
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*“The Committee will meet to discuss the topic of chronic absenteeism,
school climate and culture”*

LOCATION: Committee Room 11
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: February 5, 2019
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Ronald L. Rice, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair
Senator Patrick J. Diegnan Jr.
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblyman Ralph R. Caputo
Assemblywoman Patricia Egan Jones
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly
Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca Sapp
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

SENATE

Hon. Bob Andrzejczak
Hon. James Beach
Hon. Patrick J. Diegnan, Jr.
Hon. Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.
Hon. Ronald L. Rice
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson

ASSEMBLY

Hon. Ralph R. Caputo
Hon. BettyLou DeCroce
Hon. DiAnne C. Gove
Hon. Patricia Egan Jones
Hon. Mila M. Jasey
Hon. Benjie E. Wimberly
Hon. David W. Wolfe



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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

FROM: Senator Ronald L. Rice, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, February 5, 2019, at 10:00 a.m. in Committee Room 11 of the State House Annex, in Trenton, New Jersey.

The Committee will be receiving testimony from invited guests on the topic of the chronic absenteeism, as well as school climate and culture.

The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca Sapp, Executive Director, at 609-847-3365, or by email at Rsapp@njleg.org

Issued February 4, 2019

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SENATOR RONALD L. RICE (Co-Chair): Okay; first of all, good morning.

UNIDENTIFIED MEMBERS OF AUDIENCE: Good morning.

SENATOR RICE: And even though we're into Black History Month -- the beginning of the year, I guess -- it's still appropriate to say Happy New Year to those who have not been before us in a while and who we have not seen.

And after that, we won't be saying "Happy New Year" again; we'll be saying, "Happy Budget." (laughter)

So first of all, I want to thank everybody for taking the time to come. I think this is a very important hearing that Assemblywoman Mila Jasey has, kind of, set up for us on the Joint Committee, based on some of the issues and concerns that are moving kind of fast.

I just want to say that the Co-Chair is going to, pretty much, run the meeting today. I just wanted to say, to those of you, that your testimony this morning is going to be very important to those of us on the Committee, because we have a lot of issues that our members want to hear about throughout the course of the year, particularly as we move into Budget and after.

But we're trying to set up an agenda where we can have those issues heard; but we're trying to make sure that if there's a relationship between one hearing versus another request, that we kind of put those in some type of way and some type of perspective.

And the reason I'm saying that to you is because there's been a request from others to have a hearing around this same subject; at least a

hearing that is relevant to this subject. And there is a good possibility the next hearing would be kind of an addendum to this.

But also, I just want to remind the members that we do move up and down the state into the districts to hold hearings. And if members feel that we need to be in your district on something of importance, let us know. We will be there, and we'll arrange it with the staff, okay?

With that being said, let me-- And for those who don't know me -- there is always one person who doesn't know me; and I always find that interesting -- but I'm New Jersey State Senator Ronald L. Rice, representing the 28th Legislative District, and Co-Chair of this Committee.

So I'm going to just turn it over now to the Co-Chair, Assemblywoman Mila Jasey.

Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Co-Chair): Thank you, Senator Rice.

Add welcome; what a wonderful site it is to see all of you here.

And I know that traffic was difficult this morning; so take a moment and catch your breath. That's one reason we're starting a little later.

Now, we have a lot of people who are here to testify, and we want to hear from everyone. I'm going to let you know what the order will be. And I'm going to ask a couple of things of each of you who testify.

Number one: If you have something written, please give it to Ivy, here (indicates), and she will make sure that there-- If you don't have enough copies for the entire Committee, she will make sure that we all get

copies and that it's in the record. This hearing is recorded, and it will be transcribed and available to the public once it is.

Secondly, please hold to your three minutes, because otherwise we'll be here until this evening (laughter). And we can't; we don't have the room that long.

Also, I know that some of our members have other commitments. So when they get up and leave, it's not because they're not interested; it's because they're double-booked.

And I'm also-- Members, I'm going to ask that you hold your questions -- unless they're truly burning -- because that will lengthen the time. If you're not able to ask your question of the person who's testifying, give it to us in writing and we will get answers for you.

And with that, I'd like to do a roll call; and then we'll begin.

We'll begin with NJEA, Steve Beatty. You can come up, Steve, while we're doing the roll call.

MS. SAPP (Executive Director): Senator Diegnan.

SENATOR DIEGNAN: Here.

MS. SAPP: Senator Thompson.

SENATOR THOMPSON: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblyman Caputo.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman DeCroce.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman Egan Jones.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JONES: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblyman Wimberly.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Here.

MS. SAPP: Senator Rice.

SENATOR RICE: Here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right; Steve, the floor is yours.

S T E V E B E A T T Y: Well, thank you.

Thank you for having me this morning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I should have said that the topic for today is chronic absenteeism, school climate, and culture.

And with that, you may start.

MR. BEATTY: Thank you, again.

Thank you to the Chairs, Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey; and to all the members present here today.

My name is Steve Beatty, and I am the Secretary-Treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association, for the past year-and-a-half. But more importantly to me, I am a 25-year classroom teacher, high school Social Studies teacher, from Bridgewater-Raritan in Somerset County.

And I am very pleased to be here today to talk about what I know about, what I've done, really, my whole adult life as a practitioner; and understanding what it means with school climate and the correlation between social-emotional learning, absenteeism, and of course school success.

So I'll treat this a little bit like a lesson. There's my objective: to make that correlation and explain it to you. Talking about the elements

that I think are important are making sure you have quality staff; the materials and resources that are necessary for all practitioners and educators; and of course, the support of the community at large.

I think you would all agree that we understand that we are charged with taking care of the most precious resource and educating our future generations. And we need to create environments for our students, no matter where they live. A zip code should not be any factor in what type of education our students get. And create a climate where all students can succeed.

We know that the term *chronic absenteeism* is a very broad spectrum -- what that involves, the various cause and effects. And, really, I'm sure no two cases are exactly the same. They're unique, and they must also be dealt with uniquely. We can't go about punishing students or school districts because of chronic absenteeism without looking at the issues that are involved in what's going on.

I can speak to my own experience. As I said, I was in the classroom for 25 years, before taking on this position, most of it in Bridgewater-Raritan. But my first job -- just out of college; I was barely 23 years old -- I got a call to work as a replacement teacher for a semester in Westfield. Now, Westfield High School, you might imagine, was a fairly affluent district; and, of course, being 23, I thought, "Oh, this is going to be great. These kids-- It's affluent; there can't be any problems going on here."

But when I interviewed for the job, with Vice Principal Bob Eyre, he told me it was replacement for a leave in Project 79, which is their alternative program within the high school; about 110 at-risk students who

were in that program because they had some other issue that prevented them from coming to school and being successful.

And what I learned -- much longer story short -- is that I was told that first day -- at 23; barely 23, out of college -- that if you can't get those kids to want to be there, get them to buy into their education by involving them in the decision-making in the classroom, that they will not listen to anything you have to say about content, or want to be in school at all.

And so I walked away from that after only six months; and I still think about that, 25 years later, how important it is to make sure that we engage our students and allow them into the conversations as decision-makers in the classroom, and the corridors in our schools, to make sure that they are involved -- that they are invested in our schools.

And along with that, making sure we have quality staff; that we must find ways to recruit and retain the best and the brightest. We have the No. 2 schools in the country, looking at all measures. And there's a reason we need to make sure that we retain those people; that they're given the resources; of course, the salary and benefits they need; that they are given the due respect as the consummate experts in that field.

We can make sure that our schools themselves are welcoming environments. There can't be a difference between-- Again, a school is based on your zip code. Some schools are falling gap apart, while others are brand-new and shiny.

We also need to make sure we have materials and resources. We all know funding is an issue; but I cannot sit by again to see our schools

chronically underfunded as in years past, and the resources going away for other elements that take away from our public schools.

So when we look at the issue of chronic absenteeism in the schools, we must realize that it involves all those elements: making sure there is a quality staff, the resources; because these are our most valued -- the future of our society.

And so recognizing that, and working together to make sure they have an environment that is nurturing and they buy into, is the way to go as we address the issue.

So I thank you for your time. I look forward to working with you in the future.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Steve.

Next up I would -- we would like to hear from the Department of Education. Carolyn Marano, the Assistant Commissioner for Student Services; Kelly Williams, Director of the Office of Student Services; Dominic Rota, Deputy Chief, Office of Special Education; and Kathy Ehling--

KATHLEEN EHLING: Yes, thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --Ehling, Data Manager, Office of Special Education.

So I am going to ask you to be brief, okay? And if you have anything you'd like for us to enter into the record, give it to Ivy.

And you will be followed by ACNJ.

CAROLYN J. MARANO: Thank you.

Good morning, Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey.

We have provided you with some information packets, and already entered into the record are my remarks.

This morning, I will provide an overview of the efforts undertaken by the Department of Education to help schools identify, prevent, and combat chronic student absenteeism. I will also discuss the Department's work around culture and climate.

I begin with this undisputed principle: Being in school leads to succeeding in school.

National studies, academic research, and school-level data confirm that school attendance affects grades, standardized test scores, graduation, and high school drop-out rates. A recent national study concluded that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and 1st grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level when they reach grade 3.

In high school, not coming to school is an indication that you are more likely to drop out of school.

In our state, a student is considered *chronically absent* if she is not present for 10 percent or more of the total enrolled school days. This means a student who misses 18 days or more is considered *chronically absent*.

During the 2016-2017 school year, 10 percent of our more than 1.3 million public school students that year were chronically absent. As a result of legislation signed into law last spring by the Governor, schools with a chronic absenteeism rate of 10 percent or more are required to develop a corrective action plan to improve attendance rates.

Under Commissioner Repollet's leadership, we continue to identify ways to support school districts in addressing chronic student

absenteeism. For example, we work directly with schools and districts to implement New Jersey's Tiered System of Supports, or NJTSS; and we support NJPSA's Connected Action Roadmap, or CAR.

We also issued guidance documents that provide schools with strategies that include engaging families and communities on how to improve student attendance. Further, we provide schools with technical assistance to ensure they accurately collect and report student attendance data.

I would like to discuss school culture and climate, given the direct correlation between chronic absenteeism and school climate.

Research demonstrates that a positive school climate, among other things, reduces bullying and violence, and improves academic achievement.

The Department continues to assist schools in providing safe and supportive environments for students and staff. Social and emotional learning is a priority for Commissioner Repollet; and as such, he has made clear his commitment to, and support of, SEL. Students in SEL programs are more likely to attend school and receive better grades. These students are less likely to violate their student codes of conduct.

The Department's SEL Competencies and Sub-Competencies are a framework designed to provide students with the skills they need for success in school, postsecondary education, careers, and adult life.

The Department continues to support districts in the development and implementation of SEL programs. We are also planning the Department's first statewide Social and Emotional Learning conference for teachers and administrators.

We recognize there is more work to be done to reduce chronic student absenteeism, and to improve the culture and climate in our schools.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to appear before you.

And we can answer any questions, if you have them.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

I know that Senator Diegnan has a question.

And do you have a date for that statewide conference yet?

KELLY WILLIAMS: Good morning.

Thursday, May 23, 2019, at Rutgers-New Brunswick, on the Busch Campus.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And your name?

MS. WILLIAMS: Kelly Williams.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. MARANO: Kelly is our Director of Student Support Services. You'll be hearing more about that information; they'll be broadcasting some advertisements prior to that happening.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

SENATOR DIEGNAN: Are there any statistics on absenteeism for students that English is not their primary language? Is that a greater absentee number?

MS. MARANO: There are indicators that there are certain subgroups that have higher chronic absenteeism rates. Kathy Ehling is the Director of Fiscal and Data; we organized the Department so we were able to actually look at that data *in toto*. And there are subgroups, and ELLs is one; yes, sir.

SENATOR DIEGNAN: Because I was recently speaking to a guidance counselor in Elizabeth; and this is what he told me, and tell me if this accurate or not.

Port-of-entry students, coming from non-English speaking countries -- they give them general testing, and then they traditionally place the kids -- if they're, like, 15, 16, 17 years old -- they traditionally place the kids in freshman class, as a matter of course.

MS. MARANO: That's something that I could not speak to; but we can certainly look into it and check on that. That doesn't sound--

SENATOR DIEGNAN: And he said to me, without exception-- You know, these kids could be coming from the Dominican Republic, or somewhere, where the last time they went to school was in 5th grade. First of all, they're struggling with English; they place them in freshman class. And after about a week or two the kids feel so frustrated and dumb -- for lack of a better word -- that they stop coming to class. And I just found that to be amazing.

MS. MARANO: Sir, we'll look into that, specifically, and get you the information, through the Chairs.

SENATOR DIEGNAN: And he said that's standard practice throughout the state. That's the first time I heard that -- that if a kid is, like, 14, 15, 16 years old, and the last time they, maybe, went to class was 4th or 5th; they can't speak English, and they're put-- You talk about a recipe for failure.

So that's something that the Department really should look into. I was just stunned by it myself, the first time I ever heard it. And he said it's common practice.

So if you could look into that and let us know.

MS. MARANO: For sure.

SENATOR DIEGNAN: I would really appreciate it.

Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Any other questions? (no response)

Thank you very much.

MS. MARANO: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: We appreciate your time.

MS. MARANO: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: ACNJ -- Cynthia Rice, Senior Policy Analyst, Advocates for Children of New Jersey. And you're here with Peter Chen, Policy Counsel.

Welcome.

P E T E R C H E N, Esq.: Good morning, and thank you for having us.

My name is Peter Chen; I am Policy Counsel at Advocates for Children of New Jersey, joined here by my colleague, Senior Policy Analyst Cynthia Rice.

We have been working on-- So, background on Advocates for Children of New Jersey. We're the state's largest multi-issue nonprofit dedicated to children's issues in a variety of areas: juvenile justice, child welfare, health, early childhood education.

And, actually, it's fitting that we would follow the Department because our interest in chronic absenteeism began when the Department of Ed began looking into this set of data, and said to us, "You should really be taking a look at this absenteeism data." And as we started to dig in and put

together a series of reports on this issue, we've become the champion for reducing chronic absenteeism throughout the state, including championing the Bill that was signed into law last year which requires reporting and action plans for districts on absenteeism.

So I'm going to try keep this as brief as possible.

(refers to PowerPoint Presentation)

So just some background on absenteeism.

As the Department laid out, chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of enrolled school days, including excused and unexcused absences, and including suspensions. And I'll talk a little bit about why this is important.

This is different from average daily attendance, which is counting the average number of students who show up to school, roughly; and then truancy, which counts only unexcused absences.

So what does this mean? This means that based on a 180-day school year, any student who misses 18 days or more per year -- or about two days per month -- is considered *chronically absent*. And I'll talk a little bit more about this 10 percent figure.

But the impact on student success is really dramatic. And one of the reasons why we've taken a close look at absenteeism is because it's a leading indicator. If we want to know a child's likelihood of success in school, it would be better to look at their absenteeism data than their test scores. Because it shows us a trajectory in their lifelong learning.

So in the early years, absenteeism leads to long-term reading problems and higher absenteeism rates in later grades and high (*sic*) rates of retention. Absenteeism in later years leads to suspensions, lower academic

achievement, and lower odds of graduating from high school or reaching college.

And actually this next slide is very interesting. This is from Newark Public Schools' data, but the same trend would be visible -- has been shown in other districts across the nation.

So over there on the left are students who had good attendance in 9th grade, okay? This is 9th grade attendance, and their graduation rate four years down the road. So if you had good attendance in Newark Public Schools, you had an 86 percent graduation rate, which is almost the State average.

But as you go down in attendance categories, over the 9th grade level, you start seeing a drop-off. So the difference between 5 percent and then 5 to 10 percent -- there's a little drop-off there from 86 percent to 77 percent. But when you get to the chronically absent category, that drops to 58 percent; and when you get to severely chronically absent -- where you've missed more than 20 percent of your school days -- the graduation rate for that cohort is 25 percent.

So what absenteeism does is, it raises a red flag for us that this is a student who needs additional support in order to be successful in school.

All right; so just a little bit about truancy versus chronic absence.

So historically, we've looked at truancy: Was a student's absence excused or not? Did they have a doctor's note? Is there a reason for their absence? And these reasons are extremely important. However, the impact on a child's learning is the same regardless of the reason they're

not in that seat. So if a child is missing because they went on an extended vacation or of a child is missing because they are missing school to go to their job, or they're missing school because they're ill, those days missed in the classroom have the same impact on them. And so this is the reason why we're looking at chronic absence, which emphasizes the lost learning time and the need for supports to bring students back to the level of other students.

So if you go to the next slide.

This is just a quick look at why we might not notice chronic absence. When we think of a chronically absent student, we think of that student who misses, like, two weeks in row. But the reality is, students miss days here and there. And this student is missing as much learning time as a student who does miss four weeks at a time.

So let's take a quick look at the data.

This is just a snapshot in 2016-2017; about 136,000 K through 12 students were chronically absent. That's about 10 percent of the overall student population. And this is about on par with what we see nationally.

I will make a special note of preschool students. The rate for preschool students is dramatically higher; it's almost 31 percent of the total preschool population.

So if you go to the next slide.

This is what we call the *U-curve* of chronic absenteeism. We expect absenteeism in the older grades. I think we have a vision of high school students cutting class. But we see that there's actually high absenteeism in the younger grades as well; in the early grades, K through 3. And if we add preschool, we can see that preschool has a dramatically

higher chronic absenteeism rate. And Cindy will talk about some of the reasons why that is, that we found from our research.

Senator Diegnan, I wanted to refer to the question you asked about special categories.

If you look at the next slide, different ethnic and demographic categories have different rates of chronic absenteeism statewide. You'll see that there are elevated rates for black or African American students, Hispanic students, students who receive free or reduced lunch, English Language Learners, and students who have an IEP, as well as American Indian or Native American students.

One thing that I did want to flag here, though, is that there are going to be variations, depending on the backgrounds of those students. Even though this is a general picture, it may not be a picture in a particular district.

So if we go to the next slide, here are three school districts, and this is their data from 2016-2017, based on special populations. They all had the same overall chronic absenteeism rate of 8 percent. But if you look at some of their special populations, you see that, for example, in District A, the economically disadvantaged students and English Language Learners actually had the same or lower absenteeism rates than the District as a whole; whereas, students with IEPs or special needs had a much higher chronic absenteeism rate.

So different districts are going to need different strategies to target the populations that are at-risk for being chronically absent in their communities. And so for English Language Learner communities, their

background and the background of the school itself will have a lot to do with their attendance rates.

So I'm going to turn things over to Cynthia to talk about some of the reasons that we found in our research for absences, and some of the strategies to reduce absences.

CYNTHIA C. RICE, Esq.: So why do we have such high numbers of chronically absent students in particular subgroups?

And the answer is, it depends. It depends on the age, it depends on the grade, and it depends on economics -- many things.

What we do know is that this is an equal opportunity problem; that there are high rates of absenteeism in wealthy districts, as there are in our lower income districts.

What we do know-- And we've been studying chronic absenteeism for almost five years, as Peter talked about. We've written lots of statewide reports, local reports. And we have talked to hundreds and hundreds of teachers, Administrators, parents, school nurses, and, if they're old enough, the students as to why exactly so many kids are missing so much school so often.

So they're listed; but I want to talk about a couple of them.

What we learned about in our low-income districts -- most of the reasons are linked under the umbrella of poverty. So when we talk about health issues, what our studies have shown is, for example -- we'll use Newark, where we studied in Newark -- was that asthma was an issue; so how kids coming to school became a problem.

So when a little less than half of our families in Newark don't have cars, this becomes a problem. So if the weather is bad, and you live a

mile away, and you're a single parent, you may not take your child to school because the impact of walking in the rain for an asthmatic child may be a problem. The bigger issue is that it has a spiraling effect; because if you're a single parent, and you have multiple children, and you can't go out for one, you may not take any of your children.

So thinking about -- not just how do we deal with that particular child who may have an asthma problem, but transportation -- looking at the bigger issues, the systemic issues, the subgroups as to why children are missing school is important.

So that's for young children.

I want to mention one other thing. In our focus groups with parents of young children we heard, over and over again, "Well, the State doesn't require kindergarten and preschool, so how important could it be?"

So we're sending a message through our policy as to that -- because it's not required, at least there's an impression to parents that they're not learning that much. Where really-- You know, we are strong advocates for early childhood education. Here is where you want to build foundations for children's learning; not just in those years, but in the years to come. So it's critically important; we're clearly-- Our policies and our messages need work to make sure that families understand differently.

For older students -- we also did some work in Newark, and we did talk to high school students. Peter and I went into six of Newark's high schools. Health-related issues are also a concern with older students; but the thing there is a lot of mental health issues. Living in areas where it's dangerous, where safety is an issue, impacts learning. Peter and I asked how many have either been a victim of a crime or know family-- Every kid

raised their hand. So that coming into school, feeling safe to come to school-- Again, a transportation issue is another problem.

Also we heard problems from our high school students that, really, to be honest with you, kids 14 through 18 shouldn't be handling. Making sure that they were bringing money into the house on many occasions; having to work-- And when it came to work or going to school, and you got a call -- you were going to work.

So these were some of the issues that we heard.

So we heard, "No one size fits all." But what we also heard -- there were themes in everything we heard from the folks who we talked to. First, there has to be an intentionality. Leadership and relationships are what make the difference. So when we have Administrators who say, "We are going to take this on. We are going to make a difference. We are going to improve our attendance, and it's not just going to be in September and October. We're going to look through it consistently throughout the year. And we are going to be consistent as a school," we see differences.

But what we've also seen -- and this is with districts really trying -- that there's an undue heavy emphasis on compliance. You know, a child misses three days, so they get a letter home. Well, you can cross off the check, but that's not going to solve the problem.

What we heard from students and from parents was that when they knew that people in the school cared about their children, had a relationship with them, they are less apt to miss school. There are lots of outside issues, but these are key things. And we know this in our own human nature. We respond to people who are kind to us, who are taking

those extra steps to make sure that we're okay, that our families are okay. And we heard that over and over.

So while compliance is important, when it's the only strategy being used it will never improve attendance.

Also, using data continuously. What we also saw-- Peter showed that data through subgroups. It's not just that main number; and that means you look at it early and often. In September, schools should be looking at their numbers, because the kids who are missing three days in September more than likely they're going to be missing in December, January, and February. So you want to be preventive; your strategies have to be more preventive.

And again, building relationships.

So we heard about the law; we're waiting for the regulations. All that is great, but it forces schools that are really struggling with this 10 percent number to be that -- to take that intentional step, to look at their data, to understand their data, and come up with a plan.

And it's also -- chronic absenteeism is our performance measure in the Federal, under ESSA. So just-- That hadn't been mentioned before -- that that is critically important because, as you're already heard, it is directly linked with student achievement.

Any questions?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, Assemblywoman DeCroce.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Thank you.

Thank you for the information you've been giving us here today.

A couple of things that I was thinking about as I was hearing both of you testify. And when we look at certain schools with the statistics-- But are they repetitive schools? Are they the same schools that seem to be flagging out as having students not reporting to school? There's an overall problem, but are there specific schools that, maybe, we need to look at -- targeting specific schools with, like, pilot programs, if we were to start trying to figure out how we offset what's happening?

I mean, have you done studies to see, you know-- If it's Eisenhower School that is consistent; and maybe this year it's, say, Franklin School. But Eisenhower is still hanging out there; Franklin has become a little bit better, but Eisenhower has not. I mean, I'm looking at specific schools in every district.

MR. CHEN: Yes; so, we can look at the data and see specific schools. And there's a fair amount of variation, year over year, especially in smaller schools.

We do see that there are schools that consistently have above 10 percent of their students chronically absent. And that's part of why the law requires schools to put together corrective action plans for -- if they have higher than 10 percent of chronic absenteeism. And so many of those schools are consistent, year over year.

But I do want to point out that many of them have -- many of the schools that had consistently high absenteeism share a lot of demographic and other backgrounds that might make them more at-risk for having high absenteeism.

But I know that there are a number of pilot programs actually going on right now. New Jersey Principals and Supervisors is working on

some pilot projects in a number of districts, and targeting some of those higher absenteeism schools.

And we've also seen that schools can turn around their attendance. This is not a baked-in, unsolvable problem. Actually, Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School, here in Trenton, has done an outstanding job of reducing their chronic absenteeism. And a big part of their solution has been this sort of holistic relationship-based approach that we're discussing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: One thing I would like to say to the Chair is, that maybe what we should get is a list of the different pilot program addressing the issue; so we can take a look at the pilots and see what the benchmarks are within the pilots of what they have to meet. And look at, maybe, seeing where that problem is starting to exist, and a breakdown within the different pilot programs, and how successful they are. You know, what are the reports coming out as to the success? Because if it's not successful, then we have to look at, maybe, doing different pilots.

I remember hearing, when I didn't want to go to school growing up -- and I just said it to my little colleague; *my little colleague* -- when I was a little girl, to my colleague (laughter) over here -- the Truant Officer -- because my mother would always threaten the Truant Officer, was going to come to the house if I didn't want to go to school.

So, you know, and they do exist, but not at a depth that they probably ever did in the past -- and maybe we shouldn't call it Truant Officer -- but somebody who is a mentor to the community, and who can be closer to the parents of the students who are not showing up, so they can develop the relationships that need to build the trust; and to really find out

why the students -- whether it's transportation-- Look, in this day and age, it could be the clothes they're wearing. I mean, there are so many different things -- the pressure of society today, compared to the past, that maybe we need to cut a little closer in and bring people -- somebody from the school system closer to the community and to the parents, to try to be able to sit down and develop that relationship that could help them more.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman, we're going to hear from students shortly.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Okay, good.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And I think they will shed a lot of light on this issue, and what's effective and what's not effective.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, and that's what we could look at in the pilot programs -- what we may need to add or refine to change.

So just my suggestion -- because I am one of those who has to go to another hearing, so I'm not going to be able to stay for the whole thing, and I apologize.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I'll make sure you get the information.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And thank you for your question.

MR. CHEN: Thank you.

SENATOR RICE: Just very quickly.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, Senator.

SENATOR RICE: The NJA (*sic*) is leaving; What's NJA?
That's who I wanted to talk to.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: This is ACNJ.

SENATOR RICE: I'll hold questions for you.

No, the question is -- are you going to be around?

MR. CHEN: Yes, we're around. (laughter)

SENATOR RICE: Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; thank you.

And I did want to ask a quick one about the preschool absenteeism.

MS. RICE: Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Is this related, in any way, to wraparound services, or a lack thereof?

MS. RICE: So we don't really know--

MR. CHEN: Yes, we're not really sure; but what we do see is that the kinds of support services that children need in the young ages are very different from the ones that students might need in the older grades. And so to the extent that these kinds of services can be -- especially for pick-up and drop-off, which was mentioned.

MS. RICE: Right.

MR. CHEN: Because your older child -- you can let go to school on their own, right? But you're not going to let your 3-year-old go to school on their own. So I think pick-up and drop-off times were mentioned routinely as an obstacle.

MS. RICE: A huge problem, yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. RICE: But I would also-- I mean, I think that there are systems issues. So transportation -- looking at how do we get our youngest kids to schools, particularly if there are multiple children in the family. That is a huge problem. Because if a mom has multiple stops at schools, and there's not enough time, it's the youngest who's not going.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Right.

MS. RICE: So that's a concern.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; thank you very much.

MR. CHEN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Next were going to hear from New Jersey Principals and Supervisors; and following them, we are going to hear from the Abbott Leadership Institute.

You know the drill: name into the record. (laughter)

PATRICIA WRIGHT: Good morning.

I'm Pat Wright, the Executive Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

Thank you very much for allowing me this opportunity to share with you some very important information about school climate.

I served on the former Governor Corzine's Commission on Bullying in Our Schools; and more recently presided as Chair of the Anti-Bullying Task Force.

In addition, I have prepared and delivered professional learning to hundreds of educators across the state regarding the important issue of school climate. I passionately believe in the importance of this work as a foundational structure for any change in the topics that we're talking about today.

School climate is an umbrella concept. It significantly impacts school safety, bullying, chronic absenteeism, dropout rate, academic performance, and the social and emotional well-being of students. School climate also impacts the ability of professional staff to work collaboratively to attain the highest levels of student achievement. In short, a positive school climate is a basic foundational structure of any effective school.

The Commission on Bullying in Our Schools and the Anti-Bullying Task Force were established to tackle the issue of harassment, intimidation, and bullying in our schools; and to make recommendations related to legislation and regulations in this area. One thing both groups could certainly agree upon, through all of our deliberations, is what research has been telling us for years -- that the single-best way to address HIB in our schools is to develop the type of school climate where it is least likely to occur.

That's why today I bring forward to you the idea that we need to reflect on the spirit of the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which is already in place. When this law was first implemented, schools focused on the compliance issues related to implementation -- 10-day investigations, having anti-bullying specialists in their building, establishing a School Safety Team that was supposed to meet twice a year and look at HIB reports.

But in our eagerness to comply with the due process aspects of the law, what happened was a key part of the legislation was initially overlooked; a very important process. In the law, the School Safety Team is established to -- and I quote from the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights -- "develop, foster, and maintain a positive school climate by focusing on the

ongoing, systemic process and practices in the school to address school climate issues such as harassment, intimidation, and bullying.”

The key words there are “such as.” School climate is so much more, as we heard this morning. It’s the physical environment; it’s the social and emotional environment; it’s the affective environment; it’s the academic environment. So it’s all these pieces that the School Climate Team is charged with developing, fostering, and maintaining.

And because of the ABR, we have a lot of good news to celebrate. We’ve raised awareness about HIB; we established these School Safety Teams, which are now correctly called *School Climate Teams*, because of a change that the Task Force asked for in regulations. We’ve also mandated that schools teach anti-bullying prevention curriculum which, when translated, is social and emotional learning skills related to relationships -- peer relationships.

And through ESSA we’re now putting a spotlight on chronic absenteeism. But we know from the research that the universal school climate in any schools has to be such that it’s inviting and engaging; that students want to come to school every day.

And finally, we recognize now the need to prepare our students for life by teaching them not only academic skills, but the social and emotional learning skills that will make them successful.

So now, the challenge; I’m going to point to you. The challenge now is that we really send a message to schools -- we don’t see these things in isolation. Chronic absenteeism here, HIB here, mental health here. We need to think about all of these things that are tightly connected under the umbrella of school climate. School climates do not change without a

deliberate and intentional plan to change them. The job of the already-established School Climate Teams is to utilize school climate data and to develop coherent plans for school climate improvement.

We need to ensure now that every School Climate Team in New Jersey is provided with the effective professional learning opportunities they need to do their job effectively. I really believe that if these teams embraced this role and are provided with the resources they need, cases of HIB will continue to decline, students will be more motivated to attend school, and social-emotional learning will be an integrated part of instruction in every school.

To make this happen, I am asking the Joint Committee's expertise and assistance in seeking renewed funding -- and I know funding is an issue -- renewed funding for the Bullying Prevention Fund, that was originally established in the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights and has not been funded since the first year of its existence. These funds could be used to ignite the work of School Climate Teams throughout the state, giving them the much needed professional learning they need to do, to lead this work in our schools. By doing so, I think we'd build the capacity for school climate improvement in every school in New Jersey.

Thank you so much. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Senator, did you have a question?

SENATOR RICE: Not a question, but is this for everybody.

And I may offend some of my colleagues here, but I get tired of dealing with education. We talk about HIB; we talk about the school climate. We talk little about the community climate--

MS. WRIGHT: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: --getting to the schools. And all this debate -- and I'm not going to have a marijuana discussion here. But we look at everybody -- other states -- and see what's not happening, rather than just looking at our state and make blind what's happening in other states; and understand the relationships, etc. -- why kids are dropping out of schools.

And you talk about-- And I know that the advocates talk about all the conversations they've had with people. We talk about the need to enhance preschool and early childhood education. But there's a huge absentee rate with that population; and maybe it's because some of the parents can't get up in the morning because they are smoking weed, or popping pills, or what have you. And even those other folks may not get up, but the kids are big enough to get themselves up.

I just don't think you can leave any of these elements out of the research; and I don't think you can be silent on it, while we're talking about drugs, and gambling, and everything else we talk about in the state. You have to say, "Well, were going to ignore that, because of the politics." And we need funding over here; and the Senate President, or somebody, may not sign off on what we need. We have to put everything in perspective.

So I would hope, as we have these conversations, if you are really sincere about it, every organization-- NJEA should really take a look at the relationship, because we're fast tracking stuff that, even if we get this piece of it right, the stuff we're not looking at is going to come back to make this stuff null and void.

So I just want to lay that on everybody, so I don't have to say it again to anybody here. And that's not to offend my colleagues, because we

have different views on drugs in our community. But drugs have a great impact, community climate has a great impact, etc.

So I just wanted to say that here

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

And I know Assemblywoman Egan Jones has a comment or a question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: A question.

On the funding issue you mentioned-- It was initially funded. Was the funding just kept flat from that point on, or did it disappear?

MS. WRIGHT: It disappeared.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Okay.

MS. WRIGHT: And I believe that the Anti-Bullying Task Force, in all four of its reports, asked and recommended that we have some money.

What happened was -- the fund was originally only funded at \$1 million. If you take into account the number of school districts in New Jersey-- What I think about the funding now is that it really needs to be targeted to that spirit of the law right now, to these teams that have a responsibility to address the myriad of issues around school climate. And they need some resources to do so.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And now it's my pleasure to ask the Abbott Leadership Institute New-Ark Leaders of Health, Rutgers University-- (applause)

And I want to tell you that it was the article I read in the *Star-Ledger* that really pushed me, with Senator Rice, and-- You know what? Use the seats, and then you can rotate yourselves.

And I thought to myself, "I really want to hear from young people on the ground, working on this issue." Because you, in fact, are the ones who are going to give us the answers, I strongly believe.

Introduce yourself, and then proceed.

KUTORKOR KOTEY: Hello, and good morning, everyone.

We are the New-Ark Leaders of Health.

My name is Kutorkor Kotey; and today we will be expounding on the manner in which school climate and culture, as well as the other circumstances students face outside of school -- and how it affects chronic absenteeism.

But before we dive into this presentation, I would like to take this moment to thank everyone for coming here, despite their busy schedules. And a special thanks to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for inviting us.

So we will start this presentation out by hearing testimonies and stories from students, explaining how we're affected by chronic absenteeism.

I hope we can all realize that chronic absenteeism was something we all knew nothing of, but fell victim to.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Tell us -- are you currently in school, and what your year is, and what you're studying.

MS. KOTEY: Okay; I'm in 11th grade at Bard High School Early College in Newark, New Jersey.

KENTON HALL: Good morning.

My name is Kenton Hall. I'm a graduate of high school, and this is my story.

When I was younger, I didn't know absenteeism was a real problem, not did I know it existed. I didn't have anybody around me to tell me that I was chronically absent until I became a part of this program.

But of course, it was too late for me. My honest reason behind being chronically absenteeism was that it was a mental and physical depression for me. I found myself feeling like school wasn't important anymore. It's like you would just show up every day, and just pretty much be there.

It's like school went from being a place of future plans and dreams of going to college, to just a hobby. There wasn't enough motivation for me; it was more like angry kids in one place for six hours. And the kids were only angry because either there was a death of a close friend, or they were in danger of failing with no assistance in their lives.

I found myself not wanting to be there anymore; and when I was there, I was always upset, not knowing what for.

Things that were not normal in school became a normality, like feeling poor or being limited to certain things because we're a public school system. I ended up leaving my school to attend Leaders for Life Academy to get my high school diploma

My school wasn't what I wanted it to be for me. I honestly felt like it failed me, but I didn't fail myself.

And that's it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Kenton.

What are you doing now?

MR. HALL: Well, I'm taking some time to look into what college I want to attend, and what I really want to pursue. I was looking into criminal justice; and I want to get into that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And do you have support for that from the New-Ark Leaders of Health Institute, or from the Abbott Leadership Institute; or are you looking for that?

MR. HALL: Yes, yes; I have that support. I have way more support than I need, honestly. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Excellent. No, you never have too much support. (laughter)

Okay.

MR. HALL: If I'm not on top of it, they are.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you for sharing that with us.

MR. HALL: No problem

MANUEL MEJIA: Hello, and good morning.

My name is Manuel Mejia; I attend Rutgers University-Newark.

Thank you for having me.

I remember early in my childhood how much I loved school -- arts and crafts, coloring, and especially nap time. (laughter)

I don't remember much from those times; but this one memory in 2nd grade. It was Ms. Austin's (phonetic spelling) class, and there was a spelling test. I was never really a good speller, so I took out my notebook thinking it was a practice test. Honest mistake, really. I heard a fellow

student tell the teacher that I was cheating, and her response still haunts me to this day. From behind me I heard her voice, “I see what he’s doing. I’m going to fail him anyway.”

I failed that test that day in 2nd grade.

I suppose her low expectation of me was meant. Ever since, I hated school. It wasn’t the same welcoming environment to me, like how kindergarten was.

I started to miss school more and more as I reached middle school and high school; always on the verge of failing, but always doing enough to pass. So I came to the idea that I didn’t actually need to go to school; that I could pass with minimum effort.

This only changed when I reached my junior year of high school. Mr. Zorilla (phonetic spelling), my art teacher, who I initially butted heads with, took me aside one day and asked me, straight up, why was I missing so many days of school. I was shocked. Up to this point, no teacher ever addressed me missing that many days of school before,. He said he was concerned about my attendance, and that I had too much potential, and I needed to stay in school. That affected me just as much as Ms. Austin did.

I still try to remember his kind words in order to pursue my academic career and to be successful in my lifetime.

I now go to Rutgers University, studying neuroscience and behavior. I’m a part of My Brother’s Keeper, which is funded by the Obama Foundation. And I am very proud of our research on chronic absenteeism in Newark Public Schools. I guess Ms. Austin was wrong about me after all.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, that was very powerful. And listening to you talk about a memory from 2nd grade is -- that should hit all the educators in the room. It certainly hits me as a parent.

MR. MEJIA: Thank you.

AMALY GARCIA: *Buenos días*; good morning.

UNIDENTIFIED MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE: Good morning.

MS. GARCIA: My name is Amaly Garcia, and I go to Rutgers University-Newark.

And when I was back in high school I didn't know I was going to be where I am today. I came to this country in the summer of 2013, looking for the American dream and safety.

I was almost kidnapped in my home country, the Dominican Republic.

When I came to the United States looking for a journey that would lead me to a successful future, I also encountered what I wanted my whole life, as an only child -- my little sister was born. And she is everything to me. You know, like, when you love somebody so much that your chest just hurts so much? That's how I love her, and even more.

But this also brought challenges into my life. As the daughter of undocumented parents, my mom would have to work long hours and I would have to take care of the little baby. So I went to East Side High School, which is a high school that is predominantly Hispanics, because my family wanted me to go to a school where people looked like me. And there

my class performance and extracurricular involvement decreased because of my new responsibilities.

So with two or three hours of sleep it was really a challenge for me to get to school on time every morning. And all this lateness -- they accumulated into absences. Therefore, I was chronically absent. And I didn't know if I was going to graduate from high school.

So at that point, my American dream was just that; it was just a dream.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Amaly, can you tell us -- did you graduate, and how-- Did you say you're at Rutgers-Newark now?

MS. GARCIA: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And how did that happen?

MS. GARCIA: So I can be thankful for a high school program. So there I had a mentor. And just thinking about it -- I didn't want to be part of the program, just because my parents were undocumented. So I was -- I didn't, in fact, qualify. I was fearful of that. But I talked to my high school Vice Principal -- who I was really close to -- and he told me that, "It does not matter; you're still qualified," because I am documented myself.

So I was able to apply for the program; it's called the Cooperman Scholarship program. And from there they guided me through my junior year and senior year; and they guided me into college.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And what are you studying?

MS. GARCIA: My major is Public and Nonprofit Administration. And this semester, I started my master's in Public Health.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's excellent; thank you.

MS. GARCIA: Thank you.

SENATOR RICE: Thank you for the presentation.

What I would like to hear about from you -- because I hear from others -- we talk about the internal problems in the schools and how the schools make you feel. But let's talk about the environment that we live in. You know, we're legislators; we have these political "conversations" about how we want social justice. And we're really talking about adults, and how we want to make money and talking about the big folks out there.

But what about your little brothers and sisters? What about yourselves, moving through the environment?

And I guess the question that I need to talk about, or raise, is -- can you tell us, on the record, the impact of the environment? You're from Newark; liquor stores on almost every corner. Places you go to buy fast food with bullet proof glass; you know, chicken joints and Chinese joints. Places say, "We buy antique gold and antiques," and we don't have antiques and gold, so we get over there and steal them, okay?

And you know, just this whole environment of vacant lots, abandoned buildings, drugs on the corner. Folks are saying that if we could put some marijuana stores in our communities next to our liquor stores, then we're going to be fine. That's social justice. But we don't have that now.

So just tell us about your environment. Did that ever impact you, as well, once you got to school, or prior to getting to school? Or does it have an impact because you may have been stronger; does it have an impact on your peers, and your little brothers and sisters now?

Anybody can talk about that.

MR. HALL: I would like to say, to what you were saying-- Yes, it does have a big impact, because the more days that you walk to school and you see those kinds of things, like I said, it becomes a normality. So mentally, you just -- you get used to poverty and you feel like that's just an okay thing, "This is where I live, this is how it is."

But then when you travel, and you grow up, you see that it's not like that everywhere. It's not like that in Hillside and other places like that. So you start to feel like, "Okay, maybe I'm in the wrong area," and you start to doubt yourself, and you feel like you're not really worth anything.

MS. KOTEY: And as many of us can testify here, we did not know we were chronically absent, because every time we went to school, it was around 9 a.m.; and school is supposed to start at 8:20 a.m. We see a lot of students who were also chronically absent. So it's a normal thing; you never thought it was a huge issue, as we know right now.

K A L E E N A B E R R Y M A N N: So the other presenters would like to share--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

MS. BERRYMAN: --some research that they have collected, based upon what students said were the reasons that they were absent.

So they surveyed a bunch of students; about 70 so far, in 20 focus groups. And so we would really like to hear what the students had to say about why they were absent.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, thank you.

Are you Kaleena?

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes, hello.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Kaleena Berryman--

MS. BERRYMAN: Hello. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --Director of the Abbott Institute.

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's a very good point, and we want to hear from those students.

First, though, Assemblyman Wimberly has a quick question.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: For the young man -- you mentioned Leaders for Life. Can you just expand a little bit more? I mean, I'm somewhat familiar; I know Mr. White. But how did that impact you, as far as your high school and attendance?

MR. HALL: Well, Leaders for Life -- I would say, honestly, showed me how, like, things in life are supposed to be. They didn't give me the rundown of-- Honestly, I feel like they're the right way to go. Because high school -- they give you the generic learning experience. Leaders for Life gave me, like, they gave me -- "I'm going to get you this job, and you're going to come here, and you're going to learn this; and then you're going to go do this test. And I know you got it. And if you don't, you're going to come back, and we're going to still be here for you."

Until this day, they're still supporting me on a lot of things I do. So I feel like, basically, that's the support that public schools don't have. So that's what I needed, and that's why I went.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Thank you.

MR. HALL: No problem.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I want to thank each of you, and we look forward, now, to hearing from the researchers. (applause)

Please introduce yourself, and you may begin.

ERIC BELLAMY: Good morning.

My name is Eric Bellamy. I'm a senior at Malcolm X. Shabazz High School.

I was (indiscernible), too.

It was the year 2013; the year I looked at school in a different way. It was the year I became homeless. It bothered my mental health because all the things I loved and cherished were now gone, plus my school uniforms.

School always made a point to me, which made me think how am I going to get the money to get new uniforms, where am I going to stay, how am I going to get to school? All these different questions came up to me.

I wasn't that popular of a kid in school around that time. So more questions came to me -- what if somebody finds out? What if they make fun of me? What if they make rumors about me? Every minute I would think about those questions. I was so depressed, I just stopped going to school; staying home was the plan for me.

But now I am a senior at Malcolm X. Shabazz High School; a YMS student; a student researcher for RWJ.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And you started out by saying, I think, that you became homeless. Is that right?

MR. BELLAMY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes; and that was the challenge that led you to where you are now?

MR. BELLAMY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

HANSIER RODRIGUEZ: Hello, everyone.

My name is Hansier Rodriguez. I am also a Public and Nonprofit Administration scholar at Rutgers University-Newark.

So the personal stories of my team members represent the stories of thousands of other students in cities just like Newark.

We have decided to focus on this research program because we have all realized that we all went through the education system and we have been affected by a systemic failures within the system.

We looked for previous research done on chronic absenteeism and didn't find any implementation of youth, or student voice, in the actual focus of the research. That's why we decided to engage in what we define as *youth participatory action research*. Youth participatory action research engages our peers' voices and makes it a focus in the research.

Students who are chronically absent are more likely to perform poorly in academics, drop out of school, be unemployed and, as a result, experience more stress, and mental and emotional health issues.

Effective solutions require systematic change; but most importantly, the voices of those who are being impacted, in this case, the chronically absent.

Our goals in this project, or this research are to raise awareness about chronic absenteeism, and engage students and the community into this conversation.

We want to shift its views from just being an educational issue to a public health issue. We want to change the way schools deal with chronically absent students by taking the focus off the students' punishment and putting it into a supportive system.

We want to change policies and practices that inadequately address the hardships that students face obtaining their education. And we hope we can do this today.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And that is also our hope -- is that out of this hearing we'll be able to actually create substantive policies and procedures.

And we will work with you on that, all right?

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Thank you.

MS. BERRYMAN: We're going to move quickly through the research findings and recommendations, but we will provide a written copy of their report by tomorrow.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Excellent; thank you.

MS. GARCIA: So our process.

So we came together through a leadership grant provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. And we spent a few months looking into the research that already existed to determine what was missing.

The next couple of months we spent designing our research study; and we got IRB approval through Rutgers University-Newark.

This past summer, we spent our weeks conducting surveys; and then we analyzed our preliminary data, which we're presenting here today.

KAYLA KILLIBREW: Hello.

My name is Kayla Killibrew, and I am a senior at North Star High School.

So we've heard about the research; and I want to start to introduce the students who actually gave us the findings that we have today.

So 56 percent of our students were female, and 43 percent were male. A majority of our respondents came from the South Ward and the North Ward of Newark; 75 percent of our respondents were either juniors or seniors in high school, which gave them a different perspective on their high school career, and attendance in general.

Also, of the students who reported that they were chronically absent, 27 percent began being chronically absent in middle school; which means interception needs to start as early as elementary school.

So from the findings we found that 45 percent of respondents were chronically absent, and an additional 24 percent were on the verge of being chronically absent. Some of the top reasons that they shared with us were personal health issues; also mental health issues, such as being stressed, having no motivation and being depressed; and lastly, having family obligations outside of the school environment.

So the main question that we asked was what motivates students to actually go to school. What impacts their attendance?

On a scale of 1 to 5, when students were asked how much support they felt that they got from their school administration, the average was 3.

Only 23 percent of student respondents reported that their guidance counselor would notice that they missed school.

And then going back to the motivations that impacted them to go to school -- the top two motivations were either career goals and going to college; which means 90 percent or more of the students surveyed either gave a 5 or a 4 on a 1 to 5 scale.

So lastly, after presenting these findings, we come with recommendations that you -- the legislation that we hope you can pass.

First, we recommend that schools be mandated to have mental health professionals; that 20 percent of staff be trained in trauma-informed care for students.

We recommend that schools be required to provide a plethora of college and career exposure opportunities for students.

Also, we recommend a change in the way that absences are calculated. We would like *lateness* and *absences* to be calculated separately.

We also recommend that all schools be required to develop a chronic absence warning system, which allows parents and students to be notified of how this is being measured, and that it is being measured in general.

We also recommend that policies that discourage students from coming to school be reformed; that the harsh consequences that students face for lateness be removed.

We also recommend that each student create a college or career plan by their 11th grade.

Lastly, we would like schools to create opportunities for mentorships and internships, and other people to serve as mentors and role models for their students.

MS. BERRYMAN: Can I add one thing?

I just want to add a quick comment that part of the process of deciding to do this research study was around the students' concern for the high use of drugs amongst their peers. And so the research shows that our young people are likely, if they are depressed, stressed, feeling unmotivated, having physical health and mental health issues -- that they are self-medicating.

And so it was, as Senator Rice brought up, drugs and drug use that kind of got us to the place of studying chronic absenteeism. Because we don't want to have programs that just address drug use; we want to have programs that address why students are using so many drugs to self-medicate.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblyman Caputo; yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: You know, none of this -- if anybody has had any experience in public schools -- is shocking. I mean, anyone who has been through the system understands that these problems do exist.

What comes to my attention is -- I want to speak to the students, because they're the ones who are really doing some grassroots analysis here -- what is happening at the school level, in terms of following up with kids who are constantly truant? What are some of the things that happen at the school level? Because that's where you're going to be able to identify the problem, and also find out why kids are not coming to school.

So can somebody inform me, on the panel, what those things -- what is actually happening at that level?

MS. KILLIBREW: So, from the school level, from what we've heard from students in our multiple focus groups, is that some of the schools don't really pay attention to it.

From our focus groups, we've heard that schools either--

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Because if we don't know that, this is a train out of control.

MS. KILLIBREW: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Okay? We have to know what's going on at that level.

MS. KILLIBREW: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Does anybody know?

MS. GARCIA: So something that I've noticed a lot when I was in high school is that there is a perception from the school administrators -- that is at any level -- there are good students and there are bad students. So basically, many people focus on the good ones. And it's, like, "Okay, these are the good ones. So these are the ones who are going to make it." They just focus on these students, right? But then there are the bad ones; at least that's how they're called. So they don't pay attention to them. Like, if they stop coming to class, or whatever. Sometimes they would prefer--

UNIDENTIFIED MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: Yes.

MS. GARCIA: --for the students to not be in the classroom, just because they're like an obstacle for the class to be taught; or like they just have this perception, "The school is better without you here."

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: I think everybody understands the conditions. What I'm trying to get at is if a student breaks policy, and is not in school for a certain amount of days, is there a follow-up from the school level to find out why that child is not there?

MR. BELLAMY: Actually, I have a best friend who used to go to Malcolm X. Shabazz with me. Later on, she got kicked out; but last year, she used to not come to school. Like, she would come in at the beginning of the school year; like, in the middle, and then you would never see her again.

But then next year, our senior year -- I'm a senior now -- I saw her again. I'm like, so they're not doing anything? Because if you are skipping your whole year through high school, that one year, I don't understand how you're able to go into the next grade when you weren't in the school to progress.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Well, it seems like it's a breakdown. If you're a teacher in a classroom, no matter what district you're in, and a kid is out for a certain amount of time, it would seem to me that there would be some responsibility to find out why that child is not there.

Now, every school or every district may have a different policy; but there has to be a follow-up. Like, years ago -- Senator Rice knows, because we're very familiar with Newark -- we had attendance counselors; I don't even know if they exist anymore -- where attendance counselors would actually follow up.

So this seems to be a big concern; because we're talking about problems that we know exist, but we don't have a remedy. And we don't

even know what effort is being applied in terms of what goes on at this present time.

Sir.

MR. HALL: I just wanted to go off of what you were saying.

It's not really that they don't pay attention to it; it's more of -- and I'm going to be more blunt -- it's a selfish government issue, okay? They pay attention to it; but the thing is, if you can't already afford transportation to go to school, so you're out of school; then they send a fine to your house, so then you have to go to court. Now, your parent has to pay at least, almost, \$50 or \$100, because you're not showing up to school. So now she can't even give you transportation money to go to school anyway. So there's another fine.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Well, I understand the spiral. But if something is identified early, maybe some of those problems could be resolved.

MR. HALL: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Everyone is not going to be solvable, okay?

MR. HALL: Right

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: There will always be kids who are going to fall through the cracks, no matter what you do--

MR. HALL: Right.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: --for certain circumstances. But if you have a certain amount of children who are breaking policy, you might be able to bring back the majority of those kids, back to a normal situation,

if you understand why, and somebody talks to the family or follows up in the home.

MR. HALL: Right; and that's the problem, too. Because the fine is sent to your home, but nobody--

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Well, the fine goes there -- the fine goes after the policy

MR. HALL: Yes, the fine goes after the-- Yes, right, right.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Yes, but before they get that fine--

MR. HALL: No one acknowledges it in school. None of the auxiliaries--

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Well, that's the problem; that's part of the problem.

MR. HALL: Right; yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Right. I think that we need to see your recommendations and the report.

I know that Assemblywoman DeCroce and Senator Thompson would like to, also, ask a question, or make a comment.

And then, we're going to hear from yet another group of students. Because what I'm hearing, loud and clear -- and this was the motivation for having this hearing -- is that school climate and culture is-- It's at the base of all of these problems.

And I'm very glad that the Department, and Principals and Supervisors are still here, because I think what this speaks to, also, I'm sure, is resources.

UNIDENTIFIED MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: (off mike)
Right, that's it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Because when I hear that guidance counselors don't follow up, my next question is, what's the ratio of guidance counselors to students, for example.

So that's not something we're going to solve today; but the goal here is to make us better informed, so that we can proceed with legislation and recommendations that are informed to actually solve issues, not create another bureaucratic level.

So Assemblywoman; and then Senator.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, because when I'm done, I have to leave for my other Committee.

And earlier I had talked about pilot programs and understanding what pilots are really out there.

So, you know, kind of what I'm seeing here and hearing are the guidance counselors are kind of dropping the ball. You know, really that's where it's going to-- We're going to take a look, and take a look at that part; and that's where I believe that, as a Committee, we should look at certain benchmarks that the guidance counselors have to meet when the student ratio starts rising with students missing school.

And I think there is a comparison there, and if somebody really doesn't have a track going on -- a fast-track to a student, that student is totally going to be lost. And then their parents are going to receive a fine.

What I would like to know is, how many of the parents that receive the fine actually know why they're getting the fine; and who was following up to get the student to the point of where a fine was issued?

And I think there is something missing there, and that's where, hopefully, this Committee can help.

MS. GARCIA: So something that we considered that is missing there because -- you know, it's not only the role of the guidance counselors, because, essentially, they're there to help you succeed academically. But there are other aspects of that. For example, having a health professional, like a mental health person in the schools to help the students with the traumas and these challenges that they're facing might make a difference.

And for example -- something that that you were referring to earlier -- having a chronic absence warning system that might make a difference as well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And I agree; and I think where we could start is talking to the guidance counselors, finding out their frustrations, what they're frustrated with, and why they're having a problem meeting the goals that they need.

So they may need that assistance, as you outlined--

MS. GARCIA: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --the psychologist, and certain professionals there, to help students with stress, and feeling inferior, or whatever may be going on with them may be what the guidance counselors need in assessing and trying to follow a student.

I don't want to appear that I'm just crushing down on the guidance counselors, but I think that's where the breakdown may be happening; and that may be where we need to zero in, and bring help in, and then have benchmarks from that point on to understand what's happening before a fine is sent.

So that's what I see; and thank you all for being her today.

I apologize that I have to leave for another hearing.

So thank you.

MS. GARCIA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

Senator.

SENATOR THOMPSON: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Assemblywoman's comments kind of touched on what I was going to say.

We've had a great deal of testimony -- and we'll have a lot more, I'm sure -- on what the schools should and shouldn't be doing, or so on -- what additionally they could do to help out; and likewise, a good deal of discussion with the students themselves.

But there is third party that exerts a great deal of influence on what's going to take place here, and that's the parents. And we've heard -- we've had very little testimony about what parental responsibilities should be in this.

And quite frankly, it begins in kindergarten and 1st grade. If they instill in the child the importance of going to school, and so on, etc., at that age, they can have a great deal of influence. By the time you get up to senior in high school, or so on, well, you have your own mind and etc.

But if they instill in the young child that, "Hey, you need to be there. Look what it's going to do for you," and so on, then, okay, by the time they get to be a senior, they won't need their mother or their dad to tell them they need to go to school.

So I think we need to see a little more emphasis on giving directions for the parents on how to raise their children so they will feel, “I need to be in school; I need to do this,” etc.

If that’s told to them from the beginning, then who’s to say by the time they’re juniors and seniors, they won’t have to tell them; the student will act on their own.

So I think we need to place a little emphasis on, again, guidance for parents; and not just when they’re in high school, but when they are starting school.

MS. BERRYMAN: Right. And I think that’s important.

As a parent, I would like to add that this research project has helped me because -- I think one of the issues is that we’re measuring things, but we’re not letting the community know that we’re measuring them. So we’re holding them accountable for chronic absenteeism, but no one knew that we were measuring that, and we were failing.

So I’m a highly educated, highly motivated mother, and my little 6-year-old was chronically absent because if he was sick, I would keep him home; or if I was staying home, I would keep him home, in kindergarten. And so once I was informed about chronic absenteeism and that that was a thing, he-- I don’t think he’s missed a day of school yet this year; not one.

And so our parents are definitely responsible. We have to know what you all are holding us accountable for. I was just looking at academics and his IEP plan, because he’s disabled. I didn’t know you were looking at attendance, too. And two days a month adds up.

And so at the Abbott Leadership Institute we are pushing to help inform parents about it, and how quickly those two days a month can add up.

SENATOR THOMPSON: In fact, this goes hand-in-hand with another bill I've been thinking about introducing. I want to introduce a bill requiring schools to teach high school kids something about parenting; because many of them become parents just after they get out of high school, and so on; and teach them how to get their kids started right, etc. I don't mean changing diapers and such as that (laughter). But the education they need to give to the children before they start school, in the early years of school. If they do that, I think it would be a great help.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Last comment, and then Assemblywoman.

MR. HALL: Just a little comment.

It's really difficult for parents, especially in urban districts, such as Newark, to be able to consistently bring their children to school every single day. Such as like someone had said -- less than half of citizens own cars. We have difficulty having transportation, especially during the season -- once a season we have, like, severe storms. So now we have issues where students are unable to get to school because of weather and poor conditions in the roads. And sometimes schools don't even close down. So kids have to decide whether to actively go outside and freeze, or stay at home. And that kind of shows you what we face every day.

And especially when we come from low-income families, where a lot of us have to stay -- go to work after school to help support income.

And many of us come in tired; many of us come in exhausted. And we slip between having, say, academics and supporting our families.

It's unfair to say the parents are solely responsible. I think the people around us in the school system have to give us some leeway to support us; to be the rocks of our children.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; one more, and then-- Because we have a number of people we still want to hear from.

Yes.

MR. RODRIGUEZ: Another thing was -- it is, to me, unfair, but not so unfair, to blame the parents because everybody -- whether you believe it or not -- has a mind of their own. So if I see my mom struggling, I'm going to want to do something about it. So if I take that task on myself, then it's more pressure on me and her, because I'm trying to take on some of her tasks, because I don't want to see her struggling; or my dad, or anybody for that matter.

So it's like -- it's not on the parents, because we see them trying. There's not enough community help, there's not enough help, period. Nobody wants to help each other. It's like every man for himself, and that's what it's been.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's very well put, unfortunately.

Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Thank you.

I'm very anxious to see the written version of your recommendations. They all seem to make sense to me; how we can move forward in implementing them would be the question.

And I just want to refer back to Patricia Wright's testimony on behalf of Principals and Supervisors.

And I found what she was saying is something that you're saying. The schools are interested in compliance, not in correcting the situation. And the fact that we stopped funding these school groups so that -- what they were referred to as School Climate Teams. Because it will make a huge difference. I know in the City of Camden, where I come from, a lot of work is being done with the students and with the parents, so that we can engage the parents and they can understand what's going on. It's pretty silly to make a rule and not explain it to the people who the rule is going to handicap; just another rule to handicap us again.

It's unfortunate; I can appreciate the fact that we want to know that kids are going to school, because the numbers when they don't show us they aren't going to be successful further on.

Thank you so much for testifying. And I do want to applaud all of you, and the Principals and the Supervisors Association, because I think they focused on it. And as a member of the Budget Committee, I'm going to talk to you some more about getting some money, forwarded to help these teens, in place that can include some of the recommendations that I think you all are making.

Thank you.

ALL: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Thank you, Madam Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; and that's good to hear. You're on the Budget Committee; yay. (laughter) (applause)

MS. BERRYMAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And so I would next like to call up Dr. Nhan Truong -- I may have mispronounced your name; Marcy Peterson; Lillian Rivera; Dr. Jan Kaminsky; and Shannon Cuttle to come up.

Now I'm going to ask you to organize yourselves; go in the order that works best for you.

Oh, before the students in the back leave, I want to ask -- what do you think of a later start time for high school?

ALL: (off mike) Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes; okay. (laughter)

Thank you; I'm going to reintroduce that Bill.

SENATOR RICE: So while the students are setting up, let me just say this for the record, because we're being transcribed.

Each district is different; but I want to remind the members of the Committee that what compounds the problems in Newark is when Cami Anderson became the Superintendent and they changed the districts, and have kids going all across town with no transportation. I think that someone needs to take another look at that, from the Department of Education, and work with the Superintendent to see if, in fact, some of that can be readdressed.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; and thank you for your patience.

You may start with whomever wishes to start; introduce yourself.

Thank you.

NHAN TRUONG, Ph.D.: Hello; my name is Dr. Nhan Truong, and I'm a Senior Research Associate at GLSEN, a national education organization that aims to ensure that all students in K to 12 are provided a safe and inclusive school environment regardless their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression.

I am speaking today to share recent findings that demonstrate New Jersey schools are not safe for most lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning -- I'm going to just use *LGBTQ* from here on -- for secondary school students.

Based on the data from GLSEN's 2017 New Jersey State Snapshot -- which is based on data from the GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey -- we found that most LGBTQ students in New Jersey heard anti-LGBTQ remarks from their peers, and experienced anti-LGBTQ victimization at their schools.

For instance, 90 percent of LGBTQ students sometimes, often, or frequently heard the word *gay* used in a negative way, such as, "That's so gay." Also, 60 percent of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation, and 56 percent of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment based on their gender expression.

We also found that many LGBTQ students in New Jersey experienced anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices, such as being disciplined for expressing public displays of affection, using the locker room and bathroom that align with their gender, and also being prevented from using their chosen names or gender pronouns.

We found that 55 percent of LGBTQ students in New Jersey experienced at least one form of these anti-LGBTQ discriminatory school policies and practices.

Although the New Jersey State Snapshot does not provide data on absenteeism in school due to feeling unsafe, the 2017 National School Climate Survey indicated that on a national level, 35 percent of LGBTQ students missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

Our research shows that students who feel safe and supported at school have better educational outcomes. According to findings from GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey, LGBTQ students who have LGBTQ-related school resources and supports -- such as comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policies, supportive school staff, Gay-Straight Alliances, and LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum -- were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns, were less likely to hear anti-LGBTQ remarks from their peers, experienced less anti-LGBTQ victimization, had better mental health, felt greater school belonging, and had more accepting peers.

Unfortunately, many LGBTQ students in New Jersey do not have access to these four core school resources and supports. For instance, only 23 percent of LGBTQ students in New Jersey reported having a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy that specified protections for sexual orientation and gender identity or gender expression; and only 16 percent had a policy or official guidelines to support transgender or gender nonconforming students.

There is much that we can do to provide safe learning environments for LGBTQ students in New Jersey. GLSEN's recommendations are to increase the four core supports and resources, that I just mentioned that are shown through our research and other research to improve LGBTQ students' educational outcomes and well-being.

So we want those who are school leaders, education policymakers, and others who are obligated to provide a safe learning environment for all students, to take the following steps.

One is to implement and fund supportive and inclusive school policies, such as the comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment and supportive transgender or gender nonconforming student policies in every school district in the state.

To support Gay/Straight Alliances; to provide professional development for school staff on LGBTQ school issues, which would help to increase supportive educators and Administration. And also to increase student access to LGBTQ inclusive curricular resources that represent positively on LGBTQ events, history, and people.

So I thank the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for the opportunity to share this data and the concrete solutions to improve the learning environments for LGBTQ youth.

Thanks.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Go ahead.

MARCY PETERSON: Good morning.

My name is Marcy Peterson; I'm from Bridgeton, New Jersey, and I'm member of GLSEN South Jersey -- Southern New Jersey.

And I want to thank the Joint Committee for listening to my story today.

I come to this table as a parent who has seen firsthand the need for the State to continue to act to protect LGBTQ students.

Although we have inclusive policy to protect students, the policy must be implemented in all schools.

My family's story is one I hope not one more mother has to share.

When I think of my life, I'm most proud of being a mother to my daughter and my son. Today, it is still hard to find the words to describe the profound loss of losing my son, Tristan, my 12-year-old, to suicide 14 months ago.

There's a constant struggle bringing his 12 brilliant, beautiful years of memory into the light, and having it eclipsed by the pain and darkness of his death.

Tristan, my son, a piece of my heart, will never grow up. In my mind, he's still a 12-year old; he's always smiling and laughing. He was always asking questions. He wanted to know so much, and would pose an unending string of questions.

Now Tristan will never graduate high school, or college; he'll never have more than peach fuzz on his upper lip. He won't know the joys and sorrows of dating, or ever having children of his own.

Tristan's memory compels me to work towards bringing LGB kids together in a supported and safe environment.

From my perspective, he died of being bullied as a result of his sexual orientation; or as he liked to say, “his gayness.” He died because he didn’t have the support.

We know that for children of his age, it can be an exciting and a terrifying time of transition in itself. Tristan *thought* he was gay in 4th grade; he *knew* he was gay in 5th grade.

When the bullying about his sexuality came in 6th grade, he was scared by the threat of physical violence. My son was so afraid.

On the last day of his life, Tristan and I had had a lovely evening of Christmas shopping together. He was so excited about the holiday and about the gifts he was going to give.

On the ride home the mere mention of the other children, his tormentors, flipped a switch in him. The evening of holiday cheer completely vanished. It was like an icy chill came over the car, and I just couldn’t lift it. I couldn’t understand what was happening, or why he was so angry so suddenly.

He went to his room where I told him that when he calmed down, we’d talk.

When I went to his door a bit later, I had the intention to spend the night in there because of his being distraught. I had a game plan. We would talk it out; we always did.

But it was too late. He was gone.

I share this story of my life, the worst thing that has ever happened, something so gut-wrenching and tragic, because I want people to realize our children are suffering; and because there are clear solutions that organizations, like GLSEN, have evidenced that work in our schools.

There are so many statistics on tween and teen suicides, it's staggering. If you just Google "teen causes of death," results will include words like *troubling* and *alarming rise*. You'll find a report titled, "Suicide Replaces Homicide as the Second-Leading Cause of Death--" The CDC's National Vital Statistics report stated that, "Suicide for persons aged 10 to 19 years rose by 56 percent between 2007 and 2016."

One more fact.

The percent of younger children and teens hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or actions in the U.S. also doubled over eight years, according to research presented at the 2017 Pediatric Societies meeting.

In Tristan's name, I have to hope that everyone will come together and stop this widespread negativity. It is killing our children.

The antidote to venom, the venom of hate, is education, understanding, and community. Tristan's story will go on. I want all that he brought to my life to continue to inspire me to help others. Safe spaces are needed for growing adolescent children, like Tristen; and we can help create communities of safety, love, and acceptance.

The pure goodness of Tristan must carry on, and the pure love I have for him will help me share, and connect, and promote the love and community necessary to bring kids together to support, care, and value each other.

Thank you for listening. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Marcy, thank you for having the courage to come forward and share that very-- Well, there are no words; but I am truly, truly sorry for your loss, but grateful that you're here today to share with us.

MS. PETERSON: Thank you.

JAN OOSTING KAMINSKY, Ph.D.: Thank you,

It's challenging to follow that, and I really do hope that you know that there are so many of us out there who are doing this work for Tristan, and for all the other kids who are affected.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Dr. Jan Kaminsky; I'm an Assistant Professor of Nursing, and I am also the Director of Education for Rainbow Health Consulting. We work with healthcare professionals on issues that impact the LGBTQ community. And a major focus of our work, of course, would be the health and welfare of LGBTQ youth, including their interactions with the public schools in the State of New Jersey.

We welcome the focus on climate and culture at this Committee meeting, and we'd like to further call the Committee's attention to some of the challenges facing LGBTQ students in the public schools, some of which have been mentioned before.

LGBTQ youth comprise over 100,000 students in the State of New Jersey, by estimates from the CDC, which has given us some very new information that transgender students make up approximately 2 percent of high school students; and 8 percent of students identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. And of course, we have much higher numbers of students who are not sure of their identity, don't identify with one of those terms precisely, or who are not ready to disclose their identity. So those over 100,000 students in the State New Jersey really deserve our time and attention.

Research has shown that bullying of sexual minority youth can start as early as 5th grade. Of course, we have anecdotal evidence that says it starts much younger than that as well.

We know that bullying, harassment, and intimidation set these vulnerable students for a higher risk of substance abuse, mental health concerns, and self-harm, including suicide risk. This new large study, that I mentioned, that just came out, looked at over 125,000 American students; and they reported that for transgender high school students, almost 35 percent had attempted suicide in the past 12 months. That number just has to break anyone's heart.

LGBTQ students also expressed high rates of sexual risk-taking behavior, rape and other victimization, absenteeism from school to avoid threats of violence en route to and from school and during the school day itself, feelings of depression and hopelessness, and increased use of hard drugs.

We are, obviously, gravely concerned for the health and well-being of these vulnerable New Jersey students, who face real concerns throughout their school career. From speaking with the parent of a kindergartener -- a transgender kindergartner, who was repeatedly misgendered and called by the incorrect name, both in-person and on the electronic data management system that the student's school used -- all the way through to lack of resources and support at all school levels.

It's critical that all New Jersey districts, of course, comply with the new legislation mandating education on LGBTQ history and culture. This will help ensure that all students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ,

understand the complex background of history and contributions to the state, nation, and world.

And based on the CDC findings that I mentioned, an important recommendation for decreasing these risk behaviors was access to culturally competent physical and mental health care in the school setting.

From the faculty and staff perspective, Rainbow Health Consulting has observed a significant lack of consistent professional development for teachers, administrators, support staff, and school nurses around LGBTQ student issues in many school districts. And we believe that rigorous, professionally run, culturally competent training on these issues must be a statewide requirement for those who work with our youth in schools.

And it must not fail to take into consideration the intersection of identities, such as race, ethnicity, national origin, ability, religion, and other parts of the students' complex selves. This should include vocabulary and definitions; the importance of using a student's correct name and pronouns -- again, both in-person and also on paper and electronic student records; using LGBTQ-inclusive language in classes, clubs, and in school nurses' offices; showing representation of LGBTQ history and stories around the school; the creation of supportive and inclusive district policies around such concerns as inclusive restrooms, locker rooms, athletic policies, and dress codes; including lessons that center the experiences of LGBTQ students or exemplars in curricula; the promotion of student clubs and activities formed around LGBTQ identities; and maintaining connections to outside resources to whom students and families can be referred, such as support groups, healthcare professionals, or social organizations.

I have a particular interest in health providers in schools, such as school nurses, health teachers, and physical education teachers, who also plan content around health. That curriculum should be inclusive of LGBTQ themes around mental and physical health. Health classes should not be divided by sex, for example, but should teach all students about many different types of different bodies and sexualities so that all students can be informed. Programs must be developed and utilized that help all students to understand sexual orientation and gender identity in an age-appropriate and accurate way. These programs should use examples of positive LGBTQ relationships, and should include the need for safer sex practices, no matter the partner or identity. Additionally, these programs should actively work to dispel harmful stereotypes and myths about sexual orientation and gender identity.

As I mentioned, in addition to providing further support for LGBTQ students, we need to provide non-LGBTQ students with resources to increase their knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ issues.

Recent research found that even non-LGBTQ students benefit from having a Gay/Straight Alliance, or other such club, in their school. They most certainly would also benefit from more inclusive health education, and a more generally inclusive environment.

We're confident that districts within the state strive to provide support and resources to students to ensure a climate and culture of safety, health, and well-being. And we're ready to work with the Committee in strengthening and enforcing the rights of LGBTQ students as they progress through our school districts.

And I really thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today to talk about this most vulnerable group of New Jersey students.

And I'd be happy to answer questions from the Committee, or submit further research on this topic.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And I think in light of the time constraints, if you have something -- research findings, recommendations -- that you would like to submit to the Committee, we would be more than happy to take them.

DR. KAMINSKY: Sure, I would be more than happy to do that.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, thank you.

LILLIAN RIVERA: Good afternoon.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the New Jersey Joint Committee on the Public Schools, specifically around culture and climate.

My name is Lillian Rivera; I am the Executive Director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute New Jersey. We are the nation's oldest and largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth service agency.

We've been in New Jersey for the last six years, and I've worked with hundreds of young people who feel disengaged from the educational system because of the climate that they face around homophobia and transphobia. This is unacceptable.

Climate and culture in public schools can be the catalyst for success or the impetus for disengagement, which is what we see often. For

LGBTQ youth, culture and climate is usually the main contributor to chronic absenteeism.

I know a young transgender woman who would not go to school before second period. And she wouldn't do that because she was astute enough to avoid the young people who would torment her during first period.

From your perspective, it may be a problem; but from a youth development perspective, this is actually an asset. She knew to take care of herself, because the adult in the room would not take care of her by ensuring the targeted behavior she would endure was unacceptable. While she was able to leverage her survival skills to maintain her sense of self, the adults in the schools were ignoring her humanity to the point where her education was compromised.

This is unacceptable -- that young people have to make these concessions with their schooling. This is not their problem, this is our problem. Teachers often don't know how to deal with these issues.

New Jersey is moving in the right way with the LGBT inclusive curriculum that was passed last week; amazing, wonderful. As someone who has been in hundreds of schools to train teachers, the implementation plan of and the implementing of this curricula needs to be rigorous. And if it's not, it's going to fail and/or create more problems for children.

New Jersey deserves to provide all young people a safe and affirming environment in which to learn. The story I shared about the transgender young woman is one of the most benign stories that I could share with you. I have hundreds of them -- from this one, to a young

person being sexually assaulted in a bathroom in a school. And I could give you more of those if you need those.

New Jersey's children deserve an environment where all children can be safe to be themselves. Where they will not hear their identity or the identity of their parents used as a put down; where their gender is not interrogated based on their clothing or mannerisms, and they're free to learn without the fear of something being hurled at them with injurious intent.

Let us stand, Jersey strong, for LGBTQ youth in our state, in our schools, and most importantly, in our hearts.

And I not only say this as a youth advocate, but I say this as a parent of two children who are in New Jersey public schools. I want them to know that their LGBTQ classmates are safe.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Dr. Rivera -- how do you pronounce that?

MS. RIVERA: Rivera (indicating pronunciation).

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Rivera (indicating pronunciation). Oh, okay. It's a typo.

I just made a note to ask you if you're available to the Department of Ed as they develop the regulations to implement the legislation that the Governor just recently signed -- that you referenced.

MS. RIVERA: I'd offer all access.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; thank you.

MS. RIVERA: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Leave your contact information with me at the end.

Thank you.

S H A N N O N C U T T L E: Hi; good afternoon.

Thank you to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for having me speak with you today.

Thank you to Assemblywoman Mila Jasey as well.

As I said, my name is Shannon Cuttle; and I'm a Safe Schools expert. I go around the country and I work with school districts, agencies, and officials like yourselves in creating welcoming, safer schools and spaces.

And in regard of steering away from my prepared remarks and my recommendations -- which I will just keep, with being formally electronically submitted -- I really wanted to speak to the room today with some of the comments that have come in regards to climate and culture.

One of the things I really wanted to stress to you today is that when we talk about climate and culture, it's not just one incident, one moment in time. It is not the issue of climate and culture to be solved by just the one teacher, the one principal, the one parent, the one community. Creating welcoming, affirming, safer schools for all students and families is an *everyone* issue. We all have a part to play in making sure that all of our students feel safe, affirmed, and welcomed; and that we're creating that climate and culture that mirrors our community, that mirrors what we want for ourselves and for our students every day. We all own that task.

And that is critical when we're talking about creating climate and culture -- and all of its various impacts -- whether it be the social-emotional, the cognitive, the physical, the academic. It's all intersectional, it is all tied together.

One of the previous students spoke about the fact that they didn't feel safe at school; they didn't understand that going to school was important to them because it wasn't relayed to them from their teacher. That's part of climate and culture. Students having access and feeling affirmed to use their bathrooms because of their gender identity or expression -- that's part of climate and culture. Making sure that teachers and school counselors have the resources support, technical assistance, and professional development that they need to ensure that they can create those welcoming, safe, and affirming spaces is part of climate and culture.

Making sure that, as legislative bodies, we're always primarily thinking of the climate and culture we want in our schools and in our communities. It's a basic point of policy; and how that trickles down, then to the local level to school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers, and how to implement it is all tied together.

Policy alone will not solve the issue of climate and culture, and creating welcoming, safe, and affirming schools. It is a first step, it is part of the solution; but it is a solution that is part of the collective community response from policymakers, community stakeholders, working with educators, centering student voices; and making sure that support systems are built from the ground up, and part of every fundamental step of the process in being able to address climate and culture across our school community.

Not once when a student gets into a high school; not once when they get into elementary school; not only speaking to our most vulnerable and marginalized populations, but all of our students -- from day one, when they set foot into our preschool or kindergarten classroom and

join our public school communities -- that they feel safe, welcomed, and affirmed. And parents have the support systems that they need to make sure that they can have their students feel safe and affirmed; and with teachers as well.

And as a body of leaders here, you have the chance to be able to set that tone of what climate and culture looks like for the State of New Jersey. You have the chance to be able to make New Jersey be the first state, *the* state, to set the example -- as we have in some many other ways -- to be able to make New Jersey say, "We are the state that put students first. We are the state that creates welcoming, safer schools for all students and families. That is our prime directive, and we will work on that every day."

I will (indiscernible) answer your questions. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you. I think you summed it up very, very well for us.

I especially liked *welcoming and affirming*, because it includes everyone. And I would dare say that it's not just students that it includes, but all the adults in the school community as well, and parents.

MS. CUTTLE: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

I believe we have, now, a group of students -- the SOMa Action Student Leadership Committee.

I am especially proud to welcome you, coming from my community.

You know what? You can take turns at the mikes; four at a time works, usually.

CLAIRE LIPKIN: Hi; good afternoon.

We're the SOMa Action Student Leadership Committee. We're a student activist group based in Maplewood and South Orange. We all go to Columbia High School.

And we have three different testimonies today, relating to the topic of school climate and culture, from a student perspective; and how it links to chronic absenteeism.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Give us your name.

MS. LIPKIN: Oh, Claire Lipkin.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Claire; thank you, Claire.

P H O E B E H I L L: Hi; my name is Phoebe Hill. I'm a freshman at Columbia High School, and I'm here to talk to you today about school climate and culture.

I'm discussing an aspect of school climate and culture that has impacted me throughout my time in New Jersey public schools.

I started attending New Jersey public schools in kindergarten, so I've seen all parts of the education system. And I've watched as sexist comments throughout elementary school have morphed into the sexualization and objectifying of young girls and their bodies.

And it's important for schools to be a safe place for all people. So I'm just going to share with you some stories today about how this issue has affected me personally, and my peers.

My first true experience with dress coding was when I was 12. I was in 6th grade. It was a warm day, and I decided to wear a striped tank top that I really liked, from this store.

I was in Science, and my teacher told me that I was too bare, and that I was inviting boys to look at my body. So I put a sweatshirt on quickly; I was really ashamed, and I felt, like, almost fear. And I was self-conscious about my choice of my clothing and my body. This feeling of embarrassment and shame was one I never wanted to feel again.

So throughout middle school this experience stayed with me. I watched as girls around me were dress coded by school Administrators, or judged silently and vocally by their peers.

I would Facetime my friends early in the morning, asking if I would get dress coded for the outfit that I really wanted to wear.

As I grew older, these comments about what I wore changed into something more. In the early days of 8th grade, another incident occurred that would stay with me. I was 14, and the school was filing out for a fire drill. I stood quietly on the sidewalk, waiting for my name to be called out for attendance.

All of a sudden, I heard the boys behind me muttering. I listened closely, and I could hear them commenting about me and my body. I knew these comments were wrong, but I did nothing about it.

At the time, I was involved in activism, and I knew that these were not right; but I still made the decision not to act. I think this is because our society has normalized harassment and the sexualization of the bodies of girls and women. And this is perpetuated through the culture within our public schools in New Jersey.

The archaic dress codes can put the stigma out that girls' bodies are to be looked at and viewed as a sexual object, even when they're young

-- just a child at age 12 to 14. The students in our public schools begin to accept this as normal, which is not acceptable.

OLIVIA HIRSCH: Hi; I'm Olivia Hirsch.

I'm a junior at Columbia High School, and I am talking on the same topic that Phoebe was talking about.

And so these comments and attitudes just get worse as you continue in your high school career, from middle school to high school. Once, like, the weather gets warm, I personally spend 15 minutes rotating through outfits that I like and feel comfortable in; and also don't think will get a weird glance down the hallway for me exposing too much or wanting something. When really, I'm just wearing the clothes that I feel express myself and who I want to be.

And this becomes, sort of, an all-consuming dilemma for many students, and it becomes something where we all -- where we question whether we should act or should we not, because we don't want to put that impression out.

And almost every girl can recount a time when her body was looked at or commented about. And these small acts of aggression start to wear a person down and impact a girl's ability to learn and their want to go to school; which can lead to more absenteeism, chronic absenteeism, which is something that is just not acceptable. And it's something that should really be changed and should be addressed, starting as early as middle school, in health classes, where they're teaching -- where they should be taught about how to talk in a relationship and how to treat -- boys and girls how to treat each other with respect, which both people deserve.

And as Phoebe said, these dress codes really do need to be updated, from the archaic terms and the way -- a lot of times they're interpreted by some sexist faculty members.

And we should all feel responsibility to help these young students, especially young girls, feel comfortable in their schools and their learning environment, where their focus is on learning and on becoming an educated member of society, and not worrying about harassment or getting cat-called down the hallway about what they're wearing.

Thank you.

MS. HILL: Just to add one thing.

I think, oftentimes, the view of cat-calling is seen when you're walking in a city or on street corners. But in reality, it's all around us, every day, in the hallway. And it's really a big issue, because it makes -- it impacts a girl's ability to learn; and I think that's the number one -- should be the number one priority of our educational system.

So we need to start changing the way we view the issue of cat-calling, harassment, and dress coding to show it can perpetuate rape culture; and also a society where girls are sexualized from such a young age.

So thank you for listening today. (applause)

L A I L A G O L D: Good afternoon.

I'm Laila Gold, and I'm a freshman at Columbia High School.

Today, Claire Lipkin -- who is a sophomore at Columbia High School -- and I would like to talk about how school climate relates to security drills and school safety.

MS. LIPKIN: So as students in a public school, the topic of school safety has always been close to our hearts, because it's a reality that we face every day.

You remember last year, when you'd hear about a new school shooting every single week. That was something that we had to keep in mind as we came to school, as we wanted to focus on learning. We had to think about whether our safety was in question.

We believe that a discussion of school climate and culture would be remiss to not address the impact of increasing security procedures on students, especially at a young age.

Every student who attends public school has experience with drills, like Code Red lockdowns, where we're instructed to hide in the corner of a room and remain silent in a dangerous situation. They happen about-- How often? Like, twice a year; and they can be traumatizing for young students, especially with a lack of clear and efficient communication. If you don't know what's going on, it can be terrifying.

So we'd like to share some personal anecdotes to express how safety drills effect school climate, and to urge school districts to take measures to improve the systems of communication.

MS. GOLD: I have grown up with security drills.

I remember my very first lock-down drill in kindergarten. We were tiny kids, crammed into corners, with no idea of what was going on. As I grew older, these drills continued, so my confusion continued.

However, I eventually got used to not knowing what was going on around me, in terms of school safety.

I would like to accept and to trust that the authorities in the school knew what they were doing.

Just yesterday, our school conducted a fire drill. When the loud bell rang, my friends and I were in the locker room. At first, we were shocked and extremely scared by the blaring noise. Then we found ourselves panicking, because we had no idea what to do and had never been instructed what procedures to follow in this situation.

I remember my friend anxiously describing how she did not know what kind of drill it was. For example, if it was a lockdown drill, she would have stayed put, creating the problem of a missing person. If it was a real fire, she may have been in even more danger and could have been harmed by her hesitance. She was truly afraid, because anything could have happened.

It was a simple drill, but she was practically terrified. This says a lot about the climate in relation to security drills in schools like ours.

MS. LIPKIN: So safety drills have been a fixture of my school experience throughout my entire life. I remember being afraid of them in elementary school. I had friends who would cry every time we had a Code Red drill, because we were never given an explanation as to why they were happening. But eventually I grew used to them.

When I was in 6th grade there was an incident at my school where a student brought a gun to school. Thankfully, there was no shooting; but we went into lockdown when I was in my Math class, and I sat underneath a table for four hours. And I didn't find out about what had actually happened until months later. There were so many rumors going around; there were rumors that there had been multiple weapons; there

were rumors that there had been multiple students; there were rumors that there was a hit list.

And I remember a lot of my friends didn't come to school for the next couple of days. And we really haven't touched on chronic absenteeism yet, but I think that really shows that school climate and culture is a factor in that, and if that students are afraid to come to school, then they might not show up.

So I worry when I think of children who have to go through that every year. And I think that any parent or faculty member who is hearing this can agree that fear should not be a part of the learning experience.

MS. GOLD: Students really deserve to know what is going on in their school, and especially in their safety drills.

I have become apprehensive about the possibilities of a real emergency occurring. Clearly, our unorganized procedures are not very trustworthy. Rumors, as Claire described, can be easily spread, and I often go to school assuming that anything could happen.

We believe that school does not and should not have to be like this. It is the responsibility of the Administration to not only notify students during a real emergency, but to disclose the cause of the lockdown or crisis situation after it takes place. So much fear and turmoil would be relieved if there was more communication between administrators, teachers, students, and their families.

Safety measures should be efficient, easily understandable, and consistent. In our submitted written testimony, we offer a number of possible ways to implement better communication systems in the schools.

MS. LIPKIN: So we don't have specifics that we're asking for, but we wanted to provide a student perspective on this issue.

We urge New Jersey schools to consider their students when making policies that shape school safety measures.

We should be made aware of what is going on within our schools. We should be given the resources to learn about what's going on, what we can do to get involved and informed, and we should know about safety measures that we may need to take. This is an issue that shapes our everyday lives when we go to school. It shapes our safety and our education; we know that we can do better for children in the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to give testimony, and we are grateful for your time and attention.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; and I do have one question.

Are fire drills, alarms, and active shooter alarms the same sound?

MS. GOLD: Well, what I was referring to is, specifically, in my situation yesterday in the locker room -- which I've never experienced that before -- there was, like, a different noise, and it was really alarming and it was really scary to be in there, because it was blaring. And we had no idea what it meant, because we had never heard that specific noise before.

So I think that keeping a clear -- like, giving knowledge of what specific noises mean is really important. Especially because, like, sometimes students may -- some students may know what a specific situation means -- like what a specific noise means. But others may not, and are never taught

these situations, especially if they're new to the school and situations like that.

MS. LIPKIN: If I could add something.

I find that the alarm sounds are very inconsistent; they're changed sometimes. I remember one time in elementary school, during a Code Red, they started playing jazz music over the speaker. Apparently, it was to see how we would react to that situation, or maybe like to confuse a potential threat. I never really found out what that was about; we were just very confused.

So it is not consistent.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Well, the good news is that you do have a School Board member in the audience, listening (laughter). So this sounds like something that needs to be addressed.

Thank you very much.

SENATOR RICE: So let me thank you also--

Madam Chair.

Thank you also; and it's good to know you have a School Board member to address your situation, somewhat immediately. I used to represent Maplewood and South Orange for about 10 years, going back many years ago. I decided to send a (indiscernible) to represent you because, you know, they put him out of Morris County, and he needed some help. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That went over their heads.

SENATOR RICE: Yes.

I think that the issues go beyond that.

Are the members of the Department of Education still here?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: Because I think that this is something that you need to have the Commissioner take up.

There are two things I heard from the students; there was a lot of stuff I heard from the students, okay? But two immediate things that can be addressed: One -- and I was speaking to Assemblywoman Mila Jasey; and hopefully our Committee members will join in -- that we need to put together some legislation to make it very clear that lateness does not count as absenteeism.

We already have legislation going through that says they can't lock you out of school. Now, our kids want to go to school; they come in late -- regardless of why they're late -- and they keep them out in the rain, and don't let them in.

The other thing I'm hearing now is that it's good to have the drills; we think preparation -- I'm a Vietnam veteran, so I understand. I'm a former cop -- preparation is good. But it has to be consistent, and you have to know what's there. So there needs to be some clarity, and some rules, some laws that say, "This is what it's like. So if I hear this type of bell, I know, I don't care what school I'm in, that is *whatever*. When I hear this type of alarm, I know whatever school I'm in, that is *whatever*."

Just like we put up signs that say -- any countries you go to the street signs look the same for driving. You know what I'm saying? There has to be some continuity there, some consistency. Those are two things I heard.

And I want to thank you for your testimony, because I can assure you this Committee is going to work on that. But the Department

issue -- you need to start work, and give us some recommendations before we give you some; and I think that's important.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, thank you.

Do we have some new speakers?

Yes.

D Y L A N R E E S E D A N U S E R: Hi; thanks to the Committee, and Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, for having us.

My name is Dylan Denuser, and I am honored to testify here today.

I am a senior in the South Orange-Maplewood School District, where I have received an education since the 8th grade.

I am also a member of the Youth Advisory for the Maplewood Township, where I serve as Vice Chair.

As a student and representative of the youth, I can attest that the conditions and overall environment of our public schools need improvement. The safety, sanitation, infrastructure, and access to resources at my school hinder my ability to feel comfortable and, ultimately, enjoy being there.

My school district lacks in many areas that are inexcusable, which makes me wonder if they have the student body's best interest in mind.

For one, the facilities at my school tend to be filthy and lacking very basic amenities, such as soap and toilet paper. Many of the stall doors do not lock or close; and oftentimes, whole bathrooms are locked, prohibiting students from using them. This is a clear indicator of an

unsanitary, unwelcoming environment. And the bathrooms must be maintained by both the students and the school. Not having access to a bathroom violates a basic human right, and I'm pretty sure it's illegal. And being -- legally having to go to school and not having access to something as basic as a bathroom, and a working bathroom, makes for a negative environment.

It's also clear that many teachers lack motivation when teaching their students in the lower-level classes. You would think such teachers would put extra care into the students who are deemed *behind*. But my experience in these college-prep classes -- many of the teachers have done very little for their students; and the majority of the students in these classes are people of color.

Their teaching tends to be lazy and has little thought; often showing YouTube videos that they find online, and also handing out worksheets that they scanned.

I can say in confidence that I have not learned or attained much information from my Science classes, because I am in a lower-level. And specifically, in my Physics and Chemistry classes, I have very absent teachers; and that has just completely, like, erased from my high school experience.

I've also done very few labs, and have gone on zero field trips in my four years of high school.

With teaching like this, school is uninteresting. And I think we need to make sure that we establish a better teacher-student relationship in schools because education is so valuable. When the teacher is not

motivated, the students won't be either, which results in poor academic performances and absenteeism.

Another problem that now rings true is the lack of community -- a negative culture that rings through the halls, that I have felt since the beginning of high school. There is a very clear divide between the racial groups in my school. Even if you take a look in the cafeteria, there is a white side and a black side. All the self-segregation is a true factor in this occurrence; people tend to make friends with those they share classes with.

Which brings me to the very stark disparity between white and black students in more advanced and AP classes. It's safe to say that you can tell which classes are more or less advanced by simply glancing at the color of the skin of the students inside of them.

Additionally, the District has made it hard for students of color to break free from this cycle, even if they are eligible to move up a level. Countless black students at Columbia have complained about the patronizing remarks from guidance counselors regarding switching levels. The same guidance counselors are supposed to support you and encourage hard work and challenging yourself. The deliberate, "Are you sure you want to go into this honors class?" despite having great grades, is degrading and honestly, very racist. Students are bored in these classes, which do not enrich their learning; and not to mention the questionable teaching.

There's a lot of change to be had on many different levels with our public schools; and there's a lot you can learn from the problems at my school. Students need facilities and teachers to be proud of. And since education is something that not everybody is granted around the world, we need to make sure that we truly cherish what we have.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

It's troubling to me that these issues are continuing. And I'll leave it at that for now.

Z O E N E W M A N N: Hi.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Zoe Newman, and beside me is Lily Forman; and we're here to speak on the climate and culture at public schools.

We're both in 10th grade at Columbia High School in Maplewood.

And take it away.

L I L Y F O R M A N: Two years ago, when we were in 8th grade, I walked into the girls' bathroom at South Orange Middle School and saw a message scratched on a stall wall. It used the N-word, and told my black classmates to "get lynched."

I was shocked. I couldn't believe that such a violent, racist message was on the walls of my school. I always figured our school was above that, that we all held the same beliefs about basic human dignity. I had been raised with the belief that inclusion was a core value of our community and our state.

I went directly to the main office and reported the graffiti to the school secretary. Afterward, I went back to my Science class and tried, unsuccessfully, to focus on my work. I thought about whether or not to tell my classmates, but I was still trying to process what I'd seen.

After another racist message was found the next day, school officials reported the acts of aggression to the police.

MS. NEWMAN: This wasn't our school's first run-in with hate speech. Just a few months earlier, students found swastikas and other anti-Semitic messages in the bathrooms. During the prior school year, two students in my grade posted anti-Semitic messages on Instagram.

These previous events had led to our school joining the Anti-Defamation League's *No Place for Hate* anti-bias program. The program was well-intentioned, but its effectiveness was short-lived. Acts of racist and anti-Semitic bias have continued in our schools in the years since.

School administrators responded to this latest incident by holding grade-wide assemblies, followed by smaller discussions in our classrooms. While these steps were helpful, they were fleeting. Our regular classes went on without much consideration for the toll that the bias incidents had taken on us and our classmates.

We go to school to learn about the world, and to learn about ourselves, and to learn how to be part of a larger community. These things become much more difficult in an environment that feels unsafe.

When students feel supported and respected by their peers and teachers, education becomes more meaningful. And a healthy school environment fosters curiosity and a passion for learning.

MS. FORMAN: We understand that it's almost impossible to eliminate hate speech. But we must do more to address its causes and its aftermath, especially when the hate is expressed in schools. No child should have to feel endangered and threatened at their school because of who they are. Creating inclusive, welcoming school environments is crucial to effective education. This is why we urge the Committee to prioritize bias incidents and hate speech.

Thank you. (applause)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

I want to let all of you know how much we appreciate your taking the time to come today and share your experiences with us.

I'm especially proud of these young women, who are taking it upon themselves to not only pay attention, but to communicate with the adults who should be doing a better job -- and I include myself in that group -- to make things better. Because that's our job, as adults, as parents, as grandparents, as members of society. It's our job to raise the next generation so that it's a better world than the one we live in.

Are we missing Kristofer? Yes.

Anyone else; Hannah? Did we hear from Hannah; anyone else? Anyone else? And Bernadette; I don't think Bernadette's here.

Okay; all right. You're going to close out the student portion; and the last group that we'll hear from is SEL4NJ.

Thank you for your patience.

Go ahead.

K R I S T O F E R B E R R I O S: So my name is Kristofer Berrios.

I'm currently a student at Kean University, majoring in Psychology and minoring in Women and Gender Studies.

And I am an out trans male student on campus. Any way that I can fit that into a conversation, I find a way. (laughter)

I do lectures, and I've been doing them for about four-and-a-half years, at this point. I kind of came into it by accident, and it's been kind of my calling ever since.

And the lectures are basically based on transgender awareness and education at the collegiate level. I've done it for undergrad courses, graduate-level courses, spanning from Psychology, Sociology, Social Justice, English and, most recently, in Nursing school. Because it doesn't seem like people are getting the education that they need, when they go into a professional environment, to better encounter people from different walks of life.

And, most recently, I was invited to speak at a GSA forum at their state location forum. I think it was -- if I remember correctly, it was Middlesex. And I had the opportunity of watching the keynote speaker's speech. And he had left time towards the end of it for a question-and-answer forum for the students who were there, ranging from, I want to say, the ages of 13 to 18. They were able to provide the transportation, or get the transportation from the shuttle there.

And there was one young student who I had-- I don't know if it was fate that I chose a seat so close to them or not, but they were, maybe, that far away (indicates) from the gentleman with the glasses over there. And they had asked, as a trans-male student -- who wasn't really out that much at school -- they had asked, like, "How do you handle being bullied; like, how do you cope with it?" And they gave like a one-solution response; and it was, basically, you know, just let it roll off your back. And it seemed to dishearten the student to not really get an answer that really helped them out in any way.

So I, kind of, just went over there and I asked him, "Hey, are you okay with me kind of tackling your question?" And I had responded in a way that I thought was genuine, and how it helped me in my experience

with coping with being trans at an early age. I've known since I was 3 years old; I didn't really have the vocabulary at that age in order to know what it was. And I'm 28; so, you know, I grew up with dial-up Internet and AOL, and trying to find anything on that was horrendous.

But the information that I was able to find wasn't helpful; and it was difficult to kind of filter through what was actual fact or what was bias speech. And when I was able to finally come to terms with it I was in high school. I mean, I had a lot of anger and I had a lot of depression. I basically felt like I was on autopilot in every class, because I didn't feel that I could confide in anyone in my school. And that was where I spent the majority of my day; the majority of my time throughout the year was at school with my teachers, my faculty members, my peers. I didn't really feel like I was safe anywhere.

So I was able to see myself in this young person who just desperately needed to get an answer. And the fact that he needed to go all the way to a forum that was nowhere near his school to hope that this one person had the answer was crazy. This is the first time that I had ever done lectures for students who were younger than voting age -- who, hopefully, vote.

But it made me feel more passionate about doing my lectures. And the way I typically do it is I leave the majority of the time as question and answers. Because at a college level, you have students from age 18 all the way up to whatever that student is; and you encounter a lot. And it's easier to understand someone's walk of life if you actually have someone from that walk of life right in front of you, being open enough to get asked

very personal questions because people are genuinely curious, or they need to know.

So I've put myself in that position, because it doesn't seem like anyone else is. And I hope that there is some way that we can fix that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And please leave all of your contact information with us, all right?

MR. BERRIOS: Of course; thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Okay; did I miss anyone? (no response)

Okay.

SEL4NJ, come on up.

I see friends; I haven't seen you in a while. It's good to see all of you.

MARK BIEDRON: Good afternoon.

Thank you for having us here.

After hearing those students, I decided to totally scrap my remarks (laughter). And I just want to say a couple of things, and I then I'll let my colleagues state some things.

Those of you who don't know me, my name is Mark Biedron, the Immediate Past President of the State Board of Education. I also Co-Chaired Governor Murphy's Education Access and Opportunity Transition Team, and I also serve as the Co-Chair of the New Jersey Juvenile Justice Education Partnership.

What we've heard from our students and what we see out in the world cannot be fixed in a year or two years. It is a generational fix; and there is only way to fix it, and that is education.

We in New Jersey have a great education system. We are Number 1 or 2 in the country, depending on whose yardstick you use; we're one of the top states in the nation, in terms of financial resources dedicated to our schools. We have more schools of character in New Jersey than anybody else. And yet, we listen to our students and we see these issues we have, we see the achievement gap we have, and we see the skills gap we have.

Clearly, we are educating our students for a world that doesn't exist anymore; and this has to change.

And I know that our Department of Education, our Commissioner, and our Governor all feel that educating the whole child and addressing this problem is incredibly important.

It's a long-range solution, but we have to put the stake in the ground; we have to. It's not going to change tomorrow. Changing the way we think, the way we treat each other, the things we hear these students say, takes time.

So one of the strategies that is getting universal support from every educational group that I've ever talked to -- and no one who I've talked to has ever said this is a bad idea -- is this idea of a positive school culture and climate. It addresses everything that has been brought up here, and other things that have not been brought up. It addresses safety, it addresses how we treat each other, it addresses educational equity, it addresses keeping parents informed -- everything.

I would just like to point out that SEL4NJ is a subset of a new organization that was formed in 2018 called SEL4US. SEL4US is an organization that is bringing together this whole conversation under one umbrella. And states now are forming their own SEL groups; there are 12 states. New Jersey and Massachusetts were the first, and we're the people who started SEL4US. The leadership team -- which I am on, and my colleagues are on -- is comprised of some of the most informed experts in the country on social-emotional learning and school culture and climate.

There's a difference between school culture and school climate that I would like to point out. *Culture* is really what the school stands for. It results from conversations with administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community. And you can see that if we do not include our students in that conversation, we are missing almost everything. So that is really, really important. School culture is about how we behave. It's a set of moral standards. And each of our schools in our state is a mirror and a reflection of its community, as it should be. The way we deal with school culture and climate here in Trenton is different than the way we deal with school culture and climate in Camden, or in Jersey City; as it should be. That is what place-based education is all about.

Now, school *climate*, on the other hand, is the feeling you get when you walk into the building. So climate can change. If you have a severe event in a school, the climate for that day can change. The school culture is bedrock; it stays there. So it's really the umbrella under which everything happens, and it is a set of core values that govern behavior. It's what the school stands for.

So SEL4NJ -- we have formed this organization. We have a leadership team; we've had two meetings with 50 individuals and organizations attend that are part of this huge conversation. And we are trying to figure out how to form this organization so that we can help our educational community. The days of schools being able to do everything themselves are over. That was when I grew up. The school was just this little school, and we were going to do everything, and it was fine. Today, if we don't form partnerships with our community, with our higher ed, with our businesses -- we cannot do this alone.

So this is really, really important, and this is what SEL4NJ is about. We are going to form partnerships with all the appropriate groups, and we want to bring and work with the Department of Education, the Commissioner, the Governor's Office, and our school districts to ensure that we bring this idea of a positive school culture and climate, and social-emotional learning, and character education to every student, in every school, every population -- especially our most vulnerable populations.

So I am going to close my comments and just say that this idea of social-emotional learning and positive school culture and climate has been around for decades. It is getting much more attention now for several reasons. One, employers want students who can communicate; and you cannot be a good communicator unless you understand your social-emotional skills, like empathy. You just can't. There is mounting scientific research that success in school and in life is dependent on healthy social and emotional development, and the ability to understand and manage emotions.

There is also this idea -- a growing concern -- that SEL and positive school culture and climate is not regulated (*sic*) to class or status. It's everywhere.

And lastly, there is a growing body of research which says that a positive school culture and climate -- which embraces social-emotional learning -- engages students in learning, improves students attitudes towards their school, their community, and each other; increases positive classroom behavior; and very important, civic engagement -- which is a whole other conversation; reduces chronic absenteeism, which we've heard about; reduces conduct problems with behavior and emotional stress; improves staff morale; and improves academic performance. It can result in up to an 11 percent gain on standardized tests, if you are into standardized tests.

So I would like to just end and say thank you so much for bringing the student voice here; that was so powerful.

And I am going to turn it over to my colleague, Christy Tighe, to just talk a little more about this.

C H R I S T Y T I G H E: Good afternoon.

Thank you, Senator Rice, Assemblywoman Jasey, and the members of the community for, again, participating in this extremely important conversation, and for listening to the students who were here earlier.

I'm going to put a little bit of different perspective on social-emotional learning. I am Director of College and Career Readiness at Junior Achievement of New Jersey, and we are in touch with the members of New Jersey's business community. We reach 80,000 students here in

New Jersey with 21st century programming that helps prepare them for college and/or career.

So we speak to members of the business community, very often, as we develop our programs.

So what we are hearing from our business community in New Jersey -- as well as nationwide and globally -- is that the skills that young people need to be successful in 2020 and beyond are significantly different from the skills needed when we went to school. If you think about the history of work, we are, right now, in the midst of what economists call the *fourth industrial revolution*. That is tied to how technology has evolved at an exponential rate in the past several years.

For a long time students could get all the information that they needed from using content they got in school. It's different now; they can get any information they need on the Internet. So as skills develop and as technology changes, the skills that our young people need are going to change as well.

So I want to cite a couple of different research findings that I found.

Google did two international studies of workplace success at Google very recently. And we think of Google-- That's a big STEM company that a lot of young people want to work for. But they found that the people who were most successful at Google were good with soft skills, meaning listening, being able to communicate, being able to work collaboratively in a team.

Another thing I wanted to mention was, the *Future of Jobs* report from the World Economic Forum did list the skills important for 2020.

The most important skills for 2020, as we look towards the future: complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, and so on.

So as we're focusing on soft skills, and as we're focusing on social-emotional learning in our schools, it really is important when those young people go out to the business community; because here in New Jersey, in fact, our employers are finding that our young people are lacking in these soft skills.

The last thing I want to mention -- the New Jersey Business and Industry Association did their report a few years ago where they asked all of their members -- they got feedback about their entry-level employees. And this is what the New Jersey Business and Industry Association found very recently: that 74 percent of entry-level employees had fair or poor time-management skills; 73 percent of entry-level employee had fair or poor written communication skills. They were lacking in critical thinking skills, self-motivation, punctuality, and work ethic.

So as you see, it really is an issue for our businesses and for our state's economy. Our businesses and our employers are suffering because their entry-level employees are lacking in these skills.

So this is why it really is important to be focusing on social and emotional learning -- because education is a lot different now, and the skills that our young people need to know are very different than before.

So again, thank you for your attention to this very important matter. We really appreciate it.

And at this point, I would like to turn it over to my college.

MR. BIEDRON: Thanks.

SENATOR RICE: Excuse me.

We do have copies of your written testimony?

MS. TIGHE: I beg your pardon?

SENATOR RICE: Do we have written from you?

MS. TIGHE: No, you do not; but I can give you the information.

SENATOR RICE: Can you please send us written testimony.

MS. TIGHE: Absolutely, absolutely.

Thank you.

S T U A R T G R E E N, D.M.H.: Hello.

I'm the last speaker before lunch, so I better not take more than a couple of minutes. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Last, but best.

DR. GREEN: Yes.

So, Stuart Green; I'm the Founder and Director of the New Jersey Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention. And I was also a Co-Leader of New Jersey School Health and Climate Coalition, which, with support from United Way and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, over the last several years, has done a lot of things to support schools and address culture and climate issues.

All of that has morphed into, or taken part, now, in SEL4NJ, Social-Emotional Learning for New Jersey; and as Mark mentioned, part of a state initiative associated with SEL4US. And we're excited about what we can do in New Jersey for school climate -- school culture and climate.

I'd like to just define those for a second, by the way, in addition to what Mark said, which is-- So culture is the way we do things here,

based on all the things Mark said; and climate, as he said, also is the way the place feels to those in it. When we work with students from the LGBTQ community in groups, sometimes they say that within a couple of minutes of walking into a school building they can get a sense of whether the climate -- the culture and climate of a school is supportive. So climate is a very visible thing.

I also just want to add to my own background that I am a medical educator and behavioral scientist who practices at Overlook Medical Center, Atlantic Health System. And after Columbine, in 1999, I started the Coalition; and working with Garden State Equality, helped to develop the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which you enacted.

I chaired Governor Corzine's Commission on Bullying in Schools that Pat mentioned before.

The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights is a good law; the strongest in the U.S. at the time it was enacted. It still needs improvement and some additional support.

I'm here, primarily, as an anti-bullying advocate -- I just want to mention that -- because the SEL initiative, both nationally and in New Jersey, has not yet adopted advocacy per se. But I am here to advocate for a thing or so.

And in terms of chronic absenteeism, an anti-bullying perspective is really important. The research literature is clear: student perception of schools -- you've heard that -- as safe and supportive is a major driver of students skipping school; not the only driver, but improving absenteeism rates requires attention to addressing bullying and strengthening support of students, especially those most vulnerable. And

that means students of diverse gender identity, students with special needs, and students who are minorities of any kind, including racially, ethnically, or socio-economically; or who lack adequate support outside of school.

To reduce chronic absenteeism by strengthening anti-bullying efforts and the positive impact of the law, we need accurate information about what goes on inside of schools. And despite all the great things about New Jersey's education system, as was mentioned, you also heard the problems. And one of those problems is that New Jersey is one of the worst states in the country in terms of having accurate, clear information -- data -- about what goes on in schools.

You're familiar, I'm sure, with the problems with the data collection systems, like the EVVRS, and the way that New Jersey's data system relies heavily on administrators self-report. And it's basically not reliably accurate.

But I want to suggest the one particular change that we need, which is -- currently, there's another New Jersey law, which is 18A:36-34. That law needs to be changed. That law requires parental, signed consent for certain kinds of important surveying of students. It essentially functions as a critical barrier to obtaining accurate information about what's going on in schools. And a key example of that is that in the recent national CDC *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance*, New Jersey's data couldn't be counted in that national reporting of the results of that survey because we didn't reach the required 60 percent level of obtaining information within the schools.

I gave you two handouts; one of those handouts is a simple, a one-page, one side of one page summary about the opt-in consent law -- why it needs to be changed to an opt-out law; and that's there. That was

developed in partnership with organizations I work with, including Education Law Center and Garden State Equality.

The other document I gave you -- I'll just mention now -- which is-- I gave you a handout, a sort of checklist, based on talks and guidance we provide, which-- Let me jump to say that the problem we have in schools -- and you've heard this -- is not that we don't have great schools doing great things. It's the variability -- the way things vary so much in terms of culture, and climate, and every other factor, from school to school and, sometimes, from time to time.

And when culture and climate are not strong enough in schools, specific institutional behaviors that we know are required to support students and keep them safe are not reliably present. I'll just give you one example, in service of the three minutes. This especially -- lack of these specific behaviors, by the way, especially affect students most targeted and least supported; again, gender diverse, special needs, overweight -- any minority status or simply lonely for whatever reason, or whose families are troubled, lack outside support. So that document that you have in your packet identifies those specific elements.

And just one example -- and actually, it occurs to me this was mentioned by the students and the folks at GLSEN -- all schools should have strong mentorship, strong clubs, and community engagement in support of students who identify LGBTQ; and many schools don't. So that's the point I want to make.

Everything else is in the documents I gave you -- the two of them. And if you could take those into account and respond in some way, that would be great.

The last little point -- this is five seconds -- is there are a number of organizations that represent important community perspectives that weren't here, and that would include Education Law Center, Garden State Equality, New Jersey Center for Tourette Syndrome and Associated Disorders. Associated Disorders -- the strongest such organization in the country.

I gave Rebecca a list of those affiliate organizations -- of which there are many, many -- and I hope you're able to reach out in some way and obtain input from them as well.

So thanks very much for this; this was-- The couple of hours were well worth it -- certainly from my point of view -- and I think those of us in the audience; really powerful.

Thanks very much for convening this.

MR. BIEDRON: And thank you very much.

And I just wanted to say that we gave you the SEL4NJ white paper. We also gave you an article entitled, "Getting serious about social-emotional character development."

We also gave you the Aspen Institute recent report, which is a groundbreaking report on social-emotional learning and school culture and climate; as well as the New Jersey Culture and Climate Coalition's Successful School Guidelines. So if you are a school; you want to get into positive school culture and climate -- these guidelines help you put together your program.

And then the last thing we gave you was the New Jersey DOE SEL competencies and sub-competencies that were approved by the State Board in August of 2017.

DR. GREEN: I'd like to make one quick point; I'm sorry.

I just jumped in to do this.

Although Pat and I served on the same Commission, on bullying in schools, there is one point that might be of disagreement.

Although I also want more money -- we asked for it when we were the Commission; we didn't really get it -- and we need more money. The Education Law Center would certainly say that; however, I don't think money, and more money for schools, is actually at the crux of school culture and climate, or adequately addressing bullying.

Those of us who are, sort of, rabid anti-bullying advocates -- we see this as an issue of Education 101; that doing these things to protect vulnerable students and making sure they're adequately supported, and keeping them from being hurt -- you shouldn't be able to have a school, or be an educator, if you don't have your eye on that particular ball. And I don't think it's a matter of money; I think it's-- My day job is in a hospital with patients. I think a school saying that they need more money in order to create strong culture and climate, and adequately protect students would be the equivalent of a hospital saying, "We're going to do wrong-sided surgery, routinely and on a regular basis, until you give us more money." Things really -- we're responsible for not working that way.

SENATOR RICE: Some of it -- through the Chair-- See, this is what I just told the students who were up here. Some of it is a matter of money, because there is a lot of common ground, in terms of education and things we do. But then there is uniqueness to communities.

When I say *money*, let me tell you what I'm talking about. A lot of the bullying didn't take place when we had programs after school, when I

was coming up; playgrounds where the gym teacher was also the person who ran the playground. They taught us teamwork. When there was an opportunity where we disagreed with someone to fight, they kind of intervened and educated us. And if so, we saw them the next day.

When you started to take the urban communities -- this is what I was getting to earlier -- and I get legislators today who want to do all these wonderful things to help us; when, in fact, they're doing things to hurt us. They may not see it, and sometimes they really don't care. But we have to have facilities. When you go into urban communities-- And I always say this -- when I grew up, people went to playgrounds, students went to playgrounds. Teachers parked on streets. Now teachers park in playgrounds, and students hang on corners on the streets.

DR. GREEN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: There's a real problem there, economically; and with the way we're doing things, and what we cut back on.

DR. GREEN: Sure.

SENATOR RICE: And the State would tell the municipalities, "Well, you increase taxes and do more in terms of revenue to the school board." And then the district would say, "Well, we really can't afford to do more. We ask the State to kind of increase the taxes and do it."

So we get our people caught in between who should actually pay. There should be no debate on who's going to pay; the debate should be on how we're going to get it done.

So I just want to release that out.

DR. GREEN: I understand.

Although you do hear that in what the students-- I agree; we all agree. But you also heard in what the students said, some of the stories about those moments in which an educator said something or approached them in a certain way that demonstrated that quality of caring -- that was transformative for that student. And that kind of interaction -- and some of what you heard from the last student, about the way classes feel -- that kind of stuff is not the stuff that requires the money. The other stuff -- I agree totally, totally; more money, please.

SENATOR RICE: But in any other environment after school -- you can correct some of that, through relationships and education.

DR. GREEN: Yes.

MS. TIGHE: And if I might just interject for a moment.

And I am a school board member as well, in addition to all the other things I do. So I really have a unique perspective on all these issues.

And after hearing all this incredible testimony all day, you're probably wondering, "What we can do? How can we better support our students?"

It is a community issue, because every community is different. And what you're seeing, and what we saw from our students in Newark and from our students in South Orange was a big equity issue; there's a huge issue for school culture and climate all over the state.

And it is dependent on your community, like you said, Senator Rice. And ultimately, yes, it is all about the funding. We would encourage our legislators -- if legislation is enacted -- to make sure that there is appropriate funding tied to it.

For us -- that's all about professional development, you know? I talk to a lot of teachers; I talk to a lot of students. They want this stuff. A lot of times our hands are tied, as you know, with our school budgets being so tight.

Funding for professional development, funding for transportation; getting students out of the building-- The one young lady said that she didn't have any -- wasn't able to go on any field trips. When you take students out of the building and show them the opportunities that are available to them, they can make that connection to school and career, school and their future. Some of the students we heard this morning -- they didn't come to school because they didn't see a reason. If you get the students out of the building and get them to connect with people in their community, then they find that reason.

So funding for transportation; funding for that professional development so we can better prepare our teachers; and then funding for facility upgrades -- all really important.

So thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I want to thank you for being willing to anchor this hearing.

And, you know, I could sit here and talk to you for the rest of the day, as you know. But these are issues that I strongly believe that we, as the adults, need to figure out.

While it's great to have students come and talk to us, it's also painful to me to have children coming and telling us what they need. We should be able to figure that out. And everything doesn't require money,

but it does require commitment and attention. And, you know, that's what I heard loud and clear.

And I want to thank my colleagues for staying and for listening. And, you know, I think there's a lot of work to be done; but I firmly believe that if we get enough people who think that it's important, we can accomplish it, absolutely.

MR. BIEDRON: No doubt.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And so I'm really excited that you're back in the swing of things, Mark.

MR. BIEDRON: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And Christy, it's great to see you--

MS. TIGHE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --and it's nice to meet you, Stuart.

With that, I think we are adjourned.

And I want to thank everyone for coming, and I look forward to working on a long list of things. (laughter)

Thank you.

ALL: Thank you.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)