
Committee Meeting

of

SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE

“The Committee will meet to receive testimony from invited guests regarding chronic absenteeism in New Jersey schools. The Committee will also accept written testimony from members of the public”

LOCATION: Committee Room 4
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: January 30, 2025
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Vin Gopal, Chair
Senator Shirley K. Turner, Vice Chair
Senator Angela V. McKnight
Senator Kristin M. Corrado
Senator Owen Henry



ALSO PRESENT:

Amanda Bastelica
Jacquelyn N. Corsentino
Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aides

Aislinn Brennan
Senate Majority
Committee Aide

Christine Dobisch
Senate Republican
Committee Aide

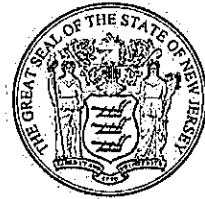
Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

Vin Gopal
Chair

Shirley K. Turner
Vice-Chair

Angela V. McKnight
Kristin M. Corrado
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COMMITTEE NOTICE

TO: MEMBERS OF THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FROM: SENATOR VIN GOPAL, CHAIRMAN
SUBJECT: COMMITTEE MEETING - JANUARY 30, 2025

The public may address comments and questions to Amanda Bastelica, Jacquelyn N. Corsentino, Committee Aides, or make bill status and scheduling inquiries to Marguerite Tazza, Secretary, at (609)847-3850 or e-mail: OLSAideSED@njleg.org. Written and electronic comments, questions and testimony submitted to the committee by the public, as well as recordings and transcripts, if any, of oral testimony, are government records and will be available to the public upon request.

The Senate Education Committee will meet on Thursday, January 30, 2025 at 10:00 AM in Committee Room 4, 1st Floor, State House Annex, Trenton, New Jersey.

The committee will meet to receive testimony from invited guests regarding chronic absenteeism in New Jersey schools. The committee will also accept written testimony from members of the public.

The following bill(s) will be considered:

S315 Diegnan/Beach	Permits school bus driver to administer epinephrine to student in emergency under certain circumstances.
S1659 O'Scanlon/Corrado	Requires school districts to incorporate age-appropriate instruction on menstrual toxic shock syndrome and requires installation of signage in certain women's rooms to enhance public awareness of menstrual toxic shock syndrome.
S1783 McKnight	Requires instruction on cursive handwriting in public school curriculum.

(OVER)

S2844 McKeon	Establishes Jersey Strong Public Service Scholarship Program.
S3917 Gopal	Makes various changes to school funding law; modifies method of determining tax levy growth limitation for school districts; revises components of Educational Adequacy Report.
S3961 Ruiz/Scutari	Requires boards of education to offer no-fee option to parents for making school lunch and other payments; requires payment processing platforms used by school districts to provide users with information on user fees.
S3982 Ruiz/Corrado	Requires any draft Individualized Education Program (IEP) and list of excused IEP team members be provided to parent or guardian at least two business days prior to annual IEP team meeting.
SJR93 Greenstein	Designates first full week of May of each year as "Teacher Appreciation Week."

FOR DISCUSSION ONLY:

S3141 Singleton/McKnight	Establishes Public Education Innovation Fund; provides corporation business tax and gross income tax credits to businesses for making qualified education donations.
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SENATOR VIN GOPAL (Chair): Morning, everyone.

We are going to start the Committee.

If I could start with a roll call, please.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Here.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Here.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Here.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Turner.

SENATOR SHIRLEY K. TURNER (Vice Chair): Here.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Here.

We have a pretty robust agenda; we're going to try to get done this morning, starting with a hearing on chronic absenteeism.

Just a couple comments before we start, as it relates to-- Oh, I'm sorry; Pledge of Allegiance.

(Pledge of Allegiance is recited)

SENATOR GOPAL: In addition to the hearing on chronic absenteeism -- which is a passion project, and very important to Senator Turner -- we're going to hear the School Funding Reform Bill, and a few other things.

You know, there is, obviously, some concern that I, as the Committee Chair, have at the Federal level on some of the executive orders that affect education. We know New Jersey boasts one of the nation's best

and most diverse school systems, and a lot of what we're doing today -- whether it's school funding, chronic absenteeism -- is going to play a big role.

But, the executive order specifically on temporary freeze on Federal education funding, which could jeopardize crucial programs, like the Individuals with Disabilities Act that supports students with special needs, is a pretty critical piece that we went through in depth. And, while that order has been put on hold, we saw that the White House had said they are going to try to figure out a different way to freeze some of those funding. The memo that they specifically put said that it was going to be at the discretion of a political appointee.

So, historically, schools have always been a safe place. The Federal law has even insulated them from a lot that's going on. But, I've had a number of calls over the last two weeks with our county prosecutor. We had an incident in Asbury Park where a parent was picked up by ICE after leaving the school district; dropped his child off. That parent probably *should* have been picked up, from our conversation with ICE, but obviously that has some effects at the school district level.

I have, in my district, Freehold Borough, Red Bank, Long Branch, that have significant minority populations. And, navigating with the superintendents, I think the -- in our conversations with those at ICE and with our County Prosecutor's Office, are going after folks who are criminals. But, the language coming out from the Federal level is causing a lot of concern for school districts on how to navigate that.

Obviously, when somebody comes into this country -- they are coming in illegally -- they are a criminal. But, at the same time, for a country to allow them to be here for 15, 20 years, and to raise a family and have kids,

it's like somebody coming into your house and then 15 years later you're saying, "Oh, well, now, we're going to put you away." So, there's a lot of blame all the way. And, what's terrible about some of what's happening is that there are kids in these school districts -- and, not just kids who are undocumented, but their friends; Dreamers; their friends. I mean, the conversations I have had with some of these school administrators and these counselors are really discouraging and really, really frightening. And, education should not be a place where any of this happens.

So, my hope is that, in this Committee, we can do everything we can to protect schools as a safe place from politics; from immigration; from anything else that's happening. Our conversations with ICE-- They're going after violent criminals; they're going after criminals, and that's fine, that's good, but should not happen in a school district, because that *will* have a mental health impact on every kid who's in that -- when those folks are coming.

So, look for some things that we're going to be doing on that side in the weeks and months ahead. And, we're going to be carefully watching what the Federal side does.

We're going to begin our-- We're going to begin our remarks on chronic absenteeism.

Senator Turner, do you have any comments you want to make before we start the hearing?

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for hearing this long-overdue conversation regarding chronic absenteeism.

We know that the problem existed long before the pandemic, and it has been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. And, we have seen

so much loss in learning as a result of the pandemic. And, if the children -- the students -- are not in school -- if they are chronically absent -- they are not learning. And, we are not regaining any of the learning loss that occurred before the pandemic, nor after the pandemic. We saw that with a report that the scores have remained stagnant, even though we provided some tutoring and some other kinds of remedial work. It's not happening. And, it won't happen if the kids are not in school.

So, I'm anxious to hear what is before us today, to see how we can rectify this, and bring the kids back to school so that they can continue learning.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Let's bring up Isaiah Fudge, Director of Positive Youth Development at Advocates for Children New Jersey; and, Nina Peckman, Staff Attorney at Advocates for Children New Jersey.

I S A I A H F U D G E: Good morning, members of the Senate Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on chronic absenteeism.

I am Isaiah Fudge, Director of Positive Youth Development Policy and Advocacy with Advocates for Children New Jersey. I am a former high school teacher, a former resource specialist for people returning from incarceration, and, before graduating from a poverty-stricken public school system in New Jersey, I was a high school dropout. And, now I'm a father, whose kid is attending public school in a more affluent community than I

grew up in. I understand firsthand the complexity surrounding chronic absenteeism.

And, so does ACNJ. In 2014, ACNJ began work on chronic absenteeism. That work led to Governor Murphy signing a bill into law in 2018, and that bill defined chronic absenteeism. It required districts to publish their chronic absenteeism numbers in their school report cards, and it required a corrective action plan involving feedback from parents for districts with 10% or more chronic absenteeism rates.

But, chronic absenteeism has surged since the pandemic. As we wrestle with this issue nationally, New Jersey's current 16.6 chronic absenteeism rate is better than most states. But, as of 2022-'23, there were 1,371,921 students enrolled in our schools. So, that means 219,507 students missed 18 or more days of school that year. Now, I haven't done the math, but that equates to a lot of missed time for education for our young people -- for various reasons.

One of the biggest causes of chronic absenteeism relates to poverty. Lack of child care, transportation, food, and other essentials often disrupt daily life for families who don't consistently have access to the resources they need. The 26th wealthiest school districts in the state have a chronic absenteeism rate lower than the state average -- many of them *much* lower. Twenty six of the poorest districts have a rate that's higher. For example, Haddonfield schools, a wealthy district in Camden County, has a 4.7 chronic absenteeism rate, while Camden Schools has -- Camden Public Schools has a rate of 40.7%. The poverty around schools in the poorest districts create barriers to youth attendance; to students' attendance.

In the written testimony I've submitted, I've outlined some more causes, but I'll just indicate them here: Poor or negative school climates and lack of awareness from students and families about chronic absenteeism.

One solution is to increase districts' ability to address the whole child and turn their schools into resource hubs. The families in the wealthiest districts tend to consistently be able to meet the foundational needs of their kids. Meeting those needs consistently creates conditions for them to attend school regularly.

So, Senate Bill 2243, which would establish a five-year community school pilot, and Senate Bill 2528, which would create the Office of Community Schools, would create similar opportunities for families of lower socioeconomic statuses.

The full-service community school model presents a way for poorer districts to meet their students' needs. The model involves integrating student supports and engaging students and families, among other best practices. Unfortunately, to this point, only four districts in the state have a formal community school arrangement. But, there are schools and districts incorporating components of the model, and they are making progress around chronic absenteeism.

In Orange Public Schools, Rosa Parks Community Schools reported a 7.4% chronic absenteeism rate. The district itself is at 13.8%. Dover Public Schools is at a 13.2% rate district-wide. Bringing resources into schools brings kids back to school. You can't control the poverty around the schools, but you can control the poverty within them. We *must* invest in schools' capacity to address the needs of their students.

Again, I've outlined some more solutions in the written testimony. I'll say, committing to bringing more socio-emotional character development resources to schools; repurposing attendance counselors across districts; and monitoring how schools share information about chronic absenteeism are all potential solutions to this issue.

Again, I want to thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony here today. I am looking forward to working with everyone to continue to combat this issue.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

N I N A P E C K M A N, ESQ.: Good morning, members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Nina Peckman; I am the Education Attorney at Advocates for Children of New Jersey.

ACNJ's Kid Law Center has been in existence since 1996, and has secured the education rights of over 10,000 children. On an annual basis, I provide educational advocacy assistance to approximately 350 poor and low-income parents and their children residing throughout the State of New Jersey, as well as to professionals who work with children and families.

Although attendance barriers and chronic absenteeism has always been an issue since the pandemic, the percentage of my cases with these issues have greatly increased. According to my cases, the common reasons for absences are due to unaddressed current chronic health issues, including mental health issues such as anxiety and depression; fear of bullying, or violence in the school; the inability to get to school because of transportation issues; and, loss of interest, due in part to unaddressed

academic problems, or when both in the students' social-emotional and behavioral issues are being addressed ineffectively.

Other factors that seem to be driving the chronic absenteeism problem: First, some districts don't have enough school staff to support the education and behavioral health needs of students, or may not have the requisite experience to identify the reasons for the absences and how best to help the student.

Second, many students remain home because parents are not getting the information that they need to support their child's attendance through basic information about attendance laws, and what are the schools -- what are the School-Based Services available to help their child. Even when parents *do* know the laws, they often don't know how to advocate for their child, or to appeal a school decision or inaction when their child is not going to school, because one of the issues mentioned above.

Third, too often, some districts use truancy charges, or simply blame parents for the problem, and don't acknowledge the parents' efforts to help their child, while ignoring all the steps school staff should have taken as soon as the child first started to miss too many school days. One thing is clear: The time to address attendance issues effectively is as soon as they become an issue. Both the attendance and intervention and referral regulations require schools to directly engage the parent and child when there are too many unexcused absences -- which the attendance regulations deem to be up to four unexcused absences. Schools must also have a process to identify and address the attendance issues of students with excessive excused absences for chronic health issues, or due to a student's disabilities, as schools

have a responsibility to ensure that these children are receiving an appropriate education.

Once a child is chronically absent, it is much more difficult to address the underlying reasons in a way that will help the child stay in school and thrive academically. In my experience of advocating for children with serious attendance issues, the best approach is the one that leads to the best- - And, the one that leads to the best outcome is when school staff, parents, and relevant community providers collaborate in creating a plan to help the student. Schools who simply try to address this issue with a cookie-cutter, fill-in-the-box approach are going to have a very difficult time trying to fulfill their responsibilities to educate children in these circumstances.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex problem, as we know, and it's very difficult to address. To try to solve this issue, we must start with a focus on individual needs and circumstances of the child who is missing school; to understand why that particular child is not attending school; and to engage that child's parents in a meaningful way, to ensure the child receives an appropriate education.

In my written testimony, I have included two examples of cases involving individual students and their issues, and how we address the absenteeism issues in their cases.

Thank you very much for your testimony.

If you have any questions, you can reach me at ACNJ. I provided my email address in the written testimony.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you so much.

Any questions from the Committee? (no response)

Thank you both.

MS. PECKMAN: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Next up, we are going to bring up Bernie Flynn, Chief Executive Officer of Mercer Street Friends; and, Bernadette Trapp, Director of Community Schools of Mercer Street Friends.

B E R N I E F L Y N N: Thank you Senator, members of the Committee.

I am Bernie Flynn; I have been CEO of Mercer Street Friends for the last five years. Started right before the pandemic. What drew me to Mercer Street Friends was the fact that Mercer Street Friends was the lead community school agency in the school district -- in the Trenton Public School District. The work is so important.

My colleague, Bernadette Trapp, who is our Director of Community Schools-- I'm going to hand it off to her in just a minute, but, to give you a little bit more about Mercer Street Friends, we're a social services organization. And, while a lot of our work is focused in Trenton, we serve all of Mercer County. We are the Feeding America Food Bank for Mercer County. We provide family support programming; and, we operate, as I mentioned, as the lead community school agency, and as part of that, we address -- seek to address -- chronic absenteeism throughout the district, but, in particular, in the three public schools where we have Mercer Street Friends staff helping to support the staff of the public school in addressing chronic absenteeism.

So, I am going to turn it over to our director, Bernadette Trapp, who was a principal in the Trenton school system. She was our first community school partner as a principal. And, then, we were shrewd enough, upon her retirement, to recruit her as our Director of Community Schools.

Bernadette.

B E R N A D E T T E T R A P P: Good morning, and thank you, senators, for having us here today.

I would like to speak about chronic absenteeism in schools, and how the community school strategy can address this growing problem.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% of the required days in a school year. So, if there are 180 days, 18 days absent or more is chronic absenteeism. All days absent -- whether they are excused or unexcused; due to illness, chronic illness; out-of-school suspension or disciplinary reasons -- all count against a child, and count towards chronic absenteeism.

Being absent from school impacts students negatively. Students who are chronically absent miss key learnings, making them less likely to read on grade level, or experience deficiencies in other core academic areas, due to a lack of prerequisite learnings. Chronically absent students are less likely to graduate, and can experience social disengagement. Chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects low-income students.

Recognized as a national problem receiving bipartisan attention, the U.S. Department of Education indicated that 28% of the students were chronically absent in 2022-2023. It is important to note that chronic absenteeism is a symptom of a much larger problem. Students miss school for a variety of reasons, such as illness; mental health challenges; family struggles, such as feeding, food, or housing insecurity; employment issues. Districts and states realize that, when addressing chronic absenteeism, punitive measures are not effective, but, rather, a more comprehensive, holistic approach is needed.

Designed as a partnership between the community and schools, Community Schools is a national strategy that works with families and students to remove the barriers to consistent attendance. This is done through the implementation of integrated supports, and facilitating connections to the community resources and services for our families.

Since 2015, Mercer Street Friends has been a lead partner with the Trenton Public Schools in the development of the full-service community school strategy. Currently partnered with three schools in Trenton: B.C. Gregory Elementary School, which is a K-3 school; Luis Muñoz-Rivera Elementary School, a K-3 school; and, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, seventh and eighth grade. We have created a structure of direct and indirect supports, such as social-emotional learning groups; after-school and summer enrichment and tutoring programs; counseling; reading intervention; choice food pantries in each of our schools; and family support services available to not just our families, but the community that utilizes our pantries.

The testimony that we have submitted goes into much more detail about what we do. Our comprehensive integrated supports for students and families are instrumental in our efforts to address chronic absenteeism. Data has indicated that there has been an increase in average daily attendance, and a decrease in chronic absenteeism at our three schools over the past two years. While these increases and decreases are incremental, it is a push in the correct direction, and there still is a lot more work to do.

In closing, we must acknowledge that schools and districts *cannot* tackle chronic absenteeism alone. This requires an all-hands-on-deck approach that includes state-level planning; tapping into community

resources; and bringing families, educators, students, and neighbors together. The community school strategy is such a catalyst for success.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator McKnight.

SENATOR MCKNIGHT: Thank you so much, Chairman.

And, thank you for being here today.

Bernadette, can you share one or two examples of solutions that worked for chronic--

MS. TRAPP: In addressing-- So, we don't exactly have what we'd call a "client base;" we serve the entire school. Anything that is needed -- anybody that is needed -- can reach out to us.

So, at the school, we support the schools through my team; I have two members at every school. They live at the school; they're housed there. They are embedded in the fabric of the school. They serve on the attendance team meetings; they reach out to families to see how we can support them; we try to discover the root cause of the problem, and not just say, "You need to come to school."

So, examples may be, we are partnered with the Trenton health team to provide case management services for children who are chronically ill, so that those families can understand what resources are available to them. If there is a problem with food insecurity or housing insecurity, we connect the families directly to our family resource center, and our specialists work with families. Housing is an issue, but we're able to address food insecurity because we have pantries right in the school.

We also see the need to recognize positive attendance. So, we help the school with celebrations for positive attendance; we have incentive programs at the schools; we assist the school, whether it be making home visits to see what's happening and how we can help the family. There's no one clear-cut thing that we do, but we try to tackle it from all angles.

MR. FLYNN: And, in particular with the elementary schools, the parental engagement is key. The younger students don't choose to not come to school. And, so, we work from preschool through the elementary schools with the parents directly, seek their engagement -- again, in a positive way; the way Bernadette has outlined it. But, that parental engagement is sort of like hand-to-hand combat; you've got to work with parents individually to make sure that you're making a connection and you find out how you can support, and you address that in a very particular manner, at times.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you.

SENATOR HENRY: Senator?

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes, thank you so much; thank you for what you do. You've made a difference.

And, any district that's experiencing chronic absenteeism should be required to have a program like this in place. I see that as a failure in administration, a failure in leadership, that-- I know some of these districts are labeled as "poor" districts, but, yet, they are rich in education dollars. And, that should be a priority to get these students into school, especially at a younger age where we know past fifth grade it's tough to teach the old horse

new tricks. So, it should be a priority of all these districts that have chronic absenteeism to get these kids in school so we can teach them.

I don't see any excuse-- None of these districts can make excuses of why they are not implementing plans or programs that you have done here locally. And, I thank you for that.

And, I hope everyone is listening, and they are calling you and find out how to get this done. And, you've gotten it done. And, you're a breath of fresh air this morning.

Thank you so much.

MR. FLYNN: Thank you, Senator.

And, those are efficient dollars. Bernadette just described-- She has a coordinator and two staffers. That's three staffers in each school making a huge difference. That is efficient use of education dollars.

SENATOR GOPAL: How many organizations are there like Mercer Street Friends?

MR. FLYNN: The City of Paterson has-- I believe it's 11-14 community schools, and we consider them to be our leader in this area.

And, then, it's really Mercer Street Friends in Trenton, in three schools, and then there are pockets throughout the state. But, we don't have nearly enough community schools in the State of New Jersey. The state of California has dedicated \$4.5 billion to the community school model. The state of Maryland has made it their primary objective in the Department of Education to have community schools throughout the state of Maryland. Pennsylvania does, I'm sorry to say, a better job than we do overall. Lehigh County in particular has a strong community school movement, and there's

a tremendous community school movement in Philadelphia that's led by the University of Pennsylvania and the Netter Center in West Philly.

So, they're all around us, and we have the expertise of these states and the University of Pennsylvania and our own higher ed. organizations. But, we need more help on a statewide basis to make sure that this model is prevalent in all of our urban centers where our families and children are challenged economically and from an educational standpoint.

SENATOR GOPAL: Are you a nonprofit, or a business?

MR. FLYNN: We are a nonprofit.

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other questions from the Committee?
Senator Turner?

SENATOR TURNER: Yes.

I'd like to thank you very much for coming here today.

And, we are so fortunate here in Mercer County to have the Mercer Street Friends located here with your kind of dedication and commitment to the community. And, particularly, for our children.

We all know that the studies show there is a strong correlation between poverty and chronic absenteeism. And, we know, too, that there is a correlation between chronic absenteeism and race. We find more Black and Hispanic students who are chronically absent. So, we need to have more programs like you -- what you have.

And, there is a bill that I am a sponsor of that would create what you have now, with the three schools in Trenton -- the community schools in every district in the state. But, that has not come to fruition, primarily because of the cost. It's always the reason for things that make sense not moving -- because we're always pennywise and pound foolish. Because, it

makes more sense to put money on the front end of life, rather than waiting to put it on the back end of life. We save so much more money that way.

And, we know, too, that if students are chronically absent, then they're not learning. And, as you indicated, Bernadette, those students fall behind and they become behavioral problems, and ultimately they just mark time as to when they can drop out of school, and that costs society dearly.

So, we need to do more in the way of providing wraparound services in schools -- particularly in those poverty districts. And, if you look at the statistics here in New Jersey, you'll find the highest chronic absentee rates are located in the cities where you find, mainly, minority students and low-income poverty students. And, many of them have single heads of household, and it's hard for a mother or a father by themselves to provide the kind of needs that children have, such as putting a roof over their head and putting food on the table. And, also, sending them off to school.

And, so often, parents are not aware of the importance of their child being in the classroom in order to learn; they don't see the connection between absenteeism and learning. So, it should be, like you said, all hands on deck. Schools need to work in partnerships with the parents, so that the parents are involved in the learning process. And, it's not just the teachers, it should be the paraprofessionals as well as the staff, and teachers, and the community.

Because community organizations such as yours is a demonstration of how important it can be in order to have your commitment. Because you have something that most people don't, and that is a sincere commitment. And, you're a nonprofit; you're not in it to make money.

But, I'd like to know, too: How are you doing in terms of funding?

MR. FLYNN: We need more money.

(laughter)

MR. FLYNN: Frankly, the only positive thing over the past week is that we used to get Federal funding -- seed funding to get things up and running -- and, we have tried to get other Federal grants and we were unsuccessful most recently. So, we don't have a Federal grant that can be cut from us right now. So, we don't have that worry. We are privately funded -- 90-95% of our budget, which is over \$1.5 million, to roughly half a million dollars for us to be in each of the three schools -- and, we get some support from the Trenton School District; we're expecting *more* support from the Trenton School District that there's a commitment there, and it's part of the Trenton School District's strategic plan.

But, right now, we're on a district-by-district basis, in terms of running community schools -- not just Mercer Street, but otherwise. And, that's where we need statewide leadership in this space, so it's a recognized model that works efficiently, and that there is more money -- State money -- available to community school models and movements throughout the State of New Jersey.

And, Senator Turner, I was remiss in the beginning of my remarks by not thanking you for your tremendous support. We would not be able to meet our mission in Mercer County without the steadfast leadership and support that you have shown us over these many years. So, that is greatly appreciated.

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other questions from the Committee?

(no response)

Thank you.

And, I do want to say that it's remarkable -- I didn't realize that Trenton Schools wasn't contributing more. How much of your organization is privately funded is pretty remarkable.

Thank you all.

MR. FLYNN: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Last group who is going to testify on this topic before we go to the next bill -- Jennifer Marinello, Principal of an elementary school in Hamilton, on behalf of New Jersey Principals and Supervisors, with the NJ Education Association; and, Jonathan Pushman, Director of Government Relations with the New Jersey School Board Association.

All three or four of you can come up.

JENNIFER LAMON, J.D.: Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Madam Vice Chair, and members of the Committee.

My name is Jenny Lamon; I am the Assistant Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

I just want to briefly thank you for inviting this important discussion here today. Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that, as you heard, affects student learning, achievement, and overall school success. Principals and school leaders see firsthand these challenges that come with students missing too much instructional time. It's a problem that does persist across our state; but, it's one that our principals are actively working to address every day.

Today, we'd like to share some of the innovative and dedicated efforts being made at the school level to help combat this issue. To that end, we're fortunate to have with us here one of our members, Ms. Jennifer Marinello, who will discuss how her district is tackling chronic absenteeism head on and making a real difference for students and families. Ms. Marinello is an accomplished educator, with extensive experience in educational leadership and elementary education. She is a current member of the Board of Trustees for the Foundation for Educational Administration. She holds a bachelor's and a master's in Elementary Ed., as well as a master's in Educational Leadership. Ms. Marinello is currently the principal of Lalor Elementary School in Hamilton Township, serving 350 students. Since 2018, she has provided leadership around her school's mission and vision, leading to its recognition as a New Jersey School of Character in 2022. She has implemented a schoolwide Title I plan, and significantly reduced chronic absenteeism and helped to improve student performance.

With that, you don't want to hear anymore from me, and I will turn it over to our principal.

JENNIFER MARINELLO: Thank you.

Good morning, Senators Gopal, Turner, McKnight, Corrado, and Henry.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

My name is Jennnifer Marinello, and I am the proud Principal of Lalor Elementary School in Hamilton Township School District. I am honored to share the perspective of a school leader, and discuss the proactive strategies we've implemented across our district to address the

challenge of chronic absenteeism, highlighting the practices that have shown the most tangible results.

Chronic absenteeism affects more than just academic outcomes, it impacts the social and emotional well-being and long-term success of our students. At Lalor Elementary School, a diverse preschool-through-five Title I school serving 350 students -- including multi-lingual learners and students with exceptional needs -- we've seen the significant hurdles imposed by chronic absenteeism. However, through a combination of data-driven approaches, community partnerships, and proactive supports, we've seen positive change.

To address absenteeism, we closely monitor student attendance on a daily basis. We identify patterns and we intervene early. This includes outreach to families to understand barriers they may experience, whether they stem from transportation challenges, health concerns, or other factors. By working collaboratively, we connect families to resources that address these underlying issues.

We also prioritize fostering a sense of belonging within our school community. Relationships are at the core of our efforts between students, families, and staff. Students are more likely to attend school when they feel supported, valued, and connected. We've worked to strengthen these relationships through initiatives such as teacher check-ins; before- and after-school clubs; family engagement events; and professional development for our staff, to identify and address attendance concerns early on. Our inclusive school culture earned us the distinction of being recognized as a New Jersey School of Character in 2022.

In addition, our partnerships with community organizations have been transformative. For example, we've collaborated with the Hamilton Area YMCA; Rutgers University; and the Child Wellness Institute -- just to name a few -- to support our students and families who may struggle with anxiety, depression, or trauma, often times, which can be the root causes of chronic absenteeism. We help provide on-site support and resources, which have been critical in helping these students and their families navigate these challenges.

Recognizing and celebrating attendance is another key strategy. Positive reinforcement, such as certificates; incentives; and recognition for improved attendance emphasizes the importance of coming to school, and fosters a culture where students feel their contributions to our school community matter. Through these combined efforts, our school has achieved a 16% decrease in chronic absenteeism.

In the year 2020-'21, right after COVID, 27% of our students were chronically absent. And, now, we are at 11% -- currently; right now. I want to remind you that these data points represent individual students. So, on the student level, I have a second grader right now who has been only absent six days this year and is thriving. Yet, in their Kindergarten school year, they were absent 56 and a half days. While this progress is encouraging, it is clear that sustained support is essential to building on the success.

As a principal, I strongly advocate for State-level support to expand funding for mental health services in the community, and resources that empower our schools to address absenteeism holistically. Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue, but it is not insurmountable. By working

together -- schools, families, communities, and State leaders -- we can ensure every student feels valued, supported, and ready to attend school every single day.

Thank you to your time and your dedication to the students of New Jersey, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

If it's all right, we'll have everyone go and then open up to questions.

Fran.

FRANCINE PFEFFER: Hi, everybody; good morning.

Francine Pfeffer, New Jersey Education Association.

First of all, Chairman, I just want to thank you on behalf of your opening comments, on behalf of our members who are really concerned about the students they're teaching right now. Sorry, I am having a very hard time -- getting a little verklempt talking about it.

You've heard most of what I want to say about chronic absenteeism. It's a problem in our schools that we do need to address. ESSA did bring it -- did place attention; the Every Student Succeeds Act did place more attention on chronic absenteeism by making it a factor that we need to look at. But, you've heard all the reasons -- health issues; family problems; transportation; even parents' lack of awareness about it; bullying; academic struggles; financial stress; mental health challenges. As you get to high school, those things just continue to grow. There is also systemic inequities in schools. Discipline procedures can lead to chronic absenteeism as well.

On students, we know the problems are-- It affects their academic performance; it affects their social development; it affects their lifelong ability; because, as you said, Senator Turner, it makes more sense to put it in on the front end than on the back end, and if you are chronically absent, you are not going to do as well in school, and therefore you will not do as well in life. It has a big impact on the school community. It puts a burden on teachers and support professionals who work with students, because they have a lot of extra work to do to help catch up students. It can affect school funding, because if students are absent too much, that can affect the amount of funding a district can receive. And, the community can be disengaged.

As we try to solve and work on chronic absenteeism, one thing I would like to stress is that we cannot do broad stroke with legislation to say, "This is the fix." Because every school district is different. Even within a district, individual school buildings are different, and they need to come up with a model that works for them. But, providing wraparound services; giving families resources; creating community schools; training educators; addressing bullying; and, in high school, offering students mentorship; counseling; flexible scheduling; credit recovery -- all of those things can help schools work with chronic absenteeism.

We heard a lot about community schools earlier. They are a very strong way to help, because that engages the whole community. We need to strengthen our social safety net so that students and their families have the resources they need. We need to make sure we have the data to see who is chronically absent and who isn't. We need to improve family engagement; increasing student connections. We really need to use tiered

systems of support to address that. And, also, one thing that we sometimes don't think about is safe passage to schools. If students can't get to school safely, they might stay home. And, as students are absent, it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy for some of them. They become anxious about getting to school, and the work they missed, and so then they-- The problem compounds upon itself.

I wish I had been able to bring one of our members today, but they were not able to come speak, because they are busy working in a school. But, one other thing I do have to say is, although I know it's not the purpose of this hearing, I think we will see an increase in chronic absenteeism right now, because many students are feeling the stress if their families are undocumented; they do not want to go to school, and they are concerned about what might happen there.

So, thank you, and we look forward to working with you to help address this problem.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Jonathan.

JONATHAN PUSHMAN: Thank you, Chairman Gopal, fellow members of the Committee.

Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards Association.

First, thank you, Senator Turner, for calling for this hearing. It's a very important issue to us and to our members. We certainly appreciate the invitation to provide feedback on this critically important issue.

Stating the obvious, simply showing up consistently to school is critical to student achievement. And, it's important that we foster safe and

inclusive learning environments that make students truly want to come to school every day.

The State of New Jersey certainly values the importance of limiting absenteeism, as demonstrated by the fact that it chose chronic absenteeism as its indicator of school quality for Federal ESSA accountability purposes. And, in 2018 -- as many of you recall -- New Jersey passed a law that promotes low absenteeism rates, and directs schools to develop corrective action plans if more than 10% of its students are deemed chronically absent. So, they just can't ignore the problem; they must take steps to identify barriers to school attendance; develop recommendations to address those barriers; implement communication strategies to educate the community on the importance of attending school; and establish protocols for parent engagement when a student shows signs of becoming chronically absent.

Now, when staff invited us to speak today, we were asked if we could share some information on the resources local boards have available to them, and any issues they may have encountered when trying to implement different policies and strategies. So, when I started preparing, I found that there are indeed a lot of resources available to our members to assist them in their efforts to prevent and address chronic absenteeism. The State Department of Education has an entire website dedicated to this issue, entitled "Conditions for Learning: Promoting Regular Student Attendance and Addressing Chronic Absenteeism," and it contains a collection of resources and guidance that can be utilized to decrease absenteeism and promote regular attendance. They also have a resource known as the Database Decision-Making for Addressing Chronic

Absenteeism -- that's a roadmap for developing data-driven action plans to combat the challenges contributing to absenteeism. The Federal Department of Education also has a load of resources, highlighting model state attendance systems and ways to increase attendance. And, we've made it a priority to regularly disseminate these State and Federal resources to our membership.

As this is an area of importance to our association, a little over a year ago we published an article that I provided to the Committee this morning, in our magazine that focused on strategies for getting students back to school. And, we highlighted-- What we highlighted in that article is that, as schools started to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, many were finding that chronic absenteeism rates remain stubbornly high. But, that was not the case in all districts. This report identified its school leaders who have achieved positive results, and gave them an opportunity to share the secrets of their success. I will refer you to that article and encourage you to read about some of these success stories.

In summary, those districts deployed a variety of strategies. And, as Fran mentioned, there is no one-size-fits-all approach; they really have to come at this in a number of different ways, depending on their individual circumstances where they're of the student or the community. Many use data-driven results; someone they identify as an at-risk student, and he or she would be assigned what they refer to as an "attendance buddy," which could be a counselor, a teacher, parent, or caseworker, who could provide a more personal, targeted touch. Some focused on what are referred to as "high absenteeism days." So, we know there are a lot of-- There are certain days of the year where attendance is low. It could be

Halloween; the day before Thanksgiving; Fridays are high absentee days. So, they made extra efforts on those particular days to stress the importance of attendance.

Others -- as our principal mentioned -- use an incentive-based approach. There was one school district that it had a program where students wanted to get their yearbooks early. Everybody wants to get their hands on that as soon as possible; they say, "If you want to get it early, you have to have perfect attendance for the week or two prior to that." So, just different creative things like that that establish some incentives. This does require a team effort, so many school districts have established attendance review committees or problem-solving teams. One district I know had a competition set up between schools within that district -- it was kind of like a March Madness tournament bracket. And, so, they competed against one another; whoever in the end won there was some kind of prize at the end.

Communication is incredibly valuable. You do need that personal outreach to parents and students or their guardians. In places with a high number of non-English speaking families, districts would create resources like videos or text messages in the students' native languages, so families could understand better the importance of regular attendance.

Transportation support -- very important. Sometimes you had to improve bus service and routes. Even some instances, there were districts that would use Lyft or Uber to go and pick up a student, bring them to or from school.

Wraparound services-- We've heard a lot today, things like community schools having meals during extended-day programs; providing daycare for children of families with young siblings, or sometimes children

of their own, so that they can focus on their education while getting some of that additional support from the school or community.

So, this is just some of the examples. And, some of those solutions, you can imagine, are going to be more costly and complicated than others. They certainly encounter challenges in trying to reduce chronic absenteeism; it really depends on what the root cause of why students are missing school. So, in some instances, they really need to develop those targeted supports to address those reasons. They just may lack the resources to do so.

For instance, as the Chairman has really highlighted throughout his time leading this Committee, mental and behavioral health issues are major factors in students' education, and could be leading to low attendance. So, that requires trained professionals in the school to support students with those issues, but it's no secret we're suffering from acute staffing shortages -- particularly for school-based mental health professionals. Transportation is that obstacle; older students may need to take care of younger siblings. Adding routes is a great option, but it comes with a price -- and, not to mention, we have a severe school bus driver shortage. Culture and climate -- obviously, addressing that; is it a safety issue of getting to and from school? Bullying. HIV could be leading students to not want to come to school. And, then, academic struggles -- and, that has a snowball effect; if they're not doing well in school, they're going to be discouraged from coming regularly.

So, I just wanted to share some of those stories. This is an issue that is of importance to us. We are obviously happy to answer any questions you may have, Chairman.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Hi; thank you so much.

And, I want to thank everyone for being here.

And, for the record, my district, Jersey City, we have five community schools, and they're all doing phenomenal, and they are working to help address chronic absenteeism.

So, two things that I want to add to possible root causes of chronic absenteeism. And, I didn't-- I didn't hear it during the testimonies that I've heard today.

One is adding telehealth. Because, there are many students who have chronic illnesses, so that could be one reason why they're not coming to school. So, we can implement telehealth so that they can get the services that they need to help them grow, to be able to come to school, or bring teachers into their homes so that they can still receive an education.

And, then, Number 2, I didn't hear-- Some students -- and, this is for older children -- they're probably bored. School is probably not engaging to them. The lessons may be easy. So, why am I going to go to school, and sit there for five, six hours, and be bored, when I can be home, on my cellphone, or doing something that's more engaging? So, I would love for us to look at the lessons that we're teaching our children, and maybe have our children sit at a podium and talk to them and see if that is one of the causes of why they are not coming to school, especially the older children. Because, if I'm bored, I don't want to be there. I'm not. You can say whatever you want to say; I'm not going, because it's not engaging.

So, I would love for these two items to be added to possible root causes of why we have some chronic absenteeism.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator Turner.

SENATOR TURNER: Yes, thank you all for being here today.

We've heard some great testimony.

Have you ever used remote learning for those students who cannot be in the classroom, and are absent because of some debilitating health issue and cannot be there? Is there anything that you can do to provide them with learning while they're at home recovering?

And, also, because of the weather-- We know the weather now is getting worse, in terms of snow, and schools being closed. Are you doing anything to provide remote learning for those students?

SENATOR GOPAL: For the principal, right?

I think this is for you--

MS. MARINELLO: I'm happy to address that.

So, if students are going to be out for an extended amount of time, the district is required to provide home instruction. So, that means a certified teacher goes to the home at a time that's mutually agreed upon, and they provide instruction right there in the home.

Regarding inclement weather days, there are patterns with inclement weather, even if it's a rainy day. We are a walking school at Lalor, so we just try our best to work with families. And, we use ClassDojo as a way to communicate with all of our families; it does translate, and we just put reminders out there, "School is open." Thankfully, we have not

had a snow day *yet*, because the snow day fell on Martin Luther King Day, so we were already home.

But, in the event that we have a delayed opening, we really just try to get the message out there to our families that we are open, and please come to school.

SENATOR TURNER: And, I understand that when it's inclement weather, you have a higher number of students who are absent. That may be the case in the urban areas more so than in suburban areas, because the kids in the urban areas, they have to walk to school. And, if it's raining, there's a higher number who are absent.

And, also, I find, too, that you have excused absences and unexcused. Now, the problem with that is, if you are excused from being absent, you bring in a doctor's note. But, an unexcused, you don't have a doctor, and if the student is out because of illness, they may be on Medicaid, and they can't get a doctor's note, or they may not have any insurance at all, so they don't go to the doctor.

So, how do you distinguish between the excused and the unexcused?

MS. MARINELLO: So, both of those count towards a student's chronic absenteeism rate, whether it's excused or unexcused. So, we ask our families to let us know and stay in touch with us regarding whether the student is visiting the dentist, or if they're sick, just so we can monitor the health and well-being of our students and staff. But, under the law right now, they both count towards a missed school day, as an absence, and it counts towards chronic absenteeism.

SENATOR TURNER: OK, if they're unexcused, do they get the same opportunities in terms of making up the work that they missed?

MS. MARINELLO: Correct; yes.

SENATOR TURNER: OK.

MS. MARINELLO: And, we really work together as a team. So, if students are sick and maybe the parents send a message to the teacher, the teacher records that in our student information system, communicates that with the nurse; the nurse will follow up with the family, check in -- you know, has the child been to the doctor? How are they feeling? And, when they can return?

SENATOR TURNER: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Chairman, thank you.

Briefly -- I'm sorry, this is for Principal Marinello as well.

Reasons for absenteeism before COVID and after COVID -- are they basically the same reasons that you're seeing the absenteeism? Or, have they changed?

MS. MARINELLO: So, I started as a principal right at the start of COVID.

(laughter)

MS. MARINELLO: However, I was a teacher for many years before.

But, I don't really know the answer to that. I really don't. But, I know why they're absent now, and it really is a range of reasons that have already been mentioned.

SENATOR CORRADO: And, just out of curiosity, are you-- I know we talked a lot about kids in lower grade levels, and we're talking about K-3 and K-5, and even up to eighth grade.

I'm curious, as we move forward, as we've talked about taking cellphones out of the schools, if maybe that will help, too, with absenteeism as we move forward, with maybe some of the mental health issues. And, some of the focusing on the classroom as we move forward in the future. If maybe that will be some of the-- We'll see positive effects from that, going down the road.

Hopefully, that will work hand in hand.

MS. MARINELLO: Possibly. I think there's a range of issues that have to be navigated through, but I think we all could agree that there is an overuse of technology -- myself being guilty of that at times.

(laughter)

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: All of us.

MS. MARINELLO: But, I know there is conversation -- at least where my children attend school -- about banning cellphones at the high school level. The elementary level, students don't bring their-- I have a few students who bring their cellphones to school, mainly because they're walking home, and they've been very responsible in putting them in their backpack. And, usually, it's just a simple conversation, and then they follow along with what the expectations are.

SENATOR CORRADO: Given the unfortunate impact on the mental health on our young students, and the negative effects that it's had -- that we know, now, the impact it's having. And, hopefully that'll help moving forward.

MS. MARINELLO: Yes.

SENATOR CORRADO: But, thank you all for what you do. We appreciate it, and we appreciate you being here.

MS. MARINELLO: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes; thank you again for coming.

I'm just going to bang home the concept that we need to hold these districts accountable, Senators. They're being paid for a service; we are paying them to educate these students. They cannot provide that service if these students are not in school.

So, funding shouldn't be an issue. That money that's being paid to that district, to provide that service, should now be diverted or moved to that student to get them into the schools. So, I don't believe funding is an issue.

I believe it's just a matter of people giving-- It's almost like they're getting rewarded if the students don't go to school. They're getting the same amount of money to educate. And, especially some of these districts with a high rate of absenteeism. What's the highest rate that we have on absenteeism? Absenteeism in some of our state -- is it 20%? Twenty-five percent? That means that district is getting paid to educate 25% of their student body and not having to provide that service. To me, it's just unacceptable. Give them the money; make sure they put it in the right place, where it belongs, Senator.

I look forward to working with you on a bill that holds these districts accountable, and the people who run these districts -- that they put

the money where their mouth is. The money should follow that student, whether he's in the classroom or outside the classroom, and every effort should be made to get him -- that child -- in front of an instructor, whether it be home, or whether it be in the classroom.

But, I think it's almost like a theft of services, that these districts are being allowed to do. And, we're allowing them to do it.

So, thank you.

Thank you everyone for coming out today.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, all.

I was starting off by being critical and concerned about some of President Trump's executive orders. But, one I was very happy to see was bringing Federal employees back five days a week, so I'm hopeful that the next Governor brings State employees back -- whatever party they are -- because I know all of our teachers and our police officers and everyone else are in five days a week, and I think that's extremely important.

But, thank you all for coming and being here.

That concludes this testimony. We're going to move now to S3917.

MS. BASTELICA: Senate Bill Number 3917 makes various changes to school funding law; modifies the method of determining tax levy growth limitation for school districts; revises components of Educational Adequacy Report.

There are Committee amendments in your packet that remove sections of the bill that would have amended the School District General Fund tax levy cap; remove changes to the eligibility thresholds for extraordinary special education aid; broadly stipulate that the amount of

extraordinary special education aid is to increase in each year instead of prescribing a schedule for increasing aid; establish the Special Education Funding Review Task Force; and shift responsibility for exploring the feasibility of implementing a tiered system of funding extraordinary special education from the Educational Adequacy Report to the task force.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

A couple, just, highlights of the bill.

Our goal is to increase the State's school funding transparency and predictability; decrease unexpected volatile swings year to year -- I always use my example of my hometown of Long Branch that gained \$600,000 and the next year lost \$10 million. That's a \$10.6 million swing in a year, and just a handful of weeks to try to make that up.

So, the bill will require that we publish online detailed aid calculation information to improve transparency and understanding. Every teacher, every parent, should have that understanding -- every taxpayer should. And, most importantly, every district.

The bill's State aid reduction cap and municipal overburden protections will prevent State aid cuts to go beyond a district's ability to adjust locally. Extraordinary special education aid provides State support for what are often significantly highly variable and unpredictable costs that districts face. The bill's mandatory annual increase in State funding for that aid, as we continue to move towards the State taking over 100% of extraordinary special education costs, will be -- would be -- a gamechanger for a lot of districts, including in Monmouth and Ocean counties.

The bill's change to vocational expansion stabilization aid will provide county vo-tech schools with a mechanism through which they can

obtain State school funding, in line with the increase that is available to county vocational school district seats, as supported through the Securing Our Children's Future Bond Act. The bill changes the Education Adequacy Report and approval process to improve the report's usefulness and accuracy and advising the appropriate and accurate school aid calculations.

The bill would also lay the foundation for studying how to address additional concerns that have been raised regarding New Jersey school funding policies, such as the calculation for local fair share, including the possibility of using a multi-year indicator, which could smooth out year-to-year impacts from drastic changes in income or property values, and better match the multi-year indicator used to calculate enrollment values within the formula.

And, lastly, the bill's Special Education Funding Review Task Force will specifically examine that category of aid and make recommendations regarding the implementation of a tier-based funding model.

We have gone through all of this in detail. There were other things in this bill that were removed. Our goal is to try to get something done that helps districts plan better. Also know that their cuts are capped at 2% of their total budget, so they know what their worst-end scenario can be, so there's no surprises. And, also, give them more of a calendar timeline so they can prepare their budget and not just be in panic the week after the Governor introduces those budget numbers.

So, we will start with-- Governor McGreevey is our first person to testify.

G O V E R N O R J A M E S E. M c G R E E V E Y: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairwoman Turner, members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you very much.

And, thank you to Chairman Gopal and all the members of the Committee for their hard work and dedication to address this legislation.

And, Senator, I'll leave my comments, so I'll try to abbreviate them in the interest of time, and the hectic schedule that you have before us today.

I went through a somewhat painful analysis of "thorough and efficient." I'll save you the excruciating process of listening to all of that. But, if I can just tersely mention that it's obviously-- We're also aware of the fact that Abbott contained a facilities funding component of the State's responsibility to children. I recognize that's not the issue before the Committee today, but we also recognize that the School Development Authority -- the SDA -- is woefully underfunded.

What I wanted to particularly focus upon is that the Legislature's express intent was to make sure that all children have the opportunity of education. Our school districts must be assured, as you said, Senator, for the financial support necessary to provide those constitutionally-compelled education standards.

And, I'll save the back-and-forth in the courthouse to the SFRA as constitutional -- and Judge LaVecchia has actually comments that the court -- based upon the record before them -- took it on faith and trusted that the State acknowledged that it had a continued obligation to the Abbott districts, and there would be a thorough review of the formula's

weights. And, that the Legislature would take all steps necessary to keep the SFRA operating at an optimal level.

But, the point that I think -- what we need to understand is -- instead of meeting the requirements of Abbott, the courts require a showing of educational failure to show that the constitutional requirements are not being met. The current Judicial standard that sets the bar for the finding of a State failure to provide T&E is to show that the State funding formula so undermines the ability of the district to discharge its legal obligations, that educational failures will be result. Nowhere did the New Jersey Supreme Court or the Legislature set educational failure, per se, as the constitutional definition of T&E. But, that is the present reality.

The problems of the present SFRA formula is that stale data from the Education Adequacy Report from the Department of Education has not been comprehensively reviewed in the past 15 years. Secondly, the ability to pay is based on stale and often unpredictable community equalized data, property wealth, and income from the Department of Treasury, based on, all too often, disjointed, non-uniform property tax system. And, that this State aid -- as you just said, Mr. Chairman -- amounts to the Governor and the Legislature to decide it is available for the annual budget, but is only funded for one year -- this past year. In other words, the dilemma is that there is little resemblance to reality; often there is unpredictability; and, the outside budgetary factors can result in havoc to the respective district.

If I can look at Jersey City, per se -- as of 2018, the Jersey City public schools served one of the most diverse student populations in the state. These children deserve the opportunities that all children throughout

the state would be entitled to. But, what we understand is that no one size fits all. Respectfully, I am asking for the reinstating of the adequacy formula. The State must restore adjustment aid and provide a similar mechanism to close the adequacy gap, and to meet the constitutional standards set forth.

Second, as to modernizing infrastructure, the State must meet its facilities obligations. And, again, respectfully, Chairman, I understand that's not the focus of today's hearing. But, to ease the burden on operating budgets that divert from educational funding to support maintained in antiquated facilities. In Jersey City, 26 buildings are over 80 years old, and 13 buildings are over 100 years old. Immediate capital investment is required to provide safe, functional learning environments. But, the State has, unfortunately, never met this requirement. And, as my dear friend Senator knows, that significant funding is necessary to support these students' special educational programs and multi-lingual family engagement -- as mandated by State and Federal law.

The Supreme Court has rightly emphasized that depriving students of adequate funding is not only a minor infringement, but a substantial impairment to the constitutional right to education.

I urge this Committee not only to be mindful of the educational equity and the imbalance that has been created over these past years, and the inability for school districts to respond quickly and thoughtfully to fluctuations in State aid, but to be acutely aware of the challenges posed by capital investments, and how, all too often, school districts -- particularly those older school districts -- are removing needed funds from the classroom to address structural problems that are acute, particularly in Jersey City.

Thank you, Chairman, and I'll submit my testimony to the Committee.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Governor.

Any questions, comments from the Committee?

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes, I would like to-- Thank you, Governor--

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: And, I just want to say, Senator, I want to congratulate him, because the last time I was with the Senator, I was at Royal Alberts at a great Indian festival. And, I'll just say that the good Senator -- the good Senator ate all of his food without the addition of yogurt.

SENATOR HENRY: And, you snuck out, Governor.

(laughter)

But, thank you.

No, Governor, I just wanted to know if you reviewed the latest version of the bill that we're discussing right now. I just got it; the ink is wet.

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: Yes, I just saw it, but I-- I have a small committee, which I will review with it.

Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR HENRY: So, it's difficult to really comment on something that we haven't -- we just got five minutes ago.

And, also, you thanked us for all our hard work. You sat down and said, "Thank you." But, are you aware that certain members of this

Committee were not even involved? Not even asked for a comment?
Didn't even get asked to review what was going on?

And, you've been around a long time, Governor. Do you believe that's any way to operate? That we sit here, and not even contribute -- or asked to contribute -- to a bill that's so important. And, you know how important school funding is here in the State of New Jersey.

I take it as a-- I don't know what to take it as, a compliment? Maybe they don't want my input? They don't want to hear what I have to say?

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator Henry, respectfully, we had a three-hour hearing; I haven't heard from you since that hearing.

SENATOR HENRY: But, it's changed, so--

SENATOR GOPAL: It's changing. We took two things out.

SENATOR HENRY: But, again, Senator--

SENATOR GOPAL: We had a three-hour hearing, I heard--

SENATOR HENRY: No disrespect--

SENATOR GOPAL: Well, a little disrespect.

We had a three-hour hearing. You could have called me at any point. I've heard from *many* of your colleagues on your side of the aisle.

SENATOR HENRY: Governor, thank you for being here. I appreciate it.

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: Oh, thank you.

And, thank you to the Chairman.

And, I just always find Senator Gopal very easy to access. But, you do have to travel to his district.

But, anyway, I think what's important is what you're trying to do today, and I'm just -- again, Senator, if I can just point to the need to cushion, as you said, the fluctuations in State aid.

And, if I can -- again, as to the SFRA formula, the stale data from the Educational Adequacy Report -- the ability to pay is based on unpredictable community equalized data, and the fluctuations in State aid. And, when you look to Jersey City, specifically, you see that the numbers speak for themselves in terms of the impact of cuts across the board that Jersey City -- as Senator McKnight well knows -- when you go back to 2018 with the Jersey City public school was educating approximately 2,800 students, and they were already operating at a \$172 million below adequacy, even with \$114 million in adjustment aid.

And, so, the concern is that, despite the growing need, the district's funding was slashed yearly -- culminating in 100% elimination of adjustment aid in the '24-'25 school aid. And, so, respectfully, considering the demographics, we just ask as a path forward to restore the adjustment aid and provide a similar mechanism to close the adequacy gap.

Second, beware of modernizing infrastructure. And, third, be aware of the diverse needs of students within such districts such as Jersey City.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Governor.

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other questions or comments from the Committee?

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: Thank you very much, Committee members.

And, my old friend, Senator Turner.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator McKnight is your only potential constituent here, so--

(laughter)

GOVERNOR MCGREEVEY: Well said.

SENATOR GOPAL: Let's bring up Deb Bradley, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors -- in favor; would like to testify. And, Althea Ford, NJBIA, would like to seek some amendments.

DEBRA BRADLEY, J.D.: Good morning, Mr. Chair, and members of the Committee.

I am Debbie Bradley; Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

The funding of our public schools has never been more important, as this is a time of uncertainty, rising costs, growing student needs, and threats to Federal funding sources.

We'd like to start by thanking you, Senator Gopal, for starting this important conversation -- at the very inception of your chairmanship of this important committee. We appreciate your leadership and willingness to explore all aspects of the distribution of formula aid, and the taboo subject of tax cap relief.

We also wish to thank the members of this Committee for your support of fairer funding efforts across the State.

We represent school leaders in every type of school district under our formula, so we seek funding relief that best meets the needs of all types of school districts and all types of students. In December, we supported an earlier bill addressing school funding that contained

provisions to update the formula through a more transparent Educational Adequacy Report process. It also addressed the volatility of State aid by including alternate approaches to the calculation of local fair share requirements. It provided phased-in funding enhancements for extraordinary special ed. costs, and it sought to provide more flexibility in the current 2% tax levy cap barrier that limits a district's ability to meet their local fair share.

These are all valid and important issues, and the prior bill contained proposals which would have helped many districts face their budgetary challenges in new ways. We continue to seek and support a legislative resolution of these issues, and continued conversations about them.

But, today's amended legislation doesn't address all those issues. But, it does move the needle forward in several areas, and we support these proposals. First, it incorporates related legislation -- which we've supported in the past -- that creates a Special Ed. Review Task Force to address one of the major funding challenges faced by all school districts. We support an in-depth review of our current census-based funding approach for special education, as well as an in-depth comparison between our current funding system and one based on specific disability categories, and the level and type of services we provide. S3917 provides that mechanism.

Second, we support the amendments which continue to include stakeholder involvement in the development and updating of the EAR, and more transparency in that process.

Third, we support the provisions concerning vocational expansion.

And, lastly, the most important provision -- in our view -- is that contained in the paragraph which limits a district's State aid loss to 2% of their pre-budget year's total operating budget. This concept, this provision, is critically important -- particularly since the bill is no longer addressing formula volatility in the calculation of local fair share. In order to ensure that this provision is most effective for the largest number of districts, we do recommend that additional language be considered to limit a district's losses to *either* of 2% of the prior year's total operating budget, or 2% of their State aid amount -- whichever is more beneficial to the district. Our reasoning is that larger districts with multi-million dollar budgets could still face deep losses due to the large size of their total operating budget, whereas smaller districts may have a greater proportional loss. We think it would be helpful to look at the numbers so everyone can understand the benefits of this section of the legislation as the bill proceeds to the appropriations process.

In closing, we appreciate your efforts, Chairman, and we appreciate the efforts of Legislative staff to work with us. And, we look forward to further conversation.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

And, I'll say, it came up in the hearing quite a bit -- and, I have a feeling many of your stakeholder organizations are going to come up -- but I have -- there was a lot of concern from my friends on the other side of the aisle, and a lot in for the ability for local school districts to increase local

taxes at any percentage. So, there's just -- and, I know everyone is going to come asking for the same thing, but there's just not any appetite, politically, from leadership at this moment to have that in the bill.

MS. BRADLEY: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: So, that was taken out.

MS. BRADLEY: OK.

SENATOR GOPAL: Althea.

A L T H E A D. F O R D: Hi there, Chairman Gopal, members of the Senate Education Committee.

I am Althea Ford; Vice President of Government Affairs for the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

On behalf of our members who make NJBIA the largest, most impactful association representing job creators in New Jersey, we support S3917 with the Committee amendments to remove the language, "With costly tax implications."

We thank Chairman Gopal for his leadership on this issue, and for introducing legislation to address the juggernaut that is New Jersey's school funding model.

Affordability is crucial. NJBIA is supportive of investments in school funding, as the K-12 system is part of our state's economic and workforce development pipeline, sharing -- excuse me -- shaping the next generation of employees, entrepreneurs, and job creators. Equally, as an association representing our state's job creators, and a significant percentage of its taxpayers, we remain concerned about any funding model that overburdens taxpayers.

We thank Chairman Gopal for introducing the amendments to remove sections two and three of the bill, which included the language that sought to alter the current tax levy model. The State must be more intentional about addressing one of the key cost drivers that contributes to unaffordability in our state property taxes. Until assessment and reforms are made, the 2% cap must remain in place to safeguard against excessive tax increases, even for the most laudable of causes.

We thank Chairman Gopal for the bill's proposal to engage stakeholders to review the feasibility of multi-year averages to calculate local fair share methods to improve preschool funding and adjustments to deadlines concerning the school budget process.

Again, we support the bill as amended to remove the language "with costly tax implications," as well as to establish the Special Education Funding Review Task Force.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak, and thank you again for your work -- diligent work -- on this critical issue.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, both.

Any questions from the Committee? (no response)

Thank you.

Next, let's bring up Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards Association; and, Michael Vrancik, New Jersey School of Business Officials.

MR. PUSHMAN: Good morning Chairman, fellow members of the Committee.

Again, Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards Association.

I'll begin by saying that we understand that this is an ongoing discussion; today is just the first of many steps in the Legislative process of getting some reforms to our system of funding schools across the finish line.

We greatly appreciate the time, energy, and attention you and your staff have given this critical issue. And, we know this will likely not be the final product, and that this is a collaborative effort that will hopefully achieve positive outcome when all is said and done.

So, on the bill, there's really nothing within the four corners of the legislation that gives us serious pause, or presents any significant concerns. But, I'll touch on some of the things we like, while spotlighting some ways we believe the bill could be strengthened.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

First, we support that new provision that would create a task force to study special education funding. As you well know, special ed. is a significant driver of district spending, and can often drive deep holes in district budgets and crowd out other important priorities. The issue requires a deep dive so that we can collectively develop recommendations so that funding for special education more accurately reflects district costs and helps them address students' individual needs.

We appreciate that we -- our association -- will be one of the stakeholders included in this task force, so that we can bring the Board perspective to its deliberations.

I stated when we testified on this bill in December we also support various other aspects of the bills that have been maintained, such as how it promotes a higher level of predictability and transparency around the formula, so that districts can better understand how and why their state aid

figures are what they are. In addition to the new task force provision, the bill also highlights the need for greater state support to offset districts -- the cost districts incur in providing services to their most vulnerable students by pushing for increased reimbursements for extraordinary special education aid. Now, although this is something that will have to be prioritized by the Governor and Legislature in every budget cycle moving forward, we have fallen far behind in meeting the existing obligation under current law, so any legislation that attempts to put us on a glide path to eventually meeting that obligation, will have to be matched with a commitment to actually funding it and keeping up with the increased cost of special education.

We seek to mitigate-- It seeks to mitigate large decreases in year-over-year state aid amounts by placing some guardrails around how much a district can lose from one year to the next. This new reduction adjustment aid is an important protection that can prevent draconian cuts in critical programming, services, and staff. But, one thing we urge this body to further explore is whether it goes far enough to mitigate the potential for deep state aid cuts. As the bill stands now, those losses will be kept at 2% of a district's total operating budget, so I think what we need to explore is whether linking the reduction cap to a district's operating budget -- as opposed to say, something like its prior year state aid -- is sufficient to provide districts with predictability and stability they need.

Two percent of an operating budget can be a pretty big number in some districts, so the cap in this bill may not provide them with meaningful relief. We appreciate the attempt to protect districts, so let's just make sure we get it right in the end.

Provisions that would direct the DOE to engage stakeholders in the next Educational Adequacy Report are positive, and it will require them to look at how a district's local share is calculated -- whether the metrics that we currently use are appropriate in calculating their ability to pay. We really want to take a dive into whether we should move to those multi-year averages of income and property values when calculating local fair share and try to smooth out large fluctuations in state aid allocations. And, what really needs closer scrutiny is that budget development calendar, which, as you know, really puts a squeeze on districts from the timing and planning standpoint, especially when their aid amounts come in lower than they anticipated. And, taking a look at whether we should be using inflationary measures other than CPI really acknowledges that some things -- some costs -- rise faster than others; namely things like transportation and special education.

We'd have to point out that the next Educational Adequacy Report is coming out very soon -- probably before the next budget -- Governor's Budget Address, and almost certainly before this or any other SFRA reform legislation reaches his desk. So, after that, it's not going -- another report won't come out for another three years. And, we really hope that these issues will be thoroughly examined, and that recommendations will be developed much sooner than that.

So, another approach could be to convene a task force that examines these issues and makes recommendations under a much shorter timeframe. And, Chairman, as you know, you've been sponsoring legislation for a couple of sessions that would establish just that.

So, there is plenty in this bill that encourages us and puts us on a pathway to more comprehensive reform and modernization of the school funding formula. However, as the Chairman alluded to, we do need to address the issue that was discussed at length -- property tax cap flexibility. As introduced, the bill would have provided districts with the ability to exceed the 2% cap -- up to a certain amount -- in order to reach their local fair share. And, which is basically what the State is telling them -- they should be raising locally to support their schools. Now, that that provision is being amended out of the bill, we're not naïve and understand that this is politically a contentious issue. However, there's this tool that we know several districts want -- in many instances, *need* -- to maintain high-quality educational programs. And, many of them could take advantage of such flexibility without placing a significant burden on their local taxpayers. This Legislature took a bold step last year and provided districts that had suffered deep cuts under S2 with authority to exceed the cap -- again, only up to a certain extent, and only for the current fiscal year. We were hopeful that the Legislature would provide permanent relief and flexibility. Importantly, it would only be permissive -- no district would ever be forced to exceed the cap, and any that do so would remain accountable to voters.

Moving forward, I hope the Legislature will reconsider this issue and empower districts.

And, I'll end by stressing that this discussion has to continue in earnest. We're less than a month away from the Governor's Budget Address, shortly after which, districts will receive their State aid notices. In the last two years, those figures have triggered chaos and uncertainty across the state. And, that's not a process that any of us want to repeat every

single year, so let's continue to amend them towards true reform that will bring transparency, predictability, and equity to our funding system.

Thank you for your time.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Jonathan.

And, I agree with you. I think School Board members should have that -- they're elected, and they should have that responsibility and accountability. But, in the sense of compromise, that was taken out.

MR. PUSHMAN: Understood.

MICHAEL VRANCIK: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to thank the members of the Committee for considering this legislation.

For the record, we support the previous version. I understand, as John has just so eloquently said, that some things aren't going to happen as quickly as others.

We support the legislation that you've put forward today. One key thing: We'd like to be added as an association to the list of groups that are on the Special Education Funding Review Commission.

But, I agree with just about everything everybody has already said. I think the most important thing would be to re-up your SFRA Review Commission. And, I think the key thing here is to really focus on the relationship of the availability of State funds, and what that means for local spending. That's the tension that exists every year, and somehow we need to take a look at all the factors that contribute to that, from the State side and the local side, and proceed thoroughly to amend the SFRA law.

And, I thank you for having this discussion and keeping it ongoing. And, we support the legislation.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Any questions from the Committee? (no response)

Thank you, both.

Next up, let's bring Tony Trongone, Great Schools of New Jersey -- in favor, would like to testify; and, Julie Borst, Save Our Schools -- in favor, would like to testify.

Come on up.

JULIE LARREA BORST: Good morning, members of the Committee -- at least I think it's still morning.

I think I have a different message, because my colleagues from the professional organizations are going to get down into the nitty gritty of what needs to happen.

As a special ed. parent, I will tell you the special ed. formula really needs to be revisited. And, I think it's largely not well understood. So, I'll share some testimony that I provided to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools last week to you, separately.

My message today I want to be a little bit more broad. I think we are all really concerned about the Federal cuts that are likely to be coming, and the fact that New Jersey did not fully fund their schools for nearly 16 years, since the inception of SFRA has left pretty much every district in this state in a less resilient place than they would have been, had those funds been in schools.

And, so, my message to you is whatever it is that you're going to do, you need to settle this and do it. We need to make sure that school districts are not taking multi-million dollar cuts this year. I think there was

a choice last year. I understand it's great to say we fully funded SFRA; it was not great to have so many districts have such huge cuts. And, all this means at the end of the day is that the kids are not getting the education that they deserve in this state.

With Federal funding cuts that are likely to come with titles -- IDA, whatever the competitive grants have been; a lot of those have been in mental health -- New Jersey has got at least a couple of those that would beef up our mental health folks. If we're going to lose that, I am begging you, *please* think about it in terms of what the state is going to do to make sure we still have great public schools if that funding goes away.

That's my message today.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Julie.

Tony.

ANTHONY TRONGONE: Yes, thank you Senator Gopal, Senator Turner, and members of the Senate Education Committee, for this opportunity to allow testimony on Senate Bill 3917.

I am Tony Trongone, Executive Director of Great Schools of New Jersey. I am a past President of NJASA; current New Jersey Commissioner for Military-Connected Children; and, a retired Superintendent of Schools.

Great Schools of New Jersey is an association of high-needs school districts dedicated to fostering discussion and advocating for quality education for high-needs students. Our membership includes superintendents from these districts, and associate members committed to ensuring educational excellence in our state.

In my opinion, New Jersey has the most equitable school funding formula in the country. However, like any policy that serves its constituents, it must evolve to remain relevant. Since the formula's inception in 2008, the demands placed on public education have grown significantly. Expectations for student learning have expanded and the need for services in areas such as special ed.; technology; mental health; school security; and career and technical education has increased dramatically.

Updating the formula to reflect these realities requires time, expertise, and commitment. Senate Bill 3917 represents another necessary step in refining school funding policy to meet the needs of districts in the '25-'26 school year and beyond. Great Schools of New Jersey supports the provisions in Senate Bill 3917. We support mitigating the volatility in determining a district's local fair share while ensuring transparency in how it is calculated. We support the need to have a special ed. task force, but also replacing the census-based approach to a special education funding with a methodology that ties cost to the actual services required for each classification.

We support a more comprehensive review of the EAR -- the Educational Adequacy Report. That includes input from local and national experts, rather than relying solely on various inflation indices. We support fully funding extraordinary special education costs, and we support greater transparency in how the SFRA formula determines State aid, ensuring the Department of Education makes these calculations publicly accessible.

As far as urgent actions that are needed right now, with State aid notices set to be issued in February, it is critical that the following provisions that are in Bill S3918 are in place. They are following: The

implementation of the tax code of limitations necessary to maintain the outstanding instructional programs. Because-- I'm going to go off script here and say over the years as a superintendent, I've had to take money from my instructional programs. They'd been deleted, as Julie noted. We tried to maintain these programs, but it's shrinking where people-- When I'm in a cabinet meeting in my district, they're saying, "Tony, there's no meat; there's just bone." But, we're still maintaining our programs.

Maintaining municipal overburden protections for districts with tax rates above the state average, as listed in the bill.

And, most importantly, we strongly support the amendment that places a cap on State reductions as a percentage of the district's total operating budget. This will help mitigate the volatility that has caused chaos over the past two budget cycles.

Again, this bill must be enacted before the Governor's Fiscal Year Budget Address, to prevent yet another tumultuous budget season for school districts. Additionally, school districts must prepare for potential reductions in Federal funding, and shifts in its allowable usages. So, I'll go off script there -- nobody knows what's going to happen Federally, but we know there's going to be reductions, and then the money is going to be shifted to another use, so that reductions and what we're currently providing our students -- students who have been marginalized; students who maybe do not come to school all the time, but they need those supports that are built through the Title I program -- they'll be cut. So, it'll be-- We'll be heavily impacted.

Again, thank you, Senator Gopal, for leading this effort. We've had a group of people -- if you've noticed -- various education groups that

have been talking about mitigating these drastic cuts in volatility, especially like you had mentioned Long Branch. One year they're getting \$600,000; next year they're losing \$10 million. So, to have these guardrails in place until we can get a better handle on the SFRA, is a great idea, and I admire your commitment and effort in this area. Educators across the state appreciate your commitment to meeting the growing needs of our students.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Superintendent.

Thanks for all your help on this bill -- to you and the other stakeholders.

Any questions from any of the Committee members? (no response)

Thank you, both.

I'm going to bring up the last group of four together. In the interest of time, all are in favor: Jackie Burke, New Jersey Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools; Elizabeth Ginsburg, Garden State Coalition of Schools; Danielle Farrie, Education Law Center; and, Fran, with NJEA.

Come on up.

While they're coming up, just two notes: S3982 is going to be held, at the request of the sponsor; Senator Ruiz's bill S3982 is going to be held.

And, I neglected to mention that the Department of Education has submitted testimony on the chronic absenteeism. Sorry for not mentioning that earlier; that's in everyone's packets.

Go ahead.

JACQUELINE BURKE, J.D.: Good morning.

Jackie Burke; Executive Director at the Council of County Vocational and Technical Schools.

I'll be very brief; I'm not going to reread my testimony from last time that we were here.

I just want to say thank you to the sponsor, Senator Gopal, for including the provision in the bill that would provide a small amount of money for vocational-technical school districts as they increase their enrollment and expansion to fulfill the mandate of the Securing Our Children's Future Bond Act.

So, thank you, and we look forward to moving this bill.

ELIZABETH GINSBURG: Good morning, Senator Gopal, Vice Chairman Turner, and members of the Committee.

I am Betsy Ginsburg, from the Garden State Coalition of Schools.

I will keep it brief; I will echo many of the things that my colleagues have stated so eloquently about the overall provisions of the bill.

We are in support of S3917 overall. Because special education has been -- and, extraordinary aid -- has been a preoccupation of ours for I don't know how many years, I will speak a little bit to that. We applaud the changes that you proposed, particularly in extraordinary aid, and changes that would allow increases in the dollar amount and percentage of extraordinary aid year over year.

As you know, Senator, I know it's been a concern of yours -- the special education category costs have skyrocketed, particularly for those students who require services in the extraordinary aid category. The

measures that you proposed, including eliminating the census-based calculation method for special ed., would make huge changes for every district in the state for our most vulnerable students, and for our ability to care and provided mandated care -- and, care that is morally and legally required for those students. So, we thank you for that.

We also agree that a task force is needed, because the whole area of special ed. is complex, continually changing, and affects so many people.

And, finally, we have one suggestion, and you may do with it what you like. The cost of transportation for special education students -- particularly those in the extraordinary aid categories -- has skyrocketed. We would request that the cost of transportation be included in the calculation for extraordinary aid. This would dramatically affect the amount of money that you're talking about, but it would also help us to provide transportation -- which, sometimes, the cost of transportation for an individual student will cost more than the tuition, say, for the out-of-district placement.

So, that is our suggestion. We're happy to talk further about that.

And, thank you for trying to move this bill in a timely fashion. I speak to you as a 25-year school board member; 22-year school board President; a person who spent last night negotiating with our teachers union -- late. The pressures on school boards, municipalities right now are enormous. The level of confusion is enormous. The level of anxiety is even higher than the level of confusion. The fact that you are willing to tackle

this at this time, when it is even more meaningful than when you originally proposed this legislation, is enormously meaningful to all of us.

So, thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, and, you are 100% on the transportation costs. And, we had a meeting on that recently.

This bill, if passed today, will go to Senate Budget, and it is going to go through the Assembly process. So, we're going to try and take as many more suggestions and changes as possible.

So, thank you.

MS. GINSBURG: Thanks.

MS. PFEFFER: Hi.

Francine Pfeffer, NJEA.

Thank you for this bill. We did like the earlier version, for various reasons, but we are supporting this one as well.

The concept of SFRA is fundamentally sound, but we shouldn't be surprised that superintendents, business administrators, and board members are saying it's not working at the moment. There have been substantial pressures on SFRA since it was first enacted. Years of underfunding the formula; S2; unanticipated fluctuations in the calculation of local fair share; an average cost of education that was first determined in the early 2000s; special education on the census model; and, a property tax gap; along with very high inflation.

So, in March of 2007, I started at the NJEA. I had been a high school teacher, and the month after I started, Governor Corzine signed a 4% tax cap. That lame duck session, not quite a year later -- the end of the 2006-2007 Legislative session -- was when New Jersey's School Funding

Reform Act was passed. And, a few years later in 2010 -- in July of 2010, Governor Christie changed that 4% tax cap into a 2% property tax cap -- the one we now have.

I took you down this little trip of memory lane with me because I remember those things -- it was right when I started -- to say, "Yes, districts *do* need that tax cap flexibility." They need it because SFRA was never designed with a 2% tax cap in mind. The 4% tax cap -- the one that Governor Corzine signed -- had many exceptions that have been eliminated under the 2% cap. Funding for programs and services if districts fail to meet the core curriculum content standards -- which are now different; New Jersey student learning standards.

Energy costs increased over 4%. Capital outlay increases over 4%. Appropriation of non-recurring revenues and surplus -- non-health insurance cost increases over 4%. Hazardous route transportation cost increases over 4%. Special education per pupil costs over \$40,000; and increases that were over 4%. Tuition increases for sending-receiving relationships and vocational schools over 4%. Opening a new facility; emergencies; student health, safety, and welfare-- All of those things were exceptions under the 4% cap.

Exceptions still exist under the 2% cap for increased enrollment, health insurance costs over 2% -- up to the SCHBP increase -- and pension costs above 2%. Not only were all of those exceptions in the cap, the original cap had a five-year sunset provision -- a safety valve to address any unexpected consequences of improving -- sorry, of imposing a levy cap before it became permanent. When SFRA passed, the Commissioner of Education was supposed to complete a study of the

impact of the tax levy cap, and recommend whether it should continue beyond the 2011-2012 sunset. I say that history because not everybody in the room was here, and we keep on talking about tax cap relief and how we need it, but we are ignoring the history of it, that this formula was not meant to exist under the cap we have now.

So, considering that the pressure is on the formula, it shouldn't come as a surprise that it's not meeting all of our districts' needs. And, while redoing the underlying assumptions of SFRA is beyond both my pay grade and my expertise, districts need predictability, help, and flexibility to ensure that they can operate.

This bill does several things to get us to that goal. It allows some flexibility in the EAR when the Commissioner deems it appropriate; it does place extraordinary aid outside of the calculation of the tax levy cap. It also -- thank you -- places the limit on aid losses, guaranteeing that no district shall lose more than 2% of their prior year's budget. However, absent cap relief, many districts may need additional funding in the upcoming year -- you've heard other people say it -- just to meet the basic operations of their schools.

And, we also need to make sure-- I'm not sure if the mechanism for districts which do receive the reduction adjustment aid that needs to be reflected in their state aid notices that they get, because that's the number that they use to calculate their budgets. So, I hope that will be done in a timely fashion.

SENATOR GOPAL: Me too.

MS. PFEFFER: I don't want to repeat -- nobody here wants to repeat the past two years when districts have seen drastic swings in their

funding, and we've been sitting here on the edge of our seats in March and April waiting for some additional funding. That creates chaos in our schools. Staff -- my members -- they look for other jobs. Why stay in a public school when you get a pink slip for two years in a row, or three years in a row? It's not worth it; you can go get another job. Programs are cut, and students are the ones who suffer.

We hope the fixes in this bill will be sufficient to ensure that we are not back here again repeating that once again.

We look forward to working with you to ensure that school funding will be predictable; that districts will have the flexibility they need to ensure their schools and programs are sufficiently funded.

We appreciate the Special Ed. Funding Task Force, as this is a common source of high cost to districts. But, we need to look at other aid -- other categories of aid that aren't getting enough money: transportation; security; energy costs -- especially as inflation continues to push our costs higher.

State budget is a statement of priority. Please, let's make sure we put the education of our public school children first in that budget. We look forward to working with you.

Thanks.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Fran.

I agree.

DANIELLE FARRIE, Ph.D.: Thank you.

Danielle Farrie, Research Director at Education Law Center.

We are grateful to Senator Gopal for his dedication to advancing legislation to amend the SFRA, and are hopeful that these

changes can be made before the Governor's budget address to create another -- a smoother budget season this year.

We support the amendment that provides a cap on State aid reductions. In FY25, there are about two dozen districts that were threatened with reductions over 5% of their operating budget -- some up in the double digits; some for multiple years in a row. These cuts are bigger than the devastating cuts that districts faced during 2011's recession, and slowing the pace of these cuts will help districts responsibly scale down or replace revenue while still providing their students with an adequate education.

We also support the extension of the municipal overburden waivers of State aid reductions. These waivers are critical, so that local leaders aren't forced to choose between maintaining essential resources in schools and the affordability of their communities. But, we do believe that regional districts should be included so that the aggregate tax rate of the constituent municipalities is used to qualify for the exemption.

ELC has also been advocating for an improved and expanded Educational Adequacy Report to ensure that the SFRA is tethered to New Jersey's current learning standards, and that the funding reflects the new challenges that our students face -- especially as the pandemic's negative impacts on student learning and mental health linger.

We support the amendment the EAR as written, but maintain that amending the LFS formula to use multi-year averages of income and property is a commonsense change that can be implemented immediately.

We also support the Special Ed. Task Force. We do hope, however, that the task force will take seriously its obligation to gather

evidence from school finance experts, and to prioritize the experiences of students and families who are often marginalized from these policy discussions.

We also support the requirement to increase allocations to extraordinary aid, but we feel that they would be more impactful if the goal was solely focused on -- in increasing the reimbursement rate each year. It's possible that even with an increase in extraordinary aid allocations, districts could still be reimbursed for an even smaller portion of their eligible expenses.

We are disappointed that the amended bill removes the language that modify the property tax cap. About half of New Jersey students still attend schools in districts that are funded below SFRA's adequacy targets. The reason for this is simple: They are not raising the local fair share that the SFRA requires. Lifting the cap for these districts will not force districts to raise taxes, but it will at least give them the option to do so.

Consider Asbury Park and Jersey City. These towns have experienced massive economic growth over the last decades, and, in turn, their local obligation to fund schools has increased. Under S2, both districts lost State aid, but were allowed to increase local revenue to offset those losses. Both districts increased their school levy by about 400% over six years; neither has a total tax rate that is above the state average. And, both *still* have local levy gaps, which will continue to grow when the cap is reinstated. The students in these districts deserve to benefit from their cities' revitalization -- *not* be excluded from it.

Finally, as you may recall in previous hearings, because of the language in S2 that directs the Department to allocate State aid reductions and increases in a certain order, the State aid information that's publicly published is often misaligned with what districts are actually owed under these individual categories and what it says on these pieces of paper, creating a lot of confusion for leaders and the public alike. So, we are requesting that amendments be included so that the Department is directed to recalibrate those aid notices so that they reflect what districts are actually supposed to be getting.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Why'd you pick Asbury and Long Branch? No, I'm kidding.

(laughter)

SENATOR GOPAL: I agree with you. It was my original proposal. There is not any political appetite to raise taxes locally.

Any questions from the Committee? (no response)

Senators, any questions? Are you guys good? (no response)

OK.

Thank you guys very much.

I want to thank all the stakeholders who worked on this bill. While Monmouth and Ocean counties have predominantly been hit hardest by S2 cuts, there are other areas of the state -- especially as inflation has gone up; cost of healthcare and transportation for special ed.

I want to thank my colleague, Senator O'Scanlon, who spent a lot of time and a lot of meetings working on a lot of provisions of this bill;

meeting with a lot of the superintendents in Monmouth County; as well as Senators Ruiz, Tiver, and (indiscernible) who all helped work on this.

And, all the stakeholders who put a lot of time and effort. I know not everybody got what they want; I know not everybody got *nothing*, so I think at the end of the day, if we can get this bill passed -- and, I don't know if we can keep moving -- we're going to get it out today and try to get the entire State to support this. It can have a dramatic impact on school districts, and have some predictability in the S2 cuts, so everyone knows what they're going to get cut or what they're going to increase.

With that, any comments from the Committee?

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

Thank you, Senator.

I'll be blunt. This is last minute, to say the least. You refer to the hearing that you had that lasted three hours; I think the message out of that hearing was, "Allow these districts to go above the 2% cap." That was consistent.

And, when I have roundtables with these districts, that's the first thing they ask for. And, in the beginning of the meeting, you looked over at me and my colleague and said, "Well, you don't need my side of the aisle, Senator, to increase taxes." I've never had the appetite -- the appetite to increase taxes when they're not needed. You know there's enough money in this system to fully fund all these school systems.

You need your side of the aisle. And, you're bringing politics into this, because it's an election year. And, that's why *your* side of the aisle

doesn't have the appetite to allow these districts to go above the 2% cap.
Plain and simple.

You know there's a problem. We all know the school system is broken; the funding formula is broken. You're applying a Band-Aid where we need a tourniquet. This is not-- Have you applied this to a district? Have you shown us what would be the impact of this bill that we just received? What would be the impact on any district? Do we have any of those numbers?

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator, you would support a bill that increased taxes to local school boards can go--

SENATOR HENRY: No, I would never support--

SENATOR GOPAL: Oh--

SENATOR HENRY: --a local tax increase. But, you don't need my support. You *don't*.

SENATOR GOPAL: I understand, but--

SENATOR HENRY: And, don't look at me in the beginning of the meeting, and imply you do. And, it was my side of the aisle that said we don't have the stomach for it. We've never had the stomach--

SENATOR GOPAL: I think if you go back and listen, I said, "Your side of the aisle does not have support, nor does my side."

SENATOR HENRY: OK, OK--

SENATOR GOPAL: I think that's accurate--

SENATOR HENRY: I don't remember saying, "Your side."

SENATOR GOPAL: I said that, I said, "Leadership does not have an appetite;" leadership is the Democrats.

SENATOR HENRY: So it's politics, politics, as usual here in New Jersey.

SENATOR GOPAL: But, I don't understand. You just said you don't want to -- you wouldn't support the bill. So, I'm confused--

SENATOR HENRY: I'm not supporting the bill.

SENATOR GOPAL: No, no, you wouldn't support increasing local--

SENATOR HENRY: I remain consistent. I don't believe--

SENATOR GOPAL: OK--

SENATOR HENRY: --the districts need to go above the 2% cap if we spent the money that we could spend on education more efficiently and put it where it's needed.

SENATOR GOPAL: I got it.

Appreciate it.

SENATOR HENRY: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other comments from the Committee?

Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

I want to just say to Mr. Chairman thank you so much for taking up this cause.

Yes, we did have a hearing -- it was very long -- and we heard from many stakeholders. And, in my district, this is an issue, so any step that we can do to help further make sure that all students receive the accurate funding that they need, I am in support.

So, thank you so much.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

With that, Senator McKnight, would you like to make a motion?

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes, I'll make a motion.

SENATOR GOPAL: And, I will second it.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number 3917 with Committee amendments.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: No.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Chairman, thank you.

I am also going to vote no. We did receive the bill amendments late yesterday. This is different than the bill we had a hearing on a couple weeks ago.

There are things in this -- in this bill I support. I support fully funding special education; I support the task force; eliminating the district loss (indiscernible) to a smaller percentage in the future operating.

But, I really want to be able to review what the changes are as compared to the earlier version that we saw. I know that this is going to go through other committees -- it will go through the Assembly -- so the final version that we see may be completely -- or may be somewhat different than the version that we are looking at today as well.

So, I reserve the right to change my vote at a later time, but today, for those reasons, I will be voting no.

So, thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Senator.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

The bill is released.

Next, let's look at S315.

MS. CORSENTINO: Next, Senate Bill Number 315 permits a school driver to administer epinephrine to a student in an emergency under certain circumstances. There are no Committee amendments.

SENATOR GOPAL: Elizabeth Ginsburg, Garden State Coalition of Schools -- in favor; no need to testify. Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards -- in favor; no need to testify. Dan Jauch, New Jersey School Bus Contractors Association -- in favor; no need to testify.

Any questions on this bill? (no response)

If not, motion.

SENATOR HENRY: I'll make a motion.

SENATOR GOPAL: I'll second it.

Thank you, Senator.

MS. CORSENTINO: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number 315.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Bill is released.

Thank you.

Next is S1659.

MS. BASTELICA: Senate Bill Number 1659 requires school districts to incorporate age-appropriate instruction on menstrual toxic shock syndrome, and requires installation of signage in certain women's rooms to enhance public awareness of menstrual toxic shock syndrome.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator Corrado, this is your bill. Do you have any comments or just--

SENATOR CORRADO: I appreciate you posting it.

Unfortunately, there was a fatality in your area, Senator Declan's district, and we appreciate you posting this bill. Hopefully, a little information will go a long way, and it won't happen again.

SENATOR GOPAL: I hope so.

Any questions, comments on this bill?

SENATOR CORRADO: No.

SENATOR GOPAL: No, OK.

Motion by Senator Corrado; I'll second it.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number--

SENATOR GOPAL: Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't even read the folks.

Colleen Eskow, New Jersey Children's Foundation -- in favor; no need to testify. Harry Lee, New Jersey Public School Charter -- Public Charter School Association -- in favor; no need to testify.

I'm sorry, apologies, there are people who want to testify about this.

Fran, NJEA, come on up. Jenny Lamon, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors, come on up. Jonathan Pushman, come on up. And, Elizabeth Ginsburg, come on up.

My apologies. I just looked at the time.

MS. LAMON: All right, good afternoon again.

Thank you for having me back.

My name is Jenny Lamon; I am the Assistant Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

We wanted to address you today regarding this proposed legislation to mandate the instruction of menstrual toxic shock syndrome in health education for grades 4-12.

We certainly fully support the intent of the bill, and we acknowledge the importance of educating students about health and wellness; however, we must express deep concerns about the ever-growing list of curriculum mandates and their impact on our ability to be able to provide clear and consistent learning goals across content areas.

I want to begin by making it clear that our concern is about the process, and not the content of what happened, or the tragedy that came about as a result of it. In New Jersey, we have a well-established procedure of districts developing their curriculum through our New Jersey Standards

process. Building on a robust body of research, the standards ensure aligned and explicit learning objectives across nine different content areas. The standards draw on national, international models, as well as research and input from all different sources, including educators from kindergarten up through higher ed.; scholars; assessment developers; professional organizations; parents; and students and members of the public. It's refined through successive drafts and extensive feedback.

The standards represent a synthesis of the best elements of standards-related work in New Jersey to date. They offer the foundation of which districts build their coherent curriculum and plan their instruction to prepare each New Jersey student with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed.

In recent years, the Legislature has passed numerous curriculum mandates -- each well-intentioned, as this one is, and focused on addressing a specific issue. However, the cumulative effect of all of these mandates has made it increasingly difficult to be comprehensive and inclusive of all conditions or risks that children may face today in a health curriculum. Health educators in particular face an overwhelming challenge. They have the kids for a *really* short time, and they have to attempt to cover a vast array of mandated topics within this limited time.

The proposed mandate under 1659, while undoubtedly addresses an important issue, exemplifies the larger issue at hand here -- a piecemeal approach to curriculum development, driven by legislative action rather than by informed educational best practices. And, if we continue to go down this path, we really do risk diluting the quality of education for all

students, and overloading the curriculum and under-resourcing the educators that are tasked with delivering it.

As leaders in the profession, we must stand firm. The role of the Legislature should not be to micromanage curricula, but to provide the tools and flexibility for professional educators to develop comprehensive, age-appropriate and effective programs tailored to the needs of our students.

I urge you to please reconsider this mandate, and instead prioritize collaboration with educators and stakeholders, and develop a sustainable approach.

One of our sister organizations, who you're going to hear from in a moment, has proposed an approach that would include disseminating an educational fact sheet. And, we think that that could actually be more impactful and cover all the bases that the bill seeks to address. And, it would guarantee that the info reaches the intended audience in a way that would be more -- a little bit more meaningful.

We would like to echo our support for that recommendation.

Thank you for giving me a chance to express our concerns.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Have you had a conversation with Senator O'Scanlon's office about your changes?

MR. PUSHMAN: Yes, I'll comment on that, Senator.

I kind of took the lead, on behalf of our group here, and reached out to Senator O'Scanlon and a number of others backed me up as well. We have been in touch with his office, we submitted Committee substitute. It has not been adopted at this time, but just to echo Jenny's

thoughts -- and, I agree with everything that she said -- the approach that we -- rather than just coming up here and saying, "Don't mandate something," "No instructional mandates," "Don't tell us how to run our school districts and adopt our curricula," we put together an approach that is not unprecedented. There are a number of statutes that require the dissemination of educational fact sheets to students on particular health issues, like meningitis; athletic head safety injury; sports-related eye injuries; misuse of opioids; HPV -- and, this may say when it should be disseminated.

So, between that, as well as there's a signage requirement for signage about the issue to be in restrooms -- we think those two would actually be more impactful than just having something adopted into the curriculum that the kids may hear once and never hear about it again.

So, we're hopeful that those conversations will continue, and that they'll accept our recommendation.

Thank you.

MS. PFEFFER: Hi everybody.

Francine Pfeffer, NJEA again.

I echo the comments of PSA and School Boards. I will just add something that Jenny didn't make crystal clear, that once the Department of Education adopts standards, before they finally adopt them, they also take feedback from the public. It's not just experts -- there is an open public hearing. Anyone can come give their input on the learning standards.

It is also very important to note that while once you put something in law it is permanent; it stays there unless you pass another bill removing it from curriculum, which can lead--

MR. PUSHMAN: That never happens--

MS. PFEFFER: --to undated things. That has never happened since I've been doing this for 18 years.

The standard-- The learning standards are changed every five years by statute. They have to be re-adopted every five years, so it allows more current things to change. The NJEA has been very consistent, even when we agree with a standard -- something being included in the curriculum -- we still get up here and say, "This is not the appropriate process; this is not the purview of the Legislature." It's the Department of Education and the State Board of Education and local boards of education that do that.

So, I join my colleagues-- I don't need to repeat everything they said. I join them in saying while we appreciate the intent of this legislation, we think there's a better way.

Thank you.

MS. GINSBURG: And, I would echo, also, what my colleagues say. We have also communicated with Senator O'Scanlon's office. The combination of signage and effective handout sheets, we think, will attract more attention to this-- I should say, Betsy Ginsburg from the Garden State Coalition of Schools.

But, we think the combination of signage and handout sheets will be a much more effective way of addressing this very serious problem than a new curricular mandate. In speaking with teachers of health

education, they always comment on the number -- the sheer volume of elements that have been added to the health and P.E. standards over the years. It is enormous.

And, by doing so, we risk giving short (indiscernible) to some things that deserve more. And, so, because toxic shock syndrome deserves more, I advocate the approach that my colleagues have outlined.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you for your concern.

Senators Corrado and Henry, would you like to proceed with this state mandate?

(laughter)

SENATOR CORRADO: I'm comfortable proceeding with it, because you've reached out to Senator O'Scanlon, and apparently he didn't change his mind--

SENATOR GOPAL: Did he get back to you guys, or--

MR. PUSHMAN: Yes, he just said that for the purposes of this hearing, the bill was going to move forward as-is.

But, I hope he'll give it more detail--

SENATOR CORRADO: I don't want to speak for Senator O'Scanlon--

SENATOR GOPAL: We're good, if you guys are good to proceed.

MR. PUSHMAN: (laughter)

SENATOR CORRADO: I appreciate what you're saying.

And, you have to understand our perspective as well. We have constituents coming to us with issues that are very important to them.

Often, it's somebody who has had a traumatic issue. Sometimes it's even a fatality. And, it's very hard not to be empathetic and not to say, "What can we do?" And, sometimes it's as simple as a 20-minute lesson.

So, I totally appreciate what you're saying. I come from a family of teachers, so I'm very understanding as well, and aware of putting one more mandate on you and asking you to teach one more class or do one more thing in the classroom. And, perhaps there *is* a better way that we can work together.

When we have someone come to us and say, "Can we make this part of a curriculum?" maybe there is a better way that we can work together and say, "How can--" Whether it's even sitting down a couple times a year and saying, "Let's go over what can we remove from the curriculum, or work with the Department." I'm very open to doing that on a regular basis (indiscernible) no longer applies in the law; how we work with the board. I am willing to have a meeting with all of you to talk about that.

But, I don't want to speak for Senator O'Scanlon today.
(laughter) He didn't want to change his mind.

So, let's add one more. And, then we'll figure out going forward how we're going to work this out together, if you don't mind.

SENATOR GOPAL: And, then we'll support you on this side of the aisle to do the State mandate you guys want to do.

SENATOR CORRADO: (laughter)

I'm very aware of that.

So, like I said, I'm very-- Let's sit down; let's have a meeting; we'll work it out; and, how we can work together *not* to add more mandates to the classroom.

But, I said -- like, also, it's really hard to say no sometimes when they come to your office and something happens and -- we're just trying to fix it.

SENATOR GOPAL: And, this bill is going to go to Senate Budget, and I will talk to Senator O'Scanlon about making sure he sits with you guys.

OK, so, you've got time.

SENATOR CORRADO: We'll talk to him in caucus as well.

SENATOR GOPAL: Motion still?

I'll still make the second.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote--

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, guys.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number 1659.
Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes; sorry.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Bill is released.

Next is -- S1783 and 1712 have been merged.

I'm sorry, 2712.

MS. CORSENTINO: There is a proposed Committee substitute for Senate Bill Number 1783 and Senate Bill Number 2712. The proposed Committee substitute requires a school district to incorporate instruction on cursive handwriting in the curriculum for students in grades Kindergarten through five.

SENATOR GOPAL: This is Senator McKnight's bill.

Any comment?

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

I think we're in "good afternoon" now, so good afternoon.

Today, I am here to continue championing a skill that some may call non-essential, but I call essential: Cursive writing.

In a world dominated by keyboards and touchscreens, the loops and curls of cursive is a need that will carry our students into adulthood. Cursive writing is not nearly about handwriting -- it's about cognitive development; fine motor skills; and cultural literacy. Students reveal that -- studies reveal that students who learn cursive retain information better, and even develop stronger literacy skills. Writing by hand activates different parts of the brain than typing, creating connections that are vital for young learners.

Moreover, it's a key to unlocking our history. Our Declaration of Independence, historical letters, and some legal documents are written in cursive. Without this skill, future generations risk losing the ability to read these treasures firsthand. This is not about resisting progress, but

embracing balance. Just as we ensure students are tech savvy, let's once again also give students the tools to connect with meaningful -- to the past, present, and future through the art of handwriting.

In 2019, I started championing to add cursive writing back into the schools. Back then, there were nearly two dozen states making efforts to re-introduce cursive and writing in schools. As of 2024, there are 24 states that have added cursive writing back into the curriculum. Let's add New Jersey to this list for the betterment of educating our amazing scholars.

I am asking my fellow legislators to support this bill. Let us do what we need to do to ensure that we don't lose touch with what we've learned. Until we stop asking for a signature when we go buy a house; when we go apply for a passport; we need to make sure that our students know how to write their names in cursive.

So, thank you, Mr. Chairman, for posting this bill. And, I want to thank Senator Turner for joining me on this effort. Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Senator.

Harry Lee, New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association -- in favor; no need to testify.

We have a number of individuals who would like to testify who have concerns.

Let's bring up Jenny Lamon, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association; Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards; Fran with the NJEA; and, Elizabeth Ginsburg.

The four of you should have just stayed up there.

(laughter)

MS. LAMON: All right, good afternoon; third time's the charm.

Again, Jenny Lamon; New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. I am the Assistant Director of Government Relations.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on your bill; thank you for your comment, Senator.

After reviewing the bill and the research and consulting with our members, we do believe that the decision on whether or not to offer cursive instruction at the elementary level should continue to be a local decision -- as it has been for the last 15 years. Anecdotally, I will tell you that every member that we spoke to is offering some sort of cursive instruction -- whether it's in ELA, or it's in financial literacy as, you know, a means of signing checks and contracts. They *are* offering it, but they're offering it in different ways, at different times, in ways that work for them.

A lot of this -- I'm not going to repeat what I *just* said, but a lot of this is, let's let the professionals do their jobs. We know that cursive writing has value, as you enumerated, Senator, but we do believe that it's a curriculum decision; it's best left to the local school districts. One of my members uses Foundations -- Foundations K-3 -- and they teach cursive in K-3. Which, which -- if Senator Turner's bill were to be enacted, it would throw that all upside down, because her bill requires it in grades three and four.

So, we're just-- During this critical time when our schools are facing such significant challenges, we just urge this Committee to please avoid imposing additional mandates.

Thank you for your consideration. I did submit a position statement with a lot more, but we would welcome further dialogue on this issue.

Thank you.

MR. PUSHMAN: Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards.

I echo the sentiments of my colleague. We do not dismiss the potential value of students learning cursive. We know there is plenty of research confirming its benefits, but after a lot of deep thought -- and, over a decade of cursive not being a requirement -- we simply believe it's a decision that's best left to local boards of education.

Many of them still do offer it, but, as you may recall, back in -- it's been about 15 years since the State decided that this was not something they wanted to include in the standards -- that's a process that is thoughtful; deliberative; happens every five years; and that's where we believe things like this should be determined, by the trained educational professionals and, respectfully, not through legislative mandates.

Teachers have so much on their plates, and we have to be considerate that when we add something to their plate, we may risk losing or diminishing how much we focus on something else -- the district and community value.

So, we applaud Senator McKnight and Senator Turner for spotlighting this issue, but we can't support the mandate at this time and hope we can find other ways to raise awareness of the positive benefits of cursive.

Thank you.

MS. PFEFFER: Francine Pfeffer, NJEA.

Ditto. We do acknowledge the benefits that can come with cursive writing, but it has to be taught very carefully to ensure those benefits are there, and if schools have decided not to teach cursive, they have other means of ensuring fine motor skills and doing those things.

In addition, while many schools do still teach cursive, if they have taken it out of the curriculum, it's because there was something else that is now there, and so putting curriculum -- putting curriculum -- putting cursive back into the curriculum will mean that whatever they put there has to be taken out. Our members who looked at this said they appreciate cursive, they think it's important. But, again, it's a curriculum mandate. Our instruction committee made up of a bunch of teachers thinks that those curriculum mandates should be, as I said earlier, at the local level.

Thank you.

MS. GINSBURG: Good morning.

Betsy Ginsburg from the Garden State Coalition of Schools again.

I echo what my colleagues say. We do teach it in my home district, and I love cursive writing; I had the best cursive writing in my class.

(laughter)

MS. GINSBURG: And, I still take my notes in cursive writing.

But, I agree that it should be a local decision. And, one consideration that you might think about is we teach it in second or third grade. I recently talked to a parent of a sixth grader who assailed me for spending so many of his taxpayer dollars, and the fact that he had a sixth grader who couldn't write cursive. Well, his daughter *did* learn to write

cursive in second grade, but had not used it since probably the end of second grade, and therefore had completely forgotten how to write in cursive.

So, I think districts should make this decision themselves. I think there is great value in cursive. But, I also think, for many children, they lose that skill because any skill that you don't practice, you lose. So, we have to weigh the value of teaching cursive at the lower levels with the fact that students really mostly do not use it.

So, with that, I think it should be local discretion.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: I appreciate everything that you all are saying.

I hear, "This is good, this is a good practice, *but*." And, Senator Corrado mentioned earlier in her comment how we should look at the curriculum to see if there are some things we should take out.

Cursive writing helps students retain information. We talk about our students on the phones all the time. Once you learn a skill, you have it. I'm 30 -- I almost said I'm 30. I'm 47 years old, and I know how to still write cursive. When my son was in the third grade and he came home and I was helping him with his homework and I was writing in cursive, he could not understand what I was writing.

And, for the life of me, I'm like, "You don't know how to read this?" He was not taught cursive writing. So, I went to Barnes & Noble, and I got the right books, and I was able to teach him. Not all parents have the money and the means to do that.

School is supposed to be there to teach our children -- especially life skills. And, cursive writing is a life skill that will help them along the way. Yes, you're saying that some districts are teaching -- so, what about the equity? So, should half our children in the State of New Jersey know how to write cursive, but the other half -- how will they communicate together?

So, it's been out of our curriculum since 2010, and now, in 2025-- And, 24 other states began to put this back, because they understand the science and they understand the importance of having cursive writing back into our schools. Maybe during lunch time, there's a 15-minute course on writing. We can be creative, and we can use our innovations to make sure our kids know how to write and read cursive. We take our children to the museum and look at the Independence of Declaration -- the Declaration of Independence. They cannot even read that.

Teachers are supposed to educate our students, and I am blessed that we have some amazing educators here in the State of New Jersey. But, I feel that it's time to look at the curriculum, just as Senator Corrado said, because I know for sure there are some topics in there that we can move away from.

So, I thank you again. I'll look further to talking to you more. But, I feel strongly about adding cursive writing back into our schools.

And, we talk about our students -- some of them are probably not engaged. But, let's teach them the art of writing in cursive. The art of leaving an imprint. It's part of their legacy; it's part of their identity. We should not have our kids signing a mortgage document when they get older

as an “X.” They should be proud to write their name. I’m proud, every time I have to sign my name.

So, I will say this again. Until we stop having us to sign our name, we need to teach *all* our students how to sign.

So, thank you.

With that, I’m finished. (laughter)

SENATOR GOPAL: Any other comments from the Committee?

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Senator, I’m coming across the aisle; I support you 100%.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: You guys are just all about mandates today.

(laughter)

SENATOR GOPAL: This bill will also go to Senate Budget when it’s done.

Any other questions?

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes.

Senator McKnight, I support you, too. I don’t think people realize how many documents you still have to sign. It’s your passport; it’s your voter registration; it is your driver’s license; it’s your mortgage documents; it’s -- there are so many documents in your daily course of life that you’re still required to sign. And, it’s amazing how people -- many people don’t know how to do a signature.

And, it's also the early learning and hand-eye coordination and when it does detect dyslexia and other disabilities. It's something we probably should have never moved away from.

I think it's really important, and I support you in this as well.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you.

SENATOR CORRADO: Great bill.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, guys.

Motion by--

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Motion--

SENATOR GOPAL: --Senator McKnight; second by Senator Henry.

MS. CORSENTINO: This is a vote on the proposed Committee substitute for Senate Bill Number 1783 and Senate Bill Number 2712.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes to a mandate. (laughter)

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you. (laughter)

Yes.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

And, Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Bill is released.

Senator Singleton has been kind enough to be OK with us holding S3141. I apologize to those who came here to discuss that bill, but in the interest of the voting session, we're going to hold that bill, S3141.

Next up is S2844.

MS. CORSENTINO: Senate Bill Number 2844 establishes the Jersey Strong Public Service Scholarship Program. There are no Committee amendments.

SENATOR GOPAL: How do you know you guys are the first ones? There could be like, 10 people.

(laughter)

Colleen Eskow, New Jersey Children's Foundation -- in favor; no need to testify. Fran, NJEA -- in favor; no need to testify. Elizabeth Ginsburg, Garden State Coalition of Schools -- in favor; no need to testify. Harry Lee, New Jersey Public Charter School Association -- in favor; no need to testify. Jonathan Pushman, New Jersey School Boards Association -- in favor; no need to testify. Debra Bradley, NJPSA -- in favor, no need to testify.

You guys ended up being right. Jacqueline and Fred, no organization name, from Short Hills.

Welcome.

JACQUELINE BENJAMIN LIEBERBERG: Thank you very much.

FRED LIEBERBERG: Good afternoon.

My name is Fred Lieberberg, and I am grateful for this opportunity to address the New Jersey Senate Education Committee.

The Lieberberg family has called New Jersey its home for 120 years. My grandfather had a farm in White House, where my dad was born. Both my brother and I graduated Westfield High School. My business career as a restaurant owner and operator was based in New Jersey. I have been a resident of Short Hills for nearly 35 years, and my children have graduated from Millburn High School.

I consider myself an engaged resident, and want to call your attention to several alarming trends that confront our state.

Number 1: In 2023, the United Van Lines migration study revealed that almost 65% more people moved out of state than moved in. New Jersey has the unwanted distinction of being the leader in outbound migration.

Number 2: According to *U.S. News and World Report*, in 2023, New Jersey ranked Number 46 in cost of living, and number 48 in affordability.

And, Number 3: New Jersey has a public service worker shortage, with healthcare workers, first responders, crossing guards, and hospital staff.

To address these critical issues, I helped author the New Jersey Strong Public Service Scholarship Program. With the support and assistance of Senator John McKeon, and his Chief of Staff Alex Kaiser, it is now before your Committee as Bill Number 2844.

So, what are the features of this program? Any high school graduate -- regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status -- will be eligible to perform in-state public service at the prevailing minimum wage. In exchange for one year of public service, the participant of the program

will earn \$25,000 in tuition credits at any New Jersey college or university. Two years of public service will translate into \$50,000 of tuition credits.

This pilot program of 15 scholarships should be relatively easy to administer and evaluate. Costs should be kept to a minimum, as it will be under the auspices of the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, which will coordinate with the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

What about the costs? Initially, for the first two years, there should be minimal operational expense, as the participants will be performing public service. When the program is fully implemented by year six, there will always be 60 students in college at any time, which will cost the state \$750,000 annually. With a current State budget of \$56.6 billion, the cost of this program shrinks to insignificance.

So, how does this program benefit New Jersey? First, it will allow participants in the program to graduate virtually debt-free, compared to the average college student who graduates with about \$38,000 in debt. The New Jersey Strong Public Service Scholarship Program will make New Jersey more affordable for our state student participants. With a college degree, participants will earn more and, as a result, should be able to buy a home and raise a family sooner. And, in addition, pay more in taxes.

Second, all things being equal, someone who grows up in New Jersey, goes to college in-state, and takes advantage of State programs, will be less inclined to leave the state.

In conclusion, for New Jersey to prosper as a livable and relevant state, it must change its leadership position in non-affordability and outbound migration. New Jersey *must* aspire to be the Number 1 state

in human capital investment. The New Jersey Public Service Scholarship Program is a very affordable way to identify self-directed and motivated individuals who will perform public service, graduate a New Jersey college or university, remain in state, and enhance our state's workforce. With higher earnings potential, the graduates of this program will not only be engaged citizens, but continue to contribute to their communities. Moreover, they will spend more in state and pay more in taxes. Hopefully, in the near future, your colleagues will speak proudly of their experiences as participants in the New Jersey Strong Program.

Thank you.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

MS. LIEBERBERG: OK, I'd just like to add a few words.

Good afternoon, Chairman Gopal, and members of the Senate Education Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today.

By way of introduction, I am Jackie Benjamin Lieberberg. I grew up in New Jersey; born in Newark; raised in Springfield; daughter of an immigrant father; Rutgers College graduate, New Jersey, in New Brunswick. I was the third class of women -- am I dating myself? And, now, Short Hills resident for the last 34 years. Proud parents of two Millburn High School graduates. And, I served as -- on Millburn Township Committee as a Committeewoman, Deputy Mayor, and Mayor during COVID. I'm proud of the work that we did to keep our residents safe and well-informed.

By day, I am a recruiter, and I work with managers looking to hire candidates in a variety of industries, and recent college graduates who

are seeking their first full-time job. I hear from hiring managers that there is a significant labor shortage, and there is an ongoing need for talent. In working with recent grads, it has become apparent to me that many of our students attend colleges out of state; come home; and do not know what they want to do, or what direction to turn. Many are not even aware that there are programs that -- if there are programs of a gap year to allow them to develop some career opportunity in critical areas: healthcare; technology; data sciences; infrastructure. Many students graduate with significant debt; don't have a plan; and could benefit from an alternative path.

Welcome to Jersey Strong. As my husband enumerated, this will keep our students in the state. We can partner with leading organizations, both non-profits and for-profit institutions -- Amazon; Shop Rite; J&J; JCP&L, to name a few -- and create a pathway for both students and businesses to have a pipeline of workers.

No secret, we are losing far too many young people to less expensive states. We can now have workers who are engaged, committed, and will have the opportunity to graduate debt-free. As we've told you, we are both vested in New Jersey. We love the state, we are not leaving, and we believe this could provide a catalyst and a foundation to keep our students here -- working, engaged citizens who, like us, love it and want to stay and build their lives here.

Thank you very much.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you.

Any questions from the Committee?

Senator.

SENATOR HENRY: A comment.

SENATOR GOPAL: Sure.

SENATR HENRY: Thank you.

I think it's a great investment, with even the potential for return on that investment, is even greater.

When these young people start their career in New Jersey, stay in New Jersey. They live, they pay taxes -- the local taxes. The money that's given to them to help them through the education comes back 10 times in tax revenue.

So, it's a great idea, a great investment, and an even bigger return on investment.

So, thank you.

MR. LIEBERBERG: Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR GOPAL: Thank you, Senator.

With that, thank you guys.

A motion--

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Motion--

SENATOR GOPAL: --from Senator Henry; second from Senator McKnight.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number 2844. Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Is a yes.

Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Thank you; the bill is released.

Next is S3961.

MS. BASTELICA: Senate Bill 3961 requires boards of education to offer no-fee options to parents for making school lunch and other payments; requires payment processing platforms used by school districts to provide users with information on user fees.

There are Committee amendments in your packets that stipulate that the provisions of the bill apply to renaissance school projects and non-public schools in addition to school districts and charter schools, and are to take effect in the first full school year following the date of enactment.

SENATOR GOPAL: Colleen Eskow, New Jersey Children's Foundation -- in favor; no need to testify. Tony Trongone, Greater Schools of New Jersey -- in favor; no need to testify. Harry Lee, New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association -- in favor; no need to testify. Jenny Lamon, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association -- in favor; no need to testify.

Any questions, comments, on this bill? (no response)

If not, a motion.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Motion.

SENATOR GOPAL: By Senator McKnight.

Second by Senator Corrado.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Bill Number 3961 with Committee amendments.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Turner has left a vote in the affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Bill is released.

And, finally, our most controversial bill today -- SJR93.

MS. BASTELICA: Senate Joint Resolution 93 designates the first full week of May each year as Teacher Appreciation Week.

There are Committee amendments in your packets that make technical changes to the resolution.

SENATOR GOPAL: NJEA -- in favor; no need to testify. Greater Schools of New Jersey -- in favor; no need to testify. Garden State Coalition of Schools -- in favor; no need to testify. Laura Gunn with Katz Government Affairs, South Jersey Chamber of Commerce -- in favor; no need to testify. New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association -- in favor; no need to testify. New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association -- in favor; no need to testify. New Jersey School Boards -- in favor; no need to testify.

Any questions, comments on this bill? (no response)

If not, a motion.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Motion.

SENATOR GOPAL: A motion by Senator McKnight.

A second by Senator Corrado.

MS. BASTELICA: This is a vote on Senate Joint Resolution
Number 93 with Committee amendments.

Senator Henry.

SENATOR HENRY: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Corrado.

SENATOR CORRADO: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes.

MS. BASTELICA: Senator Turner has left a vote in the
affirmative.

Senator Gopal.

SENATOR GOPAL: Yes.

Bill is released.

Thank you, everyone.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)