
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

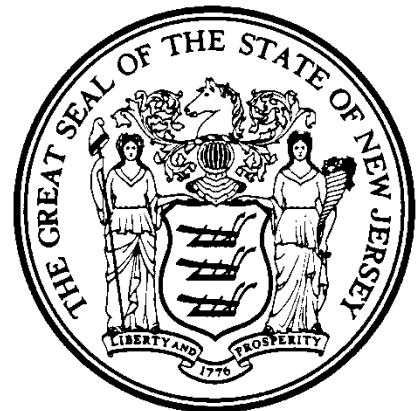
“The Committee will meet to take testimony on desegregating New Jersey’s public schools”

LOCATION: Meeting Via Zoom

DATE: December 15, 2023
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Co-Chair
Senator Renee C. Burgess
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly
Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn
Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca DiBenedetti
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

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Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
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SENATE

Hon. James Beach
Hon. Renee C. Burgess
Hon. Joseph P. Cryan
Hon. Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.
Hon. Michael L. Testa
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson

ASSEMBLY

Hon. Vicky Flynn
Hon. Mila M. Jasey
Hon. Michele Matsikoudis
Hon. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Hon. Erik K. Simonsen
Hon. Benjie E. Wimberly

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Friday, December 15, 2023 at 10:00 a.m., via Zoom to take testimony on desegregating New Jersey's Public Schools.

The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca DiBenedetti, Executive Director, at 609-331-2485, or by email at Rsapp@njleg.org

Issued December 1, 2023

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ASSEMBLYWOMAN VERLINA REYNOLDS-JACKSON (Co-Chair): Good morning, everyone. I want to thank you all for joining us today for the Joint Committee on Public Schools.

Today is December 15, 2023, and this is a Zoom call. And, the topic today is desegregation of New Jersey schools.

And, Becky, I think we have some technical things we need to do this morning before we get started.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Sure, I'm just going to do a quick roll call.

Senator Burgess.

SENATOR BURGESS: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: I know that Senator O'Scanlon and Senator Testa will be joining us shortly.

Senator Thompson is indeed here.

Assemblywoman Flynn will be joining us shortly.

Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Matsikoudis.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKOUDIS: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblyman Simonsen will be joining us shortly as well.

Assemblyman Wimberly I know is on his way.

Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Present.

MS. DeBENEDETTI: And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Co-Chair): Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Good morning, Senator Cryan.

Thank you so much for joining us today. I know you're multitasking, but I know you have attentive ears and you will definitely chime in if you need to.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thanks. Thank you very much for (indiscernible) bringing us together today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Awesome.

We do have two members that this will be their last Joint Committee on Public Schools, and that is Senator Cryan and Assemblywoman Jasey.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: No, Senator Thompson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Senator Thompson -- I'm sorry, Senator Cryan. Senator Thompson will be retiring.

And, we just want to thank them so much for all of the leadership that they have had on this Committee for many years. And, so, I thank you both for entrusting us to continue the work that we do.

And, I didn't know if anyone else wanted to say a few words.

Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you; thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

I really want to take a moment. Sam, congratulations on retirement, and I wish you well. Thank you for your contributions here.

But, I really wanted to take a moment to thank Mila Jasey, who has been a partner, a leader -- I know Assemblywoman Jackson has been spoken about. Incredible knowledge, incredible insight, and a devotion to all things good for the future. Mila, I just want to wish you all the best and say thank you very much for all of it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much, Senator, and friend. Joe has been with me from the beginning.

And, the work will continue. I know that, and I am not going away; I'm just changing roles here. So, give me a call any time; I'm happy to join you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

All right, well, we're going to move on to the hearing. And, today's hearing will--

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman, Assemblywoman Matsikoudis has her hand raised.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: OK; I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MATSIKOUDIS: No worries; thank you so much.

I just wanted to say congratulations to Senator Thompson, and a special note to Assemblywoman Jasey.

I am going to-- I'm sorry, I think I said Assemblyman. Senator Thompson. Anyway, sorry about that. I didn't have enough coffee today, I don't think.

But, Assemblywoman Jasey. You have been an amazing leader, and I feel very honored to have worked beside you, not only on this Committee, but I will miss you very much in education. Your heart and your mind are always-- Your thoughts are so well received, and I'm just, as I said, so grateful and honored to have been able to work with you.

So, thank you so much again.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, Senator Burgess has her hand raised.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes, Senator Burgess.

SENATOR BURGESS: Good morning again, everyone.

I just want to congratulate both Senator Thompson and Assemblywoman Jasey. Thank you for your amazing careers and what you've done for your community, your state, and also your families. I know you've made them proud.

And, I just want you to know that I thank you personally for welcoming me with open arms, and all the talks we had. I just appreciate them all, and I wish you a happy holiday.

God bless you both.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Awesome.

I see Assemblyman Wimberly is just joining us. Thank you so much, Assemblyman for being here.

We're just saying our congratulations to Assemblywoman Jasey and Senator Thompson on their retirements.

Did you want to say a few words?

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Yes, definitely.

I wish both of you the best in your retirement.

Senator Thompson, I wish you the best. Maybe I'll run into you at a Rutgers football game next season.

Assemblywoman Jasey, I wish you absolutely the best. You have been nothing but a lady and a true leader in our caucus, and your stalwart fight for so many issues that are important to everyone -- from higher education to women's health care, you name it -- you've always been on point. And, in my 12 years, I can say that you have truly been a mentor and somebody that I've looked up to. And, I wish you nothing but the best. Enjoy those grandbabies and great-grandbabies. And, maybe I'll get invited to one of those big Christmases, just gathering my plate over there to that table. And, I would definitely come over.

So, God bless you both and enjoy your retirement.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON:
Awesome, awesome. Well, thank you so much.

And, again, congratulations to you both.

Today's hearing will focus on school segregation. It's one of the most complex, complicated, and daunting issues of our state education system that we face every day. We have the best schools in the nation, but we also have many that are underperforming schools -- especially in our Black and brown students in underserved urban communities.

New Jersey's problem didn't arise overnight, and there is no quick fixes to segregation. So, for this reason, we have convened leading experts who will provide a variety of perspectives. Our goal here today is to examine the issues, possibly come up with some solutions, and think about removing the obstacles that so many students every day -- so that every day students can obtain a high-quality education no matter what their ZIP code is.

And, so, we're looking forward to today's dialogue and understanding of the issues. And, we would also like our members to ask questions of our guests after they finish their presentation, or, if you want to wait until the end, as we look forward to having a robust hearing.

I am also mindful that this isn't our first hearing on this. We've had hearings like this several times in 2022, and, so, this is under the tutelage of Assemblywoman Jasey that we're going to continue this on.

So, with no further ado, I am going to ask Austin Edwards, Esq., Senior Policy Counsel from Salvation and Social Justice, to give your report.

A U S T I N J. E D W A R D S, ESQ.: Thank you, Assemblywoman, not just for your leadership, but also allowing me to speak here today.

Good morning, distinguished members of the council -- of the Committee.

Again, my name is Austin Edwards. I serve as Senior Policy Counsel for Salvation and Social Justice. We're a faith-rooted, nonprofit organization. We are dedicated to promoting racial equity and social justice throughout New Jersey.

And, we're deeply concerned about the persistent problem of school segregation in our state, which perpetuates educational disparities and limits opportunities for young people.

We face a stark reality: Our schools are deeply segregated with students disproportionately concentrated by race and socio-economic status. This segregation leads to unequal access to quality education, to resources, and opportunities; which ultimately hinders our state's potential and perpetuates systemic inequalities. We can't afford to ignore the issue *any* longer. Decades of research have established that the devastating impact of school segregation on students' academic achievement, social development, and long-term well-being. It's time for us to take decisive action to dismantle these harmful barriers and ensure that all children in New Jersey have access to quality education.

So, we have a few proposed solutions. The first one: Ending the ZIP-code barrier. Currently, New Jersey law requires students to attend schools only in their home districts, which effectively limits access to diverse and high-performing schools, based solely on whether you can afford to live in a ZIP code. This policy perpetuates segregation, and it hinders students' opportunities. That's why we at S&SJ urge you at the Legislature to consider ending the ZIP-code barrier and implementing policies that facilitate school choice across district lines.

Number 2: We want to ensure the full implementation of the school funding formula by investing in quality public education that's essential to dismantle the harmful effects of school segregation. But, this investment must be distributed equitably across districts. So, we're urging you to ensure that the School Funding Reform Act -- the SFRA -- is fully

implemented and funded every single year. This will guarantee that all students, regardless of their background, have access to the resources they need to succeed.

Three: Removal of zero-tolerance policies. Now, these policies in our school harm our students -- *especially* students of color. The zero-tolerance policies lead to harsh and automatic punishments for simply minor infractions, which disproportionately impact marginalized students. Instead of these punitive measures, we ask you to move towards restorative practices that see and lift up the humanity in our youth. These practices focus on building relationships, identifying the root causes of behavior, and fostering positive change. By investing in restorative justice programs and training school staff and other community members in de-escalation techniques, we can create safer and more supportive learning environments for all of our students.

Number 4: Regional across-district magnet schools. Now, these magnet schools draw students from multiple districts, and they can be effective in fostering integration and providing access to specialized programs. So, we urge you to invest in the creation and support of regional across-district magnet schools that focus on diversity and academic excellence. It happens in many different states; it happens in certain districts in New Jersey as well, so, if we make this across the board, it's something that can work.

Number 5: Merging districts. Another idea to combat the segregated and contiguous municipalities that can be a long-term solution for creating larger and more diverse school communities. While this approach does require careful planning and community engagement, it can ultimately

lead to more equitable distribution of resources, and improved educational outcomes for all students.

And, finally, Number 6: Stricter zoning. Current zoning practices in many New Jersey communities contribute to segregation by limiting the development of affordable housing options. So, we're asking you to enact stricter zoning regulations that encourage mixed-income housing and promote diverse neighborhoods. This, in turn, can also lead to more integrated schools.

In conclusion, addressing school segregation requires a multi-faceted approach that combines bold legislative action with community engagement and sustained investment. By implementing the solutions I outlined above, New Jersey can begin to dismantle the barriers that stand in the way of educational equity and ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to thrive.

We here at Salvation and Social Justice stand ready to work with the Legislature to develop and implement effective solutions to school segregation in New Jersey. We believe that, together, we can create a future where *all* children have access to quality education and the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Thank you again for the time and the consideration, and I am happy to answer any questions either now or further along today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you, Austin.

I think the information that you provided is one of -- definitely of possible solutions.

Assemblywoman Jasey, did you have something you wanted to add?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

Just, first of all, thank you.

I am making notes, and everything that you are recommending are-- These are all possible solutions that we have considered in the past. And, the problem is, we have to change the laws in order for any of this to work.

Merging districts is something I've advocated for a very long time, and having the regional magnet schools, I think -- especially for kids, older students -- giving them that choice is important.

There is nothing that I would not do, I think, to bring more of our children together. The one place that I think we're doing a better job is in terms of our county-level schools, for high school. But, they're very competitive to get into, and, so, they're not really open to all children if they haven't had an equal opportunity to have access to the best teachers and the best facilities. But, if you look at our county-level high schools, you will see a diverse community, and you will see students working together. And, that is the model that I have in my head for how we could do a better job.

But, it's going to -- it's a heavy lift. But, I thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today.

MR. EDWARDS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Anyone else? (no response)

Thank you, thank you Mr. Austin, I appreciate you.

Tom Puryear -- I see you're on. We weren't sure if you were coming, but, since you're here, I figured we might as well see if you would like to add to the conversation. I don't want to skip over you.

From the New Jersey Conference of the NAACP.

THOMAS L. PURYEAR: Thank you very much.

I am substituting for our president, Richard Smith. I was not aware of the actual format, but contrary to what I said to Rebecca, I will modify my statement.

We are plaintiffs-- The NAACP are plaintiffs in the lawsuit. Prior to the recent decision from the court, we did not publicly release any remedies; we did not want to muddle the waters in regards to making remedies that would create problems one way or the other.

Now that there has been some type of movement, the Education Committee for the NAACP New Jersey State Conference has prepared and, although they have not yet been approved, I will take the opportunity and take the risk of sharing what the Education Committee is going to recommend to our Executive Committee. There may be some repetition in regards to the prior presentation, but, here are the five things that we will recommend:

The creation of county-wide regional school districts governed by an 11-member school board. Inter-school enrollment protocols must be established.

Secondly, the establishment of state-mandated high-quality preschools for all eligible students.

Third, within all county regional school districts, there will be theme-related academic programs, beginning with the sixth grade.

Four, existing county vocational schools would be required to diversify their enrollment by region and municipality.

And, last, provide county-wide regional school districts with adequate mental-health resources.

We realize that there is some pros and cons, so I'll just share with you the pros that we've come up with so far. And, a pro would be the elimination of the statute that requires students to attend school districts within their municipality where they reside.

The constitutional school construction mandate would have to be modified in order to address the needs, construction, repairs for formerly identified Abbott school districts. Sufficient State funding for busing would have to be established existing statutes on busing -- that is the distance from school and home would have to be amended.

And, another pro would be the recommendations that would be requested would have to be imposed as a statewide mandate.

As a con, the election of county school board representatives would have to be addressed in order to have quality and equal representation. Neighborhood schools would be eliminated, and some African American and Latino administrators would be impacted by the elimination of individual school districts, and that's something that would have to be addressed and to be concerned with.

As I said, these are recommendations that will be put forth to our executive committee, and hopefully the solution that we are looking for as the NAACP is to adhere to our constitution that says New Jersey schools should not be segregated. We know that the task is going to be difficult; we have existed educationally in a system that has not created the

best education for all students. And, we are plaintiffs, and we are hoping that the resolutions will bring about equality and the addressing of (indiscernible) in our state.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you; thank you.

I know you definitely raised some concerns for me as well when you talk about the county school boards and what the leadership will look like as we merge them. I think that is definitely to make sure that the administration and the leadership is also reflective of what we're looking for in terms of diversity, and making sure that that is equitable, too.

So, thank you for raising that as well.

Anyone have any questions they would like to address to Tom while we have him on with us today?

Yes, Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Tom, I'm sure you remember the inter-district school choice bills that we have passed.

And, the problem, really, is getting people to join in, to be part of the solution and not part of the problem; and funding for transportation is a big one.

But, I hear what you're saying, and I believe that there are solutions possible if we have the will to implement them. So, I thank you for those recommendations, and something that I will continue to be interested in working on.

Thank you.

MR. PURYEAR: Assemblywoman, if I can reply.

First of all, you have represented us. I live in East Orange, so I've been in and out of your district, what have you. You've been a colleague; you've provided our organization with quality information and have always been available for us. So, I want to say, enjoy your retirement as you go forward.

When you mention the inter-district situation-- In Essex County, I think there are at least 21 municipalities. No municipality or school district in Essex County has chosen to participate in that. So, that's the question. And, again, I think your statement about will is very important. If the will is not there, no solution is going to be brought forth successfully. And, that's the concern that we have: There has to be some type of moderation as far as saying, "We will accept, and we're willing to extend our borders so that all children will have a quality education."

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you, Tom, so much.

Next, we have Senator Thompson, you would like to speak -- yes.

SENATOR THOMPSON: I would just like to say it has been an honor and privilege to serve on the Joint Committee here.

In a couple of weeks, I will be stepping down from my time in the Legislature. I will be ending 52 years of service to the citizens of my adopted state. I joined the State Health Department as a research scientist January 31, 1972. So, it has been a very interesting and fruitful experience.

I have very much enjoyed serving on the Joint Committee with you, and I want to wish well to all.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you, Senator Thompson. God bless you.

Next, we will transition over to Dr. Charles Payne, Henry Rutgers Distinguished Professor of Africana Studies and Director, Joseph Cornwall Center of Metropolitan Research, Rutgers University -- Newark.

C H A R L E S M. P A Y N E, Ph.D.: Thank you; thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: There you go, Dr. Payne, (indiscernible)

DR. PAYNE: It took me a minute to get online.

Thank you very much. I am Charles Payne, I am the Director of the Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Research at Rutgers Newark; and I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to the Joint Committee this morning.

And, I'm sorry, I do have a cough. I decided that this week was the perfect time to reacquaint myself with COVID-19, so, you'll have to forgive me.

I think of desegregation as having two distinct facets: First is the challenge of making sure that we create diverse environments that broaden students' social experience. But, then, there's still the challenge of providing the best possible education for all children, wherever they happen to be. And, that includes repairing as much as possible of the damage already done by segregated and under-performing schools. There are clear and distinct benefits to both. We should not treat this as an either-or discussion. Nevertheless, what I know most about is school improvement, and I will aim most of my remarks there.

I know this Committee is well aware that third-grade reading scores are predictive of many important life outcomes. It is well past time for reading well by third grade for all students to become a statewide point of emphasis -- especially in low-performing schools and districts. This is not pie in the sky. We are talking about something that some of our schools are already doing.

If we just look at low-income third graders attending high-poverty schools -- a tough group -- low-income third graders attending high-poverty schools in 2022. At a time when only 24% of low-income students in the state met State standards in reading literacy, there were 10 schools in the state where low-income students matched or exceeded the state proficiency rate of 42%. These include schools in Union City, Elizabeth, Passaic, among others. Some of those schools have been high-performing schools for 10 years. We are just beginning to do a systematic study of those schools, but we know on expert opinion you can talk to people like Superintendent Silvia Abbato in Union City, who has been leading these efforts for, I think, close to 30 years now.

If you want to come closer to my ideal of where we should be moving educationally, you would embed third-grade reading initiatives into international baccalaureate programs -- especially international baccalaureate primary (indiscernible) program. IB programs are intended not so much to get kids passing tests, as to educate them to international standards. The programs we are dealing with-- The problems -- I'm sorry -- that we are dealing with, are fundamentally problems of adult expectations for children. And, what IB does is institutionalize high expectations for everybody.

For a long time, IB programs were considered appropriate only for children from elite backgrounds. We now know that that is false. Many children of average ability benefit from these programs in important ways: greater academic self-confidence; greater likelihood of going to college; graduating from college; going to better colleges; and so on. Since IB programs are attractive to middle-class parents, they can also be a component of desegregation, especially when they become part of some of the magnet school ideas that have been talked about -- that have been spoken about previously.

(indiscernible) here in New Jersey, where a high poverty rate has turned its high school into an IB school. And, I'm sure you would find it interesting to talk with the leadership there. You want to get a little closer to my ideal package of interventions. These schools would also be community schools. I know you'll be hearing from many voices in support of community schools as these discussions go on. I will only add that what I consider the best available synthesis of evidence, based on 140 studies, concludes that the evidence base provides strong warrant for using community schools to meet the needs of low-achieving schools in high-poverty-- I'm sorry, to meet the needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools, and to help close opportunity and achievement gaps with students from low-income families; students of color; English learners; and students with disabilities.

So far, I have said, I think, three things; three major principles: One, prevent early failure; two, teach all students to high expectations; three, give students a chance to explore their own gifts. If we

do nothing else, if we could actually implement those three principles, I think we would be in a very, very different situation.

We should also make certain that young people graduate high school. Some cities around the country have seen improvements of 30 percentage points or more in the last decade, usually by establishing early warning systems that let adults know as soon as students begin sliding off track. In Newark, we've just seen a 24-percentage-point increase in on-track freshmen over that period. The work centers on improving the quality of freshmen year, partly by addressing the problematic mindsets of adults. The Newark principals who are leading in that work would be happy to share what they are learning.

It is not necessary to say anything about how our state scores in math -- especially among disadvantaged students -- threaten our collective economic future growth. I would urge you to convene a task force, with the state's best math teachers heavily represented, to study the problems of math instruction; develop a set of recommendations for improvement. And, this should certainly include close study of the districts currently doing the best work with disadvantaged students.

Whatever you do will require leadership and (indiscernible) already seems to me to be behind the leadership -- seems to be behind many other states -- and thinking about developing a robust pipeline of strong leadership for schools serving disadvantaged students; other students who usually get the weakest principals. We know that from a long, long body of research.

Some of the fastest-improving cities and states have invested heavily in policy centered on what they call "next-generation

principals” -- principals who have been trained specifically to work in urban and disadvantaged environments. And, those principals clearly have the greatest impact in schools serving disadvantaged students.

One of the last things I will say is that one of the reasons leadership is important is that we know that ideas don’t implement themselves. We can take the Amistad experience as a cautionary tale. The research base for the legislation is sound. We know that the kind of teaching Amistad calls for leads to greater agency among students; more engagement in school; more higher-order thinking; and so on and so forth.

I think we all (indiscernible) of the execution of Amistad in New Jersey leaves much to be desired. That, again, takes us back to the issue of the quality of leadership on the ground, but it also means that whatever you decide -- whatever we do -- we have to think about implementation -- how we are going to do this, as much as we think about what we are going to do. And, implementation starts with the issue of how are we going to publicly monitor progress and do that more effectively than we have sometime.

Again, I want to end by saying-- I want to be clear that we should not choose between desegregating schools and improving them. Desegregation confers distinct social benefits on students that cannot, so far as I know, be duplicated in segregated environments. If we want the best for our students, it is incumbent upon us to do both.

Finally, finally, I urge you to take your time with this. Take time to make a prominent (indiscernible) and needs discussions with voices from affected communities. Take time, as I have been suggesting all along, to allow for input from the most successful practitioners in the state:

The people who know how to do this work are in our state and in our schools *now*. We simply need to learn from them; we do not need to go beyond that for expertise. They are simply an invaluable and under-utilized resource. The extraordinary investments New Jersey has already made in educational equity position us to do things that would be much more difficult to do elsewhere. I hope we go into this conversation, as the previous speakers have said, with the attitude that it's time to stop chipping away at the problem of underperformance. It's time to put an end to those problems.

Thank you very much for this chance to talk to you this morning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much, Mr. Payne, that was excellent.

I think you definitely gave us some more food for thought around being inclusive of those leaders who are doing the work right now. No need to go look outside; they're doing the work, and they should be a part of the discussion as well.

And, also, I think it's important that you have raised how to monitor the data we use in terms of defining what segregation looks like with those poor school districts -- those underperforming school districts -- look like. How do we use the data to show how they're going to be improving after we've made some changes? I think that's another very important part for us to continue to watch and to monitor, because the numbers don't lie; they tell us when we're doing good, and they show us when we need improvement.

So, I want to thank you for elevating all of your points.

You said, I think seven -- I might have eight or nine that I took in between the ones that you laid out. So, thank you for that information.

Does anyone else have any questions they'd like to ask Dr. Payne?

Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Not a question, but an observation.

And, that is that anything that we do-- I agree with everything that you're recommending. But, I think we also need to pay attention to the fact that, right now, our schools are in crisis because we don't have our best and brightest going into the profession. And, if there is anything that we can do to elevate the teaching profession, that's something we should be thinking about as well. Because, everything that we've talked about so far are possible solutions that we have discussed and we have tried to implement, but we have failed at it.

And, speaking as the parent of a public school teacher and the sister of a public school teacher in Newark, it is a daily conversation how poorly we're doing in attracting our best and brightest to the profession. We need to elevate it; we need to respect them; and we need to support them if we expect them to go into the profession and work with our young people. And, that is -- that's a very heavy lift, and I recognize it. But, I'm sure that if we put our heads together, there are ways to address it.

So, I just want that to be part of the conversation as well.

Thanks.

DR. PAYNE: If I can respond briefly.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

DR. PAYNE: I just want to say you're absolutely right. We should be doing everything we can to attract the best and the brightest.

But, I also want to say that I think the data are clear that the people in our schools now can perform at a much higher level -- a qualitatively higher level -- when they have the appropriate leadership and the appropriate culture in the schools.

I was not able to get my written report in on time for this, but I am going to submit it on Monday--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes, please--

DR. PAYNE: --and, I hope somebody can take a look at the appendix. Because, the data is -- there will be data in that appendix that just shows you the vast differences in our best and our worst schools. And, those differences, I think, have to do with leadership.

But, thank you very, very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes, thank you.

Yes, Assemblywoman, Chairwoman Jasey, you raise an excellent point. We all have been championing to do that as well.

And, I look forward to your additional report, Dr. Payne, that you're going to send here. We'll make sure we send it out to the Committee as well.

DR. PAYNE: Thank you much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Next, we have Saray Ramos, Director of Policy and Advocacy, the Latino Action Network Foundation.

SARAY RAMOS: Good morning, members of the Joint Committee on Public Schools.

My name is Saray or Saraya Ramos. I am with the Latino Action Network Foundation.

I first wanted to highlight earlier this year, LAN Foundation collaborated with the New Jersey Consortium for Immigrant Children, and we hosted an education roundtable that focused on the Latinx experience within New Jersey schools. This roundtable consisted of conversations between youth leaders and student leaders and community members and their personal experiences. And, the direct feedback from this roundtable -- as well as community work for the past five years with students and young leaders around educational equity -- have highlighted and brought to surface several barriers to education equity for Latino students.

And, these include residential segregation; language access; early childhood education; mental health; culturally competent mental-health and special-needs assistance; school discipline; school environment and curriculum; and pathways to higher education.

And, so, this collective knowledge and direct community input has resulted in a series of recommendations aimed at advancing the integration of our schools and fostering educational equity across the state. The full report can be found on our website, but we can also send that out afterwards.

I first want to emphasize that while the issue of segregation, the issue of the lawsuit, that our (c)(4) has filed in 2018 mentions predominantly Latino and Black districts. Any proposed solutions or recommendations shouldn't be limited to specific areas, and what is needed are structural and long-term changes statewide. Because schools, regardless of location, must provide supportive and equitable environments to ensure all students' needs.

And, so, I would like to echo the following recommendations, as my previous community members and partners have already highlighted a lot of what I have to say.

The first recommendation that LANF has is the elimination of the ZIP-code barrier. And, this shift can provide more opportunities for students to attend schools that suit their educational needs and interests and promote more diverse and inclusive learning environments.

And, the second one is the elimination of zero-tolerance policies. As we all know, these policies have only really exacerbated racial disparities in student discipline. And, this was highlighted in the Attorney General's August 2023 guidance in which Black students in New Jersey were found to be suspended at 3.3 times a higher rate than white students, and while Latino and multi-racial students were facing suspensions at 1.5 times their white counterparts. So, we know that these policies do not really contribute to school safety or improved student behavior, but lead to a number of negative consequences -- especially for students of color.

And, again, like was mentioned earlier, replacing these punitive measures with equitable disciplinary systems and more restorative justice practices is something that needs to be implemented for the well-being

of students. And, this can only be done with the support of the NJ Legislature.

And, going back to our lawsuit. There were a few solutions -- or remedies -- that were highlighted, and were also echoed in this conversation, and I just want to echo them again. We fully support the implementation of magnet schools, and we find it important that ensuring equitable locations and inclusive enrollment practices can further promote integration by bringing students together from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds. Also, inter-district choice programs -- we know that the current -- New Jersey's current program is limited and has not been widely used, so expanding this program through mandatory participation for schools rather than it being voluntary would be extremely beneficial as another remedy to desegregate our schools.

And, lastly, what was mentioned in the previous report -- community schools. Introducing comprehensive support systems within our urban schools can address various socio-economic challenges that are faced by students and their families. And, this would include culturally competent counseling; language assistance; and health care, to further support and address the diverse needs of students and their families beyond academic education.

And, so the fundamental goals of these remedies is to significantly enhance educational opportunities for Black, Latino, and white students and children; providing them with the chance to receive education in an integrated environment.

And, so, I urge the Committee to consider these recommendations seriously, as it is our state -- sorry, our state has a long-

standing obligation to rectify the systemic inequalities prevalent in our education system. And, so, the initiatives today are not merely suggestions. They present a pathway forward on fostering an educational environment that is inclusive, equitable, and conducive to the success of all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much, Saray. That was all well taken, definitely highlighting the points that-- Some were previously made as well.

Assemblywoman Jasey, Chairwoman Jasey, would you like to add? I see your hand -- you look like a jumping bean, like, "I want to say something."

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: No, you know, I'm just-- I'm just so frustrated that-- I mean, I've been at this for more than 20 years, from when I was on the school board, until I got to the Legislature, and we're just such a segregated state economically and racially. And, as long as our children are compelled to go to the public schools in their communities, we're going to have this problem.

So, it's a problem with housing; it's a problem with some of our laws; and not to be a damper, but I'm just-- I'm really frustrated that we're not doing a better job.

And, all of the recommendations being made are recommendations that are important and that could help. But, until we address the geographical segregation that we have here in New Jersey, it's not going to change. And, this is a painful observation that I'm making.

So, I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: You're right, you're right.

I think this is the frustrating part. We've had these hearings -- I said it the other day -- we get tired of meeting just to have a meeting, to have another meeting, to say the same thing that was said in the first meeting, and now we're, 20 years later, still having meetings about the first meeting. And, it is-- It's very, very frustrating.

And, I think as we continue to move forward that we continue to ask our allies to continue to uplift this, the issues that we have here. And, I think that's the power behind this Committee, this Joint Public Schools Committee, is that we can continue to do that so that we *can* have change. Whether we take small chips at it at a time, but we know we want to go for the ZIP codes. We definitely want to continue to advocate for the full funding for the School Reform Act.

And, we just, we know all of these things, and we also have to create a pipeline for more teachers, more to come in and be creative and be able to help our students achieve their greatness.

So, no, we're all frustrated, but we're going to continue to hold a torch on this issue of desegregation of New Jersey schools and continue fighting for our children.

I thank you for your persistence in this space, Chairwoman Jasey.

I think we still have one more -- Vivian Cox Fraser, President and CEO of the Urban League of Essex County. I know you were feeling a little jetlagged, and I don't know-- I don't know if I still see her on the call.

I don't think so.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: I don't see her, either.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I don't see her either.

All right, well, this is-- Any other members have any questions or concerns or want to talk to our panelists about before we conclude the meeting?

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman, this is Becky.

I just wanted to acknowledge that Assemblywoman Flynn and Assemblyman Simonsen *did* join us.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Oh, yes.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON:

Assemblywoman Flynn, did you want to add anything?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: No. I do share in the frustrations that Assemblywoman Jasey has shared, obviously, having a similar trajectory as she -- I'm honored to say -- being a former board member.

As you know, you put in a lot of time and hours trying to address these issues, and I'm saddened for her that she feels like she's in this position of so much work to do. And, I hope she knows that people like me will continue to do, hopefully, the work that she -- to finish the work that she has done.

She should also reflect upon the fact that she has accomplished a lot, and I'm saddened that-- But, I know as a former board member, you feel like you-- We wish we could do it all, and we're always sad

when we can't finish everything that we have on the table that needs to be addressed because the stakes are so high.

And, I thank everyone who spoke, and I'll review it all again, Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, afterwards. I'm sorry, clients call me, too; that's the other thing. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: No worries, no worries.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: You can't really cut them off, as much as we would like; we can't always.

So, thank you again for putting this together. I appreciate it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: And, thank you for your service, too, Assemblywoman. You've been a valued voice at these committees, and we definitely appreciate all of your comments that you add to us as well.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And, I know that you will still continue to work with us, also, moving on into the future. So, thank you.

Well, this is the conclusion of our hearing. It's clear from our discussion that segregation in our schools is just not a matter of space, but also about the resources; the opportunity; and the support available to our students. The stories and the data presented today highlight the disparities that exist, and remind us of the urgent need to create equitable educational environments for all of our children, regardless of their background or where they live.

So, I do want to thank all of our participants for coming in. Thank you for your comments; thank you for your suggestions and your resources.

We do-- If you have your testimony and additional documents that you wanted to share, please send it to us. Becky will definitely get it to us, because this conversation will continue.

And, together, we *can* work towards a future where school segregation is of the past and every student has the opportunity to thrive.

So, I thank you all for joining us today, and I look forward to our next hearing.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)