checked out” this year. While it is critical to assess each student’s academic needs and provide appropriate supports, standardized testing will not fill this need and could have unintended negative consequences for students worried about failure.

Along with closely monitoring and addressing potential academic learning gaps, county vocational-technical schools are developing plans to help CTE students tune up their technical skills, prepare for license or certification exams, or fulfill seat time requirements for certain credentials. Our schools are looking at options such as summer programs and weekend programs to help students, especially those graduating this spring, successfully pass their certification and skill exams and ensure that they are job-ready.

Such efforts are an example of an unanticipated and unbudgeted expense that should be supported by state and federal funding for Covid relief. While all school districts appreciate the availability of federal aid under the CARES act, these funds are allocated based on the Title I formula, which prioritizes funding for districts with larger concentrations of socio-economically disadvantaged students. While such districts clearly have the greatest needs and the largest numbers of students who will need additional supports, it is important to understand that Covid has decimated the budgets of all types of districts. The limited amounts of additional federal aid provided to higher wealth districts, while appreciated, simply will not cover all the costs of PPE, building retrofits, personnel, and additional academic, CTE, and other programming and supports to address learning gaps and students' social-emotional needs.

While we all recognize the concerns that educators have about safety during the pandemic, our schools report that the majority of CTE teachers do want to teach in-person in their specialized classrooms and labs, where students can observe social distancing practices and still interact with teachers and peers and work with industry-standard equipment and tools.

We believe it is critical to prioritize vaccines for teachers, staff, and ultimately for students so that we can all get back to the business of learning. While our schools have shown that in-person instruction can work, this is incredibly stressful for teachers and staff, and many families will continue to opt for remote instruction until vaccines are widely available.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of our county vocational-technical schools.



**TESTIMONY  
JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
FEBRUARY 9, 2021**

Rose Acerra, Interim Executive Director

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of We Raise New Jersey. I am Rose Acerra, Interim Executive Director. We Raise NJ is a statewide coalition of leaders representing students, parents and families, educators, administrators, policymakers, and business and industry partnering to advance an inclusive and equitable vision for the success of our state's students in the 21st century.

Our membership collectively represents over 200,000 New Jerseyans from across the state dedicated to equitable education for all. We are proud that students and educators directly influence our advocacy efforts. For example:

- Under the leadership of member organization Parent Impact, 13 outstanding students from across New Jersey were selected for our new Youth Leadership Ambassador program. This program provides training and mentorship in civic engagement and education policy and stipends for student participation.
- Under the leadership of member organization JerseyCAN, we also launched the Teacher Leader Policy Fellowship, engaging 12 diverse educators to participate in policy and advocacy training and dialogue.

Following the onset of COVID-19 last March, we focused on addressing the needs of students, families, and educators through the pandemic. We -- and they -- are all interested in how schools return to in-person instruction, as it is essential for learning and allowing parents to return to work. We must advance this priority while keeping a keen eye on safety and work conditions.

Further, we must ensure students are physically present AND socially and emotionally ready to learn. We must prioritize students' social and emotional well-being. While the pandemic is unprecedented, it gives us the opportunity to set a new precedent, developing models that will address our children, families, and educators' needs now and into the future.

With all this in mind, I would like to share our three priorities that would advance inclusion and equity through the evolving pandemic and beyond.

First, we must **expand and ensure connectivity and virtual instruction capacity** for all students. Regardless of whether and when districts offer in-person instruction, we must provide equitable access to online learning now and for the future.

Last month, we hosted a webinar to discuss the digital divide and heard from experts and community members from across New Jersey. We posted a video and resources related to this event on our website. The key recommendations we heard are as follows:

- Due to this pandemic's disruptions, we must accelerate student learning. Technology is one critical element of the solution.
- The state needs a streamlined approach to centralizing information about devices, connectivity, and digital literacy support. This includes communicating available and necessary resources.
- Families need help to improve digital literacy and troubleshoot technical challenges.
- Educators told us they need professional development and training to conduct engaging online learning. Teacher Leader Policy Fellow and Newark educator Hannah-Marie Kennedy emphasized: "COVID-19 – fortunately and unfortunately – catapulted the classroom into the 21st century...having that professional development to give teachers the tools to help students in this virtual platform is necessary."
- Students need and deserve reliable and consistent access to online learning and related supports. Further, they should be consulted in discussions about the digital divide. Youth Leadership Ambassador and Camden student Zackary Brown shared, "It is said that the major cause of the digital divide is access...other contributing factors include the cost of technology, access for the disabled, lack of skills, lack of education, lack of information, and lower performance computers. What's the remedy? Concern, preparation, foresight, partnership, and the student voice."

Second, we believe schools and districts must **transparently diagnose current learning levels to accommodate *individual student needs***. We must understand what students are learning – or missing – and set ambitious but achievable goals, and focus on the whole child. This starts with strong partnerships between the teacher, student, and family.

Last year, under the leadership of member organization NJPTA, we worked with the national nonprofit Learning Heroes to research New Jersey families' needs emerging from the pandemic. Detailed findings are available on our website in English and Spanish, but overall:

- We learned that parents' top concern for the current school year was safety, followed by the social and educational impact of COVID on their children.
- We also learned that parents have an inflated perception of student achievement; over 90% of NJ parents believe their student is performing at or above grade level in reading and math. In reality, closer to half of NJ students were achieving at that level before the pandemic.
- Finally, we learned that parents feel more connected to their child's teachers than ever before and want to be more involved and informed.

Based on this research, we worked with Learning Heroes to create a Family-School Communication Tool that can be customized to start a conversation about each student and their academic and social, and emotional needs. We encourage districts to use tools like this

to ensure our families have the information they need to support students during this challenging time.

Our third near term goal is to **ensure the use of quality curriculum, instruction, and materials and reinforce high expectations**. All New Jersey students deserve access to a rigorous curriculum and differentiated instruction that provide what they need to achieve. At the same time, our educators deserve robust and relevant professional development and training, so they feel equipped to meet students and families where they are.

Some of the insights shared by our Teacher Leader Policy Fellows are as follows:

- Ben Kleiner, a 5th-grade teacher in Toms River, explained: "It was essential that students and families became proficient in using each platform because they were the main sources of communication every time, we switched instructional models. My school has gone between being 100% remote and hybrid about four times now, and we're currently holding steady with hybrid instruction. Once parents knew their contact information was integrated into many of the platforms we use, it was easy for us to send out email blasts to communicate changes as well as where to find schedules to keep students on track no matter where learning was taking place."
- Christine Hietanen, a High School English Teacher from Morris County School of Technology, shared: "I initially thought I would Live stream my lessons, have breakout sessions, and jigsaw readings, but to be honest, it just didn't work. I had a serious mind-shift and started realizing I needed to incorporate more real-world, authentic tasks."
- Jersey City middle school teacher Roseangela Mendoza said: "We're not just a school, we're a family. Whatever we do, together or as individuals, should benefit everyone who is in our community. Many of the families in our school are predominantly Spanish-speaking, and as a fluent Spanish speaker, I do my best to translate for families across the school. They have my phone number and can call me whenever they need help."

We Raise New Jersey applauds educators' efforts like these and envisions a future where all students have access to similar experiences.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today. If I can leave you with one imperative thought, it is that we listen to students, educators, parents, and families, and the full range of stakeholders at the local and state level to address the challenges before us. We Raise NJ is here to collaborate with you on these issues. Our only way forward is together.

####

**About We Raise New Jersey:** WRNJ advocates for the high-quality education every student deserves to be prepared for success in college, career, and community by harnessing the collective strength of New Jersey's influential education, business, and civic organizations. Coalition members include African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, Association of American Educators, JerseyCAN, New Jersey Business & Industry Association, New Jersey Chamber of Commerce, New Jersey Charter Schools Association, New Jersey Council of County Colleges, New Jersey PTA, Parent Impact, Paterson Education Fund and Teach For America-NJ.

For more information, visit <http://www.werajenj.org>, and follow [@WeRaiseNJ](https://www.linkedin.com/company/we-raise-nj/) and <https://www.linkedin.com/company/we-raise-nj/>.



## Coalition Materials for the Joint Committee on Public Schools

We Raise New Jersey is pleased to share the following coalition materials and resources with the Joint Committee:

- In partnership with NJPTA and Learning Heroes, We Raise NJ worked with Edge Research from May-August of 2020 to conduct qualitative and quantitative research (including a statewide representative survey) to understand parent perceptions and mindsets about the return to school for 2020-21. We have created materials for partners and advocates, including:
  - A dedicated web page on the WRNJ site including:
    - A short overview of our research findings in English and Spanish.
    - A research presentation deck in English or Spanish.
    - A video of the research presentation webinar from 9/30/20.
    - Link to free, customizable family-school planning tools for elementary and middle school students in English and Spanish.
- In January 2021, we conducted a webinar co-hosted by coalition members of the African American Chamber of Commerce of NJ, Association of American Educators, and NJ Chamber of Commerce Foundation to explore devices and connectivity issues digital literacy and identify solutions to advance the education all NJ students deserve. This event featured seven (7) panelists representing NJ students, educators, families, school and district leaders, businesses, state government, and over 60 diverse registrants. We have posted the following resources:
  - A dedicated web page on the WRNJ site including:
    - A background document on the digital divide in NJ
    - A video of the 1/13/21 webinar
    - A press release sharing recommendations from the webinar: New Jersey Leaders Get to the Bottom of the State's Digital Divide in Education



## JerseyCAN Statement on the Impact of Long-term School Closures and Statewide Solutions For Addressing Learning Loss

February 9, 2021

Dear Members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools,

As you know, New Jersey was one of the earliest states hit by COVID-19, forcing all schools in our State to be shuttered from mid-March through June 2020. Now, months into the 2020-21 school year, some schools in our largest and neediest school districts remain closed, with students receiving only virtual instruction. ***With long-standing persistent achievement gaps across our state and a lingering digital divide, COVID-19 has the potential to drastically exacerbate the educational inequities in New Jersey for an entire generation of students.***

New Jersey is just one month away from the anniversary of statewide school closures and for some students that will signify the last time they had access to in-person learning. ***While the efforts of district leadership, teachers and countless other education professionals to support students during this time can not be understated, it is clear that we must be honest with ourselves and double down on efforts to close opportunity gaps and accelerate learning.*** New Jersey school closures have made three things clear:

- I. **Research is projecting steep learning deficits and projecting altered financial outcomes due to school closures and virtual learning.**
- II. **There must be a concerted priority and effort towards reopening schools, with priority on our neediest students.**
- III. **We need to act now to implement innovative learning practices to accelerate learning and alleviate learning loss.**

**I. Research is projecting steep learning deficits and projecting altered financial outcomes due to school closures and virtual learning.**

There has absolutely been deep learning loss--not just a delay in learning--due to COVID-19 and the inconsistent delivery of education across the state. We know there is learning loss because there were achievement and opportunity gaps pre-pandemic. For New Jersey, there has been little information on the academic impact of spring closures and fall reopening learning models. Only one national study from CREDO<sup>1</sup> tried to share state specific estimates of learning loss from the spring. This is what they found:

- **For reading, New Jersey students might have experienced anywhere from 174 days of learning lost in reading to some marginal gains (less than 58 days).**
- **For math, New Jersey students might have experienced learning losses as large as 464 days or as small as less than fall report from the Collaborative for Student Growth found that learning loss may not be as great as projected, but more alarmingly found students are missing. 58 days.**

The national data is painting a grim picture, but more troubling data piece that emerged from the Collaborative for Student Growth's fall report is that **our most vulnerable students are missing from data sets:**

**"Some differences by racial/ethnic groups are emerging in the fall 2020 data, but it is too early to draw definitive conclusions from these initial results. Student groups especially vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic were more likely to be missing from our data. Thus, we have an incomplete understanding of how achievement this fall may differ across student groups and may be underestimating the impacts of COVID-19."**<sup>2</sup>

Also troubling is that, according to a recent report from McKinsey, these academic, social and emotional gaps will have long-term socio-economic impacts on students. Their data estimates that the average K-12 student in the U.S. will lose \$61,000 to \$82,000 in lifetime earnings due to the learning gaps exacerbated by COVID-19. These estimates are worse for Black and Hispanic students.<sup>3</sup> Given these initial projections and the continued closure of schools due to a second wave of the pandemic now hitting New Jersey, JerseyCAN is highly concerned about widening achievement and opportunity gaps, and the long-term impact of COVID-19 on students' life outcomes.

**II. There must be a concerted priority and effort towards reopening schools, with priority on our neediest students.**

This pandemic showed the truth behind New Jersey's public education system -- there has been one approach for more affluent students and another one for low-income students. JerseyCAN, and partners, collected the first statewide data this fall through a parent poll.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short\\_brief\\_on\\_learning\\_loss\\_final\\_v.3.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v.3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [Learning during COVID-19: Fall 2020](#)

<sup>3</sup> [COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime, pg 7](#)

<sup>4</sup> [JerseyCAN and NJCF Parent Poll, Fall 2020](#)

- Statewide, 52% of parents say they have at least one child that is participating in remote learning full-time, while 70% percent of Black parents, 61% of Latinx parents, and 72% of low-income families say that their child is remote learning full-time.
- Low-income parents (56%) and parents of color are also less likely to report having the option of hybrid learning, when compared to their white (76%) or more affluent peers (73%).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, our statewide parent poll also found that parents believe their student's academic needs have not been met:

- 47% of New Jersey families believe their child will need a lot of additional support to have a successful school year, with an additional 26% of all parents saying their child will need some additional support.
- The need is most concentrated among low-income parents of color with 54% percent of low-income Black parents and 56% of low-income Latinx parents stating they need a lot of additional support (compared to higher income parents, 45%).
- Low-income parents overall (51%) say they need a lot of additional support. Low-income parents are also less likely to be supplementing their child's education with educational sources outside public school options-- nor should they have to.

There are also increasing reports that students' and families' social and emotional needs are not being met due to the disruption of in-person schooling. The continued duration of the pandemic, combined with prolonged school closures, and the inability for families to rely on their familial and social support systems for childcare is absolutely having a negative impact on children and families. We have heard many reports from our New Jersey Teacher Leader Policy Fellows of older siblings needing to take breaks from their classes and online learning to assist a younger sibling with their work.

***Given the staggering data on learning loss, the deeply disturbing trend that we are missing our most vulnerable students from data sets, and the continued social and emotional impact of virtual learning, we must prioritize getting our students back into school buildings as soon as it is possible.*** The Department of Education should be laser focused on providing support, technical assistance, and resources to our schools that have yet to open for in-person or hybrid instruction this year. For those schools and districts there should be a clear understanding of what must occur for a school to reopen for in-person instruction.

Regardless of when schools open, we need a concentrated effort to ensure that we know where all of our students are and take a moment to measure their social and emotional health. The State could develop a tool to gauge students' social and emotional well being, which could also provide an academic check-up on student learning. Most importantly, the absence of participation by a student can serve as a touchpoint of information from which teachers and schools can in-turn check on the health and wellbeing of the students and families to see if they need additional support during this time.

---

<sup>5</sup> JerseyCAN and NJCF Parent Poll, Fall 2020

#### IV. We need to act now to implement innovative learning practices to accelerate learning and alleviate learning loss.

Based on research and best practices emerging from other states and cities across the country, there are timely policy and program interventions that the State could support to stem the widening of the achievement and opportunity gaps that low-income students are facing. There are several options that could and should be considered, such as: (1) robust tutoring support for low-income students, (2) intensive summer programming, (3) extending the school year or beginning the 2021-2022 school year early, and (4) altering retention policies to give parents more choice.

- Robust tutoring support for low-income students:
  - The Center for American Progress is recommending an “**Opportunity and Counseling Corps**” that would provide tutoring in an AmeriCorps type effort. Other national experts such as Robert Slavin and the Annenberg Institute at Brown University are promoting intensive tutoring programs. The Annenberg Institute will launch a National Student Support Accelerator early this year with a goal of all K-12 students having access to high-impact tutoring.
  - In **Tennessee**, former Governor Bill Haslan’s foundation has paid \$1,000 stipends to 1000 college students to engage in tutoring hosted by the Boys and Girls Clubs throughout Tennessee in the summer of 2020. Their plan is to replicate this and grow the program (called the Tennessee Tutoring Corps) for summer 2021. In addition, there is a bill moving through the Tennessee legislature to create the Tennessee Accelerated Literary and Learning Corps to provide high-quality tutoring throughout the school year.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Maryland** is also moving forward with a publicly-funded tutoring program. According to *Ed Week*, Maryland is the only state to date that has set aside some of its CARES funds for tutoring. State officials there have indicated that \$100 million in CARES funding is being allocated for tutoring.<sup>5</sup>
- Intensive Summer Programming:
  - The research on summer school in a typical year shows promising benefits, especially for low-income students who experience the greatest effects of the summer slide. Research has shown that students who participate in some high-quality, voluntary, multi-week summer learning programs experience significant academic gains in reading and math that can diminish the effects of learning loss.<sup>7</sup>
    - While many districts provide summer school programming, additional state or federal funding could be used to increase the time used for summer programming (i.e. could expand to a 10-week intensive program from 8AM-4PM).
    - In addition, new public funding could expand the number of students who can participate in summer programming; this could now include students who are showing some early signs of learning gaps.
  - The State should incentivize more robust summer programming. Alternatively, if state funding is not possible, the State should provide guidance to districts regarding how to use federal stimulus funding to support more intensive summer programming.

- Extending the School Year/Starting the 2021-2022 School Year Early:
  - In addition to more intensive and widely accessible summer school programs, the State should also consider providing districts, charters, and renaissance schools with the option of extending the school year. This could be done by starting the 2021-2022 earlier in August to make up for lost time for students this year. Again by August 2021, most district staff should have access to the vaccine and could mobilize to begin the new year early.
  - To incentivize this, the State could identify state or federal funds (stimulus or other) to create a pilot program for districts, charters, and renaissance schools that opt to extend or start the school year earlier. According to State statute 18A:7F-9, the statute regarding 180 days of school requires that the district provide at least 180 days of school. The statute reads: “No State aid shall be paid to any district which has not provided public school facilities for at least 180 days during the preceding school year, but the commissioner, for good cause shown, may remit the penalty.” As such, it appears that the statute does not prevent a district from exceeding 180 days.
    - Clearly there would be costs associated with starting earlier, as well as employee contract issues. However, if new state or federal funding could be used to offset these costs, a pilot program could be offered to willing districts, charters, and renaissance schools who opt to start the school year earlier.
- Giving Parents the Ability to Retain Their Students:
  - A final option that should be considered is giving parents the ability to retain their child(ren) in the same grade. Parents know their children best -- not only their child’s ability to potentially accelerate learning but also their social and emotional health. While efforts should be made to mitigate learning loss by accelerating student learning, given the significant interruption of school services and stressors of the pandemic placed on families, parents should be able to choose whether to retain their students in their current grade.

## V. Conclusion

We are deeply appreciative of your ongoing commitment to students and families as the pandemic continues. We recognize the tireless efforts of government officials, health care professionals, and local public servants, and we remain extremely grateful for all of your efforts. We look forward to working with you on innovative ways to ensure that our student learning continues, despite the challenges that our families and communities are currently facing.

Sincerely yours,

Patricia Morgan  
Executive Director  
JerseyCAN