
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet to receive testimony from invited guests on students’ mental health issues and how those issues impact chronic absenteeism”

LOCATION: Meeting via Zoom

DATE: March 11, 2025
11:30 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Co-Chair
Senator Renee C. Burgess
Senator Angela V. McKnight
Senator Shirley K. Turner
Senator Joseph Pennacchio
Senator Douglas J. Steinhardt
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.
Assemblywoman Linda S. Carter
Assemblywoman Carmen Theresa Morales
Assemblywoman Victoria A. Flynn



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca DiBenedetti
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

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

Hon. Joseph P. Cryan, Co-Chair

Hon. Renee C. Burgess
Hon. Angela McKnight
Hon. Shirley K. Turner
Hon. Joseph Pennacchio
Hon. Douglas J. Steinhardt
Hon. Michael L. Testa

ASSEMBLY

Hon. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, Co-Chair

Hon. Linda S. Carter
Hon. Carmen Theresa Morales
Hon. Victoria A. Flynn
Hon. Michele Matsikoudis
Hon. Erik K. Simonsen

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, March 11, 2025 at 11:30 a.m., via Zoom, to receive testimony from invited guests on students' mental health issues and how those issues impact chronic absenteeism.

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

Issued February 10, 2025

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MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Pennacchio.

SENATOR PENNACCHIO: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Steinhardt.

SENATOR STEINHARDT: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Testa.

SENATOR TESTA: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Senator Turner.

SENATOR TURNER: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Carter.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CARTER: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Flynn.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Assemblywoman Morales.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: Here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN VERLINA REYNOLDS-

JACKSON (Chair): Yay!

MS. DiBENEDETTI: (laughter)

Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Present.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: And, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN (Chair): Here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Good--

SENATOR BURGESS: Senator Renee Burgess is here.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Oh, wonderful; thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yay!

Listen, it's almost spring, if you can't tell -- the weather outside. So, happy Tuesday.

I'm super excited to be here to talk about this important topic today, at the Joint Committee on Public Schools. We're talking about student mental health and chronic absenteeism.

And, we've heard this in a couple different hearings we've been in. And, so, Senator Cryan and I thought it would be great to be able to bring the experts together to get this information out. Because, we love our students, and we miss them tremendously when they're not there, but we know that there's some barriers that happen, and why they can't -- why they can't come to school; what those challenges are.

And, so, we're looking to listen and learn from you all. But, Senator Cryan, I think you really teed this up with going through the information early. Do you want to add anything before we start with our first guest?

SENATOR CRYAN: No, Verlina's going to run the meeting.

I just want to say thanks to all of you.

I do think that the public at large, and even parents at large, are shocked when we talk about chronic absenteeism; the amount of students that are there. You can call it the dirty little secret of education, whatever terminology you want to use. It's just one of those hidden factors that I just don't think the state at large understands or really appreciates in terms of what it means.

Some of the data I read-- And, I know the presentations today are going to bring that in focus for us, whether it's mental health or other areas.

I'm very grateful that all of you took the time.

Thank you.

Verlina, your show.

MS. DiBENDETTI: Assemblywoman, just a reminder of the five minutes -- because of how long the list is.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

We have lots of people who want to give us great information, and we want to take action on it as well.

Our first guest speaker is Roger León, the Superintendent of Newark Public Schools.

R O G E R L E Ó N: Good morning, and thank you to the members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for inviting me to speak today.

I am Roger León, proud Superintendent of the Newark Public Schools.

And, before I actually get started, to hear Senator Cryan and the inquiry that he was making just gives me such renewed appreciation for this body.

I am also a proud product of the Newark school system, born and raised and still live in Newark today. I am equally proud to represent a district that continues to make strides in ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed. We are, in fact, in year five of our historic 10-year strategic plan, and seeing clear evidence of a new educational ecosystem in Newark.

While chronic absenteeism remains a challenge statewide, I am pleased to report that Newark's absenteeism rate is significantly below the state average now two years in a row, demonstrating our district's commitment to supporting student attendance and engagement. The global pandemic we all faced, and its lingering effects, still exist today.

Communities in Schools is a national organization that ensures every student -- regardless of who they are; their ability; zip code; or socio-economic background -- has what they need to realize their potential in school and beyond. As a result of this grant, we are in a collaboration within a network of educational practitioners, experts, and stakeholders from a national network as a licensed partner. This has enabled to continue learning and sharing best practices to engage in powerful conversations and strategies around what it takes to ensure every young person succeeds in today's evolving educational landscape; to deepen our practice; to strengthen leadership; and to build long-lasting connections with our colleagues across the country. We are the only school system in New Jersey in this network.

Working collaboratively with school staff in creating a positive culture and climate that is welcoming to all students and families is at the center of what we are focusing on. Ensuring that attendance is a schoolwide priority, and using opportunities to celebrate not only perfect attendance, but improve the attendance as well. Celebrations with our students, with their classmates, and with their families as well.

The tracking of attendance becomes a key priority. I, with Tableau, have a daily count. I know how many students are in school every single day; how many students are tardy. The principals have on their desks, through Tableau, a daily accounting of not only who is in school by

classroom, by grade, across multiple different factors. Pulling up attendance data weekly to ensure accuracy of student data and interventions becomes important, because many times, what happens -- and, Newark, your largest school district, has only but 4,100 students. So, a student who is late is not necessarily absent. So, making sure that all of the data collection is, in fact, accurate.

At the heart of what the Senator was talking about was case managing students. Attendance is very, very important. And, the best way of doing that is meeting the students' needs at the school as well as in their home. So, consistent check-ins; conducting daily outreach to parents, whether it's phone calls; emails; text messages; robocalls; and in-person home visits becomes critical. These home visits are, in fact, a better way of understanding all of the barriers and the intentional relationships with families that need to, in fact, be built.

But, there are policy changes that school districts are engaged in -- or need to engage in -- to really aggressively address this issue. Implementing pupil action plans; engaging in school support teams; hosting parent workshops; building intentional relationships within the school and between the school and the home. Ensuring that we are obviously aligned with whatever are the district's priorities. Collaborating with before-care and after-care opportunities to address barriers -- because there are parents, even in Newark, who are working and need assistance and supports. So, before-care and after-care, instrumental towards doing that.

We have created in Newark not only a buddy system, so students with good attendance is helping a buddy who is not necessarily coming to school, as -- has had a direct impact on what our attendance looks

like today. So much so that I have a traveling trophy that, every month that a school is actually meeting the expectations of the attendance standards in the district, that that traveling trophy moves from one school to another, letting everyone know that we are in fact watching.

The collaboration within schools and with offices in the district -- which is of zero dollars -- has created a great attribute to the success that we're actually seeing, encouraging from attendance committees at schools, to implementing "Attend to Achieve," the buddy system, have been super helpful to us.

I appreciate, Assemblywoman, the opportunity to share what we are doing in Newark, and, specifically, our partnership with Communities in Schools, as we work together to support young learners -- not only in Newark, but throughout our state.

And, once again, I just want to thank all of you for your dedication and commitment to public education, and for allowing me a couple of minutes to contribute to this important dialogue.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you for that list of all of the examples that you are doing in the district. It really is amazing. And very creative, Superintendent León -- very creative.

Thank you.

DR. LEÓN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: We're going to move onto our next--

SENATOR CRYAN: Can I just ask one quick question?

I'm sorry; I'll be very quick.

Is that all right? Sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Of course, Senator.

SENATOR CRYAN: So-- And, thanks for your-- Are you the only CIS school district in New Jersey?

DR. LEÓN: That's right, sir.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, I didn't realize that, looking at the data.

I have one question, and, frankly, it'll be a theme through most of you.

By the way, that stat of Newark, two years in a row below State average--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes--

SENATOR CRYAN: --from somebody who has been in the Legislature a couple minutes, is a stunning stat. And, congratulations to you.

How does it work by age group? By grade, age group -- whatever time you want to use; school? Are there variables there that the Committee should be aware of?

DR. LEÓN: We're seeing an interesting continuum.

So, at the ends is where some of the bigger issues are occurring. So, in Pre-K being one of the end becomes an issue. So, there are factors like all of the immunization requirements, things of that nature, that do create, inherently, a student not being in the school.

At the tail end, you have seniors who are either experiencing "senioritis" so that at the tail-end they think that they're almost done, but they're actually not quite there yet. And, as we're getting all of the

college scholarships, we're impressing upon them that the importance of senior year is equal to that of all of the years.

We're seeing an interesting phenomenon in Newark because, across the country, attendance usually drops in grade nine when you start in high school -- that is *not* what we're seeing. We're seeing the highest attendance rates in Newark's history in those middle grades to grade nine, which is giving us great pause for a lot of the progress that we should be seeing as they get into high school.

SENATOR CRYAN: Very helpful; thank you.

Thanks for your time. Thank you.

DR. LEÓN: Thank you, sir.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you.

Next, we have Dr. Sarah Bilotti; Superintendent of Schools.

SARAH BILOTTI, Ed.D.: Thank you.

I have Dr. Jonathan Hesney, and Ms. Doreen Babis with me.

I am going to share-- Dr. Hesney actually put together this presentation. I just sent a share request to see if I could just share my screen.

MS. DiBENEDETTI: Unfortunately, our IT Department does not allow sharing. But, everyone -- I did email it to everyone--

DR. BILOTTI: Let's do it.

JONATHAN HESNEY, Psy.D.: Good morning, everybody.

I want to thank you all for having us for this very important conversation. It is truly appreciated. From us in the Pascack

Valley Regional School District, we definitely take the aspect of student attendance extremely important, and it, unfortunately, is a very large strain on both the school systems and the parents of our community, at times.

So, again, I really appreciate the time.

So, just going through quickly, our presentation, just to kind of understand-- So, we kind of term this in more of a terminology of "school avoidance," because, unfortunately, that's what the chronic absenteeism starts to become. And, it's when the student experiences severe difficulty attending school due to some emotional distress.

And, the reasons could be a variety of things from anxiety, to depression; there are family issues that we've dealt with that relate to that as well. There may be a loss in the family that creates distress. Social concerns are a tremendous issue that we deal with when a student feels that they are maybe not part of the school system, and are ostracized socially. And, then, another one is academic stress, where you have high-performing students -- or even middle-of-the-road-performing students -- who start to falter and then feel like they cannot get back on track. So, those are some of those areas that lead to that. And, it does lead -- the consistency in absence will lead to academic decline; social isolation; and, long-term emotional challenges that we, unfortunately, then have to deal with.

So, our approach is, we really try as best we can to utilize all the resources we have. So, initially, if a student starts to have these challenges, we will begin conversations from the guidance level for our general education students, and CST for our special education students. We utilize the systems of intervention and referral services to see what we can do within the school setting to really support those students overall, and providing

differences in terms of potential scheduling; modified schedules overall; and/or other supports that we can encompass.

We really try to not only hit the mental health aspect, but also the academic as well, because we really don't think that those are mutually exclusive; they are definitely connected. And, then, we try as best we can to consistently message out about attendance, and sending appropriate notifications to parents at various thresholds. We call in parents for developmental action plans explaining compulsory education and parents' responsibilities. So, really, again, trying as best we can through what we have as programs to link that community servicing together. So, that is also important. Then, if it gets to a point of the municipal courts, we will utilize them as well.

For direct interventions for students -- and, Senator Cryan was asking earlier about home visits -- this is something that we've engaged in pretty consistently when the aspect of student attendance -- if a student is out for two to three weeks, we will really start to engage with the families to ensure that some sort of home instruction will start to take place, and then from there, what can we do to try to facilitate the student back into school and to give them supports? And, if perhaps some aspect of mental health support is needed beyond that, really try to support them in that endeavor on the parents' side.

From a school-based aspect, we create regular check-ins. As I said before, we will provide modified schedules, maybe some late arrivals for students who are having a difficult time getting in earlier. Trying to work around our attendance policy and certain aspects to try to work with those students so they feel that they can kind of move forward. And, then, we are

lucky enough to have, within our district, two wellness -- a wellness center in each of our high schools. We are a regional school district that we do receive students, and we are just high school. So, within each building, we do have wellness centers with two support counselors who are really dedicated to this population and other mental health needs along the district.

If it does get to a point where the students need more support, special education *will* get involved. We are lucky, also, at each of our high schools, to have self-contained programs for students with emotional challenges -- that is, if it gets to that threshold of need overall. And, obviously, going through the special education process for referral to determine if that's something that they would require. But, we really then up the supports and individualize the programming for those students based off of what we found to be their needs. So, at some points within that, it is regular parent phone calls; working with the families. Again, home visits could be part of those programs as well -- going out to the homes to ensure our students are coming in if they start to kind of fall off track. And then, we really look at analyzing the benefits of creating safe environments and programs -- as I was saying before -- that we have to kind of utilize outside locations to support our students.

So, we are, as best we can, trying to engage in building some of those programs. Because, in all honesty, the unfortunate aspect is, once a student really has difficulty coming back into the district, it is incumbent upon us to educate that child and, oftentimes, an out-of-district program -- which is a smaller setting, which can facilitate, but is very costly to the district and also a much more restrictive level of programming. So, we're trying our best to avoid that -- not only with the spirit of what special

education code is, but also, really trying to not let students go too far outside their communities, because once they leave, it is a challenge getting them back.

And, to that point with community and family engagement, we really try to -- through work resources; workshops; we have our Hills Valley Coalition that works from that aspect to really support and collaborate with our community. And, then, as future steps, we are potentially looking into bringing in mental health agencies to support our students' populations; do more home visits; and, also, provide mental health screeners for our students to really be proactive in finding students who are maybe having difficulty connecting into schools.

So, that is our overall viewpoint, and how we are trying as best we can to intervene in this very challenging situation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you.

DR. HESNEY: You're welcome.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

Do you have the-- I know the Newark Superintendent, León, talked about his rate of absenteeism. Do you know your rate?

DR. HESNEY: I don't have it offhand.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: OK.

All right, no worries.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: I thought-- Assemblywoman, Chairwoman, it's Vicky.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: They have a pretty low -- I pulled your latest school performance reports -- it's 7.5%.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Oh, awesome.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: And, I thought that was extraordinary, since I probably-- My school district of Holmdel, we usually teeter around the State average, if not worse. So, I think Pascack Valley should be applauded for what they're doing.

But, I am starting to look at a trend. And, I also-- Since I have that opportunity, I want to say the Newark Superintendent, if he's still on, I thought his numbers were fantastic, too. And, he has a significant homeless population that's probably even impacting that number. So, I thought that was pretty critical.

But, I did notice in yours and some of the ones I'm looking at, students with disabilities -- that's a number that's kind of alarming to me, because I think that's the number -- even with Pascack Valley, that's impacting their absenteeism number. So, I would be curious to hear from some of the administrators of what we're doing to kind of -- what ideas you have to address students with disabilities, because that seems to be impacting some of your absenteeism numbers.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Good question, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Thank you.

DR. HESNEY: Yes, it's a great one.

DR. BILOTTI: Yes, do you want--

DR. HESNEY: Yes, sure.

So, I think we're really trying to think of proactive solutions, in terms of-- Because there is a point where once it begins on this pathway, it's a little bit difficult to deviate off. So, in working with our guidance departments and also from this, the aspect of potentially screening students, really to establish connections, because we feel that the more that there's an established social connection either with a peer or an adult in the building, then there's more of an ability for that student to connect in. And, also, with families, once that starts to happen as well, our special education populations are definitely impacted more so, especially in our high school range, because they're dealing with a lot of emotionality issues, I think. We're in a fairly high-performing school district, and once you start to kind of falter on -- with your grades, it starts to go down a very challenging path.

So, we're really trying as best we can to work with those students who may be having challenges academically, so they don't feel like there's nothing to support them. And, then, also, really using some level of mental health screening, too, at different points in the year, before these situations get much worse than they might be.

DR. BILOTTI: We also try to be proactive. We see a lot of examples of anxiety, and what we want to try to get in front of -- as Dr. Hesney's saying -- is this cycle of a student falls a little bit behind, starts to become anxious, and then that anxiety can actually turn into a real mental health crisis that then maybe would enable them to be eligible for special education services, because now they're avoiding coming to the school; they're having other issues that are sort of comorbid with the absenteeism. So, we're also trying to think of ways-- How do we get in front of that cycle

so that it doesn't create students being absent from school? And, we all know teenage anxiety right now is-- I mean, the numbers are alarming.

And, so, we've been thinking about, how do we do that? And, so, that's what he was referring to with mental health screeners, and how else can we proactively determine what students may be at risk, and try to intervene before it becomes chronic absenteeism or school avoidance? It's a good question.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN FLYNN: Yes, I would think-- You know, even within, like, case management and developing goals and objectives, I think that piece of it really needs to be incorporated into a process, because I do think that subgroup of students feels even less connected to schools at the high school level. Like, school districts like yours, mine, and others.

So, sports would be good, too.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

Senator McKnight, I see you have your hand raised.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thank you so much.

I just want to just further Assemblywoman Flynn's question.

In reference to the mental health component, if a child is out of school, do you then -- you know that there's anxiety, there's some issues going on -- do you then incorporate home instruction so that they're not absent from school? Or, are you thinking of doing that?

DR. HESNEY: Yes, so, we utilize home instruction. Once the student is out for 10 consecutive days, we do engage them with the aspect

of home instruction. We don't want them to fall too far off. We also entertain letters from our psychiatrists and our mental -- our medical professionals, for home instruction. And, then, from there, we provide as best we can. But, the ultimate goal is always to try to bring that student back within that home instruction plan.

But, it does-- Our goal is to not let the academics go too far outside to where the student feels even more disconnected from the experience of school, (indiscernible) but they're not -- we do try as best we can to get in-person with those students, but even we would provide virtual instruction just to, again, build some level of connection back with that student to get them engaged.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Got you.

And, you don't have to have the number now, but if you can provide to the Chairwoman the number of students who are doing home instruction because of mental health, and you want to make sure that they're not -- they're still receiving instruction, that would be great, because that could be a number that we're looking into, in reference to home instruction, because of that.

DR. HESNEY: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: OK, thank you.

Senator Cryan, and then Assemblywoman Carter.

SENATOR CRYAN: A couple quick ones.

First, high school, right -- 9 through 12 -- any grade level of the 9 through 12 that's more -- for lack of a better way to put it -- comes up with a higher degree of absenteeism?

DR. HESNEY: I would say, from what-- This year specifically, we've been seeing a little bit more with our ninth-grade population. I would say within those first two years are probably our ninth and 10th grade. Once we have students for 11th and 12th, unless there's a major crisis that would occur, it's more unlikely.

But, I would say-- Because, the entry into this building is a different environment overall, and then it's pairing with new students, so I think that, unfortunately, becomes a transitional challenge, yes.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, second of three.

In the first slide -- common reasons include anxiety, and then you listed a variety. Is there one more predominant than the other? Is it anxiety or, is it-- Are those reasons anxiety, depression, family? Are they-- Is there one more predominant than the other or, for lack of a better way to put it -- equal?

DR. BILOTTI: Again, I think, probably for us in the current moment, a little bit more in anxiety, just from the requests that we're receiving -- specifically for that home instruction.

But, I think that that really is going to also be dependent on so many factors; it's kind of hard to predict. And, I think you're going to see a wide variety amongst the different school districts around the state as to what that singular driving factor is.

Our student population is different than, even, the school district right next door to ours. Right now, the largest number of requests that we're getting is for anxiety-based or mental health-based home instruction.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK.

Last thing, last question from me: You indicated students move to more structured support, and you do the self-contained programs. Have you seen a growth in that over the past couple years?

DR. HESNEY: Absolutely.

SENATOR CRYAN: Do you think you could give us some sort of perspective on that?

DR. HESNEY: Yes, I mean, so -- a lot of actual commentary that I get, even from my child study team members, are that students are having difficulty matriculating in larger buildings. So, that's a big part of what that becomes. And, as a result, they do require that self-contained programming.

We *do* provide that within our buildings, which, they are still within the building, but they have a more confined experience overall that attends to that. But, sometimes when that gets too much so, then that even grows to, again, those out-of-district placements.

DR. BILOTTI: Yes, and we opened up a second program two years ago, and we're looking at opening a third program specifically for these students who are really struggling in this high school environment to be located in a separate school building kind of off site to try to just have another bridge before they go on home instruction.

So, we've had-- Our numbers are large enough that we see the need for additional specialized programs to meet their needs. These are good questions.

SENATOR CRYAN: Very helpful.

Thank you; thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN

REYNOLDS-JACKSON:

Assembly-
woman Carter.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CARTER: Thank you so much.

Just in reference to the mental health providers and all, are you seeing that as difficult, really, to contract or even hire mental health providers in that field, because of the fact that -- and, even your counselors - - because we see we have this shortage of teachers and everything like that, but dealing also with the mental health aspect, whether it's in house or out of house, and how are you dealing with that?

Along with, when you talk about home instruction, really, like, the aspects-- And, you hit that sometimes you may have virtual. What percentage do you do that maybe is all virtual or part virtual home instruction, for some of the students to be able to make sure that your numbers -- your absentee rates -- kind of change a little bit in that area?

DR. BILOTTI: I'm not sure of the percentage. The way that we report out isn't easy for me to just figure that out at a glance, but I can look into that. My sense is that post-COVID, the percentage of virtual is substantially higher than it had been.

To the other question, we're in a very unique and very fortunate situation in that our teacher contract is one of the most generous statewide. So, we've not had the difficulties other areas have had in hiring those providers. However, we've hired the last-- The last two or three counseling staff that we've hired, we've hired at the top of our teacher's guide. Meaning we're getting people with experience, but we're also-- It is taking a large amount of district resources to bring those people on board.

So, we don't necessarily have the vacancies. We do have people with qualifications who are applying when we have vacancies. But, again, that's a direct result -- I believe, at least -- of the generous guide that we have. So, our salaries are higher than average, which I think is helping us out, because our neighboring districts are not necessarily seeing it that way and they're very much struggling in finding those mental health professionals.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CARTER: Do you think that that might be an issue in a couple of years to come? Because, if you're hiring at a higher portion of your guide, do you think that, in a couple years, that's going to create a possibility of them going somewhere else or doing something differently?

DR. BILOTTI: Interesting--

DR. HENSEY: It might be. I think that there's definitely, in terms of working in schools, the fever is down overall in terms of that. But, I do think that it is a good aspect for individuals who are mental health providers to get involved, and to get consistent jobs, essentially, that are not just per-diem based. So, I think that that's a big piece to it.

But, I definitely-- I can see it getting challenging overall, the next couple of years.

D O R E E N B A B I S: And, I also add that what we're finding there's a real need for is psychiatrists who are working with children. We have been on four- or five-month waitlists to get our students in for psychiatric evaluations to give us more information about what the root problem is and how to address it.

So, that has been-- While they're not hired by the district, they are board approved, and it's been very challenging trying to find people who we can work with.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CARTER: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

Well, thank you for all this great information. We're going to move onto our next speaker, Julie Borst, Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey Community Organizing.

JULIE LARREA BORST: Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for-- Actually, now it's afternoon.

It's good to see everybody.

Thank you for having this hearing. I think chronic absenteeism is one of those things that you see just out there, even in mainstream media, and people are very curious about it.

But, let me backtrack a second.

So, besides wearing the Save Our Schools New Jersey hat, I am also the Board Chair of the New Jersey Community Schools Coalition. And, I am a Co-Director of the newly launched New Jersey Institute for Community Schools at St. Elizabeth University.

So, Senator Cryan, I am very glad you took a look at the reports that I sent you, and I've just been texting with my colleague at Communities in Schools, asking him for the numbers on Newark. So, I was very glad to see Dr. León here talking about them a little bit. That program that they are currently doing is a three-year pilot. Communities in Schools had a million-dollar grant; they could approach school districts that had a

minimum of 20 schools in it, and they chose Newark. And, thankfully, Roger decided to do that.

Last year was the first full year, and what I think is really interesting about it -- besides the first five schools doing incredibly well -- they follow a community schools model highly focused on integrated student supports, meaning that there is -- all services are available to everybody in a school, but they focused directly on about 10% of the population for a more one-on-one experience.

And, very often, when CIS goes into a district, the school district is either hiring a site coordinator -- maybe somebody who is a social worker; a retired teacher; those kinds of folks tend to be really good in those kinds of positions. And, what Newark decided to do was to take the folks who had been tracking absent students, but more from a truancy lens -- sort of more of a punitive -- maybe that's too strong a word, but from that angle versus the how do we figure out what's going on with that student in their life, and how do we connect them to the resources in order to be able to make it so they can come to school?

And, so, the principals -- the end of last school year -- the principals came. There was a small meeting with CIS. My colleague and I here, Greg -- Dr. Greg Stankiewicz -- were invited to come sit in on that to hear the read-out of the first year. The numbers are amazing, but also not surprising. So, we have been involved with community schools' work advocating for it here in New Jersey, helping school districts who are already -- who already have many, many, many partnerships with outside organizations that are not necessarily academic related, but they're addressing student need. And, there are great examples of that, and they

haven't had the money to be able to get to a full-service community school kind of label.

And, I think this is important, because this is about how you use your resources. And, I think that's incredibly important. But, when it comes to chronic absenteeism in particular -- in the two reports that I gave you, one is from the Learning Policy Institute, and this is Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond's organization out in California. She also happens to be the President of the California State Board of Education, currently.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Oh.

MS. BORST: And, she is responsible for getting the state of California to invest \$4 billion to turn every Title I school in California into a community school.

And, so, they are a few years into that. Her research is obviously nationally known. She has been working with CIS and also the Institute for Educational Leadership in Brookings Institute, and they have been informing the U.S. Department of Education on community schools now for several years.

I think what's important in the community school model is how you are organizing what is happening inside of your school and having a dedicated person to manage that. But, I also think let's really understand where chronic absenteeism comes from. And, Assemblywoman Flynn, you touched on something a little earlier when you were commenting about Newark versus the Pascack Regional demographics, for instance.

But, let's just say that poverty -- root causes of absenteeism tend to be organized around poverty -- and, this is everything from food insecurity; housing insecurity; transience, which is something we don't talk

about in New Jersey, but happens *a lot*. Have a conversation with the superintendent in Wildwood, and he will tell you about transient students. These things happen; you have to address them. You can only deal with what's in front of you when you're inside of a school building, but you can certainly start bringing in resources to support those students and families to make it so it's a little bit easier for that student to learn.

Those include things like advancing family engagement. That's *incredibly* important, and that's not the box of joe on the first Thursday in September, and we'll see you next year. That is really, really, really sitting down with your parents and students and finding out what is going on in their lives and finding out what they need.

Promoting student connectiveness -- because that lack of connection from students to schools creates, helps fuel some of that anxiety. How do you get back into the swing of doing school? Those things are really important. So, promoting student connectedness can be everything from having a club; encouraging somebody to join the sports. My daughter happened to have graduated from Pascack Hills in 2017, and there's a special ed. student sent from Northern Highlands. She didn't want to do it, but she was always encouraged to join the track team, for instance, because that's a whole big bunch of kids and they're all cheering for each other, which is so cool.

Ensuring that health and well-being and safety are all part of what's happening, not only in the school life, but also what's happening out in the community. And, that's creating partnerships with health-care organizations. Safety could be anything from connections to police officers

to parents making sure that when kids are walking home, there's parents along the way making sure the routes are safe.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

MS. BORST: Investing in relevant and engaging learning -- this is *incredibly* important. If kids are not interested in what's going on--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right--

MS. BORST: --it's really, really, really hard to keep them engaged.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right.

MS. BORST: And, then, supporting that access to learning; meeting kids where they are. That's really, really important. We've standardized everything to death, and I'll put on my Save Our Schools hat for this. We have standardized everything to death--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right.

MS. BORST: We need to let kids have the agency and the flexibility to find the things that they're interested in--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right--

MS. BORST: --and to go where they want to go--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes, thank you so much--

MS. BORST: --that's really, really super important.

So, thank you very much.

I am happy to answer any questions.

And, if anybody wants to pop in for our official launch at St. Elizabeth on Thursday, I'm happy to have you; let me know. (laughter)

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

SENATOR CRYAN: One quick question; I'm sorry. Just very quick.

So, the West Virginia studies talks about--

MS. BORST: Yes--

SENATOR CRYAN: --money coming back, and attendance goals.

MS. BORST: Yes, so I think that however it is that West Virginia organizes their school funding around the points where you're telling the State how many kids you have in school, and your money is based on that, they're having really bad absentee issues. And, it was enough so that it was actually affecting the State funding. And, I believe that's where that number came from.

There is a similar report, by the way, for Newark from them, and I'll pass that along to you when I get that. I didn't bring it, because I was hoping Roger was going to be here to talk about that.

SENATOR CRYAN: So, for lack of a better way to put it, there's incentive base to having -- a student financial incentive base -- to having the student in the classroom.

MS. BORST: It certainly is. And, the thing about West Virginia -- which I think is important, so let me just give a little pitch here about that.

The Governor's wife -- the Governor's wife heard about Communities in Schools, and she wanted to do it. And, so, she volunteered her husband's salary to get it started several years ago. (laughter)

SENATOR CRYAN: (indiscernible)

MS. BORST: But, this was one of CIS' biggest efforts. There were -- I think there were 28 schools, I think, in the initial launch for that a few years ago. And, again, this is about -- because a lot of West Virginia is very rural -- how do you find those services and organize those things and bring them -- those things into the school, and make them accessible for students and teachers and families?

SENATOR CRYAN: Well, but -- I appreciate it.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you.

Thank you, Julie. Thank you.

Our next speaker is James Earle, Superintendent, Trenton Public School District.

J A M E S E A R L E: Good morning/afternoon to everyone.

And, thank you for the opportunity to be in front of you to share information about what Trenton does and what we are experiencing here, connected to chronic absenteeism.

As I hear some of my colleagues talk about the strategies that they're using, they're synonymous. And, in Trenton, too, we have a population that is transient; we have a large immigrant population. And, many-- Quite often, they're not connected to the school in the same way that we believe that people should be connected to it. So, we have to think like they think, and be able to help them understand how important it is to be here.

One of the first things that we have focused on, and I know we hear a lot about kids, and the students, and what they experience is. We focused on the adults. And, we believe it's critically important to reinforce for adults to come every day. Kids mimic what they see, and if we're not here, they don't come. So, we've been focused on making sure that adults -- our teachers -- we start to understand percentages and chronic absenteeism in that area. And, although people have the right to take the days they need, we're encouraging our staff to be here often, as much as they can when they're not sick or they don't have family concerns or emergent issues. But, we think that's critical to building a culture of attendance in any system, even if you're at home. If you're not there, then kids aren't at home if you don't show up at home.

So, we have placed tons of emphasis and monitoring time on staff attendance. Who comes to work? Who comes often? Who comes every day? And, I, as the Superintendent, lead that effort by making sure that I'm in-district as much as I can be and present -- physically present. Because we talk about that. And, I could go on forever about that one issue, because I think that changes the culture here, if we could ever get that right.

On chronic absenteeism, some of the things we've done-- We have some really neat things happening we think can help change. We've seen it change, and then, of course, cultural issues like a day without immigrants, or immigration concerns, pop into the picture and it changes all the work you've done for someone, because fear is now the leading cause of chronic absenteeism for many of our families.

So, one of the things we did in my first two years was trying to get to the root cause of what's causing our young people to be absent in

Trenton. We thought because you would hear, “It’s not safe here,” students don’t feel like they’re safe; they don’t want to come to school; or, can they get transportation? That was, like, the Number 1 thing I heard here. But, after we did some surveying, survey results -- and, I’m going to have those in a few minutes; I’ll be happy to send them to you, because it’s striking -- we found that the root cause was *not* transportation. It wasn’t safety. It was health related. And, quite often, when a family member is sick in the home of our children, it impacts the whole group.

I know in my family, if I’m sick, my kids might be able to manage home, and my wife can help. But, in our families, many times if a mother is sick, then the younger sibling has to take care of their *younger* siblings, and it’s a domino effect. And, it was the Number 1 in our survey, and it’s shown up two years in a row that that’s the Number 1 issue that we’re sick; I’m sick; mother’s sick; child is sick. And, they stay home; they stay away from school. So, we’ve put some effort into making sure, trying to help parents through our “Parent Connect” series understand what it means to be chronically absent.

So, we learned that, and we knew that transportation wasn’t the issue. But, we also provide courtesy busing where we can, if they don’t meet the threshold. We will allow students to jump on buses if there’s space on a bus. So, we’ve gone that far to get students on buses, even when they don’t qualify, to get them to school. Walking in the city when it’s cold or raining is not appealing to students, so we have to figure out the best ways to get our young people here. So, we look at those types of things.

And, as for our school safety, we took that -- we believe that it was a culture of, “It’s unsafe to be in Trenton.” So, the community--

We partnered with Isles and other community partners, and we have two street teams that are working around our school to assist with students getting to school. They're properly dressed, they have on, like, crosswalk gear, and so you can identify them. And, parents and our families know that when they come to school, they can see those individuals on the street if they need support. And, that's helped a good bit. We've seen violence and vandalism and fights and those things drastically decrease -- almost double-digit numbers in the first couple of years, and we see it starting to flatten out now. So, we're seeing some really good stuff.

One of the other things that we implemented but haven't gotten it *fully* implemented, because we can't find the people, was the walking school bus. And, the idea there was grades K-8, we would find trusted adults in our community, and along the way identify spaces that kids can go into, but two or three adults would walk groups of how many of our students on secure routes. We did do that with our transportation group in the city -- identified a route and all schools K-8. Those are out to families. You walk on that route, police are on those routes; adults are aware that students are walking. But, we could not find the trusted adults -- or, as many as we'd like. We have 25 schools, and if you think two people in the morning, two people in the afternoon, that's four. So, we just were never able to get that number. But, we kept the structure in place because we hoped to continue to build it.

We have high chronic absenteeism rates in *many* of our schools. We did see decreases in those areas, because of some of the work that we did. But, one of the key things that we have structure in place, that I wanted to just share a few minutes about -- we have an attendance team. Our attendance team consists of eight officers -- eight attendance officers --

who are like truancy officers, but they don't take the truancy approach. They go out to homes; knock on doors; they gather information about the family; and they record that. And, that's how we get our data. What's the true concern? Not what we think. But, we actually know why a child is not coming to school, and it's quite often *not* what's being shared in public; it's likely something deeply personal, and if you know -- I can share emails -- I wouldn't -- but I could share emails during this time of immigration concerns, where parents just wrote and said, "Hey, we just -- we can't send our children to school."

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right.

MR. EARLE: You put that on top of that, and you have that issue. So, we have eight officers and three managers. And, we have care team meetings at every school once or twice a month, and we go out -- my team goes out to monitor those meetings and to get data about who are those children; where it can impact. So, care team meets for chronically -- chronic absenteeism response and engagement.

We also employed restorative practices, so we -- less suspensions. We're now asking the question, "What happened to you?" instead of, "Why are you acting that way?" to keep kids in school. And, we've found that the Number 1 group of kids -- level -- of young people that had the highest chronic absenteeism was kindergarten.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Wow.

MR. EARLE: And, they can't drive, right?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Wow.

Wow, wow--

MR. EARLE: (indiscernible) families. We take a family approach.

And, then, we implemented some healthy areas -- March Madness competitions--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you--

MR. EARLE: --we have attendance billboards around the city that--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I love them--

MR. EARLE: --that share. And, then, we're getting the community engaged, because we believe it's gotta be our whole community. When you see a kid not in school, ask, "Why?" Report it to us, and we'll come to them and say, "Why are you not in school?"

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right.

MR. EARLE: And, then--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Well, thank you -- thank you Dr. (*sic*) Earle--

MR. EARLE: All right. (laughter)

It's a lot to share, so.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I wanted to thank you so much for, really, the intentionality of it all. I first started hearing about the chronic absenteeism at the 4Cs meeting. Hope Grant came and talked about the seriousness of this.

And, I think the things that you've talked about today have been very intentional, not to -- to your point, it is not about a

punishment, but it is trying to reach out in this holistic way. How can we be helpful? What needs to be done? And, I think that's definitely helping with our numbers.

Where are we at in the district, in terms of improvement? I know you said that kindergarten is the highest number. But, as a district, where did we fall at in that State number?

MR. EARLE: So, I don't have that information ready--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: OK--

MR. EARLE: --but I will get that for you.

I think we were-- We were much better in some places, but what we found is February was our worst month. It's the shortest month, so with chronic absenteeism, you miss two days, you're on the list. And, you had a day without immigrants, and we saw spikes in double digits in chronic absenteeism.

So, as I said, all of the ground we gained trying to get closer to State numbers, we were probably closer in some schools, but we were not -- we were seeing the numbers jump back up.

(indiscernible) so I can get better information to you, so that you can have comparisons. We actually have a comparison chart that I'll ask them to get for me and bring in.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Oh, thank you so much.

Senator McKnight, I see your hand is raised.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Hi, Superintendent.

You mentioned that transportation is not the top priority. But, I was talking to a principal here in my district, Jersey City, and I already

-- it's being drafted now, some legislation, to change the bus ticket routes. Because, right now, it's at 2.5 miles, which right now is archaic, because in the district, you don't have to live near your district to go to a school.

MR. EARLE: Correct.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: So, if you-- So, the walking distance is astronomically high. And, people are not walking; our kids are not walking in that rain, that snow, to school.

So, I am drafting legislation to lower that, because of the fact that you can live anywhere and go to any school.

MR. EARLE: Yes. So, we would certainly appreciate that.

We actually take -- do our best, as I said, with courtesy busing. If you don't-- If you're under the threshold, we've said so instead of 2 miles, it's 1.7; we'll work with young people. And, if you have an extenuating circumstance, we try to make that work, too. But, that's at our own district cost. So, we try to accommodate kids.

But, having a lower threshold would certainly help many kids, because that distance -- if you think about yourself walking--

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Exactly--

MR. EARLE: --2 miles -- I mean, 2 miles can be a distance.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes, and that's 2 miles each way going and coming. So--

MR. EARLE: Yes--

SENATOR McKNIGHT: --so, when I drop that bill, I would love for you to come and testify.

MR. EARLE: I will, I will absolutely be there.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Thanks.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

Thank you, Superintendent Earle, for that information.

We're going to move onto our next speaker, Dr. Bob McCullough.

B O B M c C U L L O U G H, Ph.D.: Thank you; thank you very much.

I really appreciate all of the testimony that's been given so far today. It is very encouraging to be able to hear all the great things that are being done, and just the compassion that everybody has for youth.

My name is Bob McCullough; I am with Hazel Health. And, just a little bit of background: I am actually a licensed clinician, so I have been serving youth and families for the last 30 years, and then part of Hazel's growth team currently.

And, Hazel is the largest physical and mental telehealth provider for Pre-K through 12 services across the country. We're currently in approximately 20 different states, with 6 million youth having access to our services.

But, one of the things I really wanted to focus on is certainly the work that we've been doing with regards to absenteeism. And, again, just all the great work that's been -- that's been voiced here today. We believe that it just takes an ecosystem to be able to make those services happen. It is-- Certainly, telehealth is an important part of that. It cannot replace the great work that's being done in the schools with the counselors and with the wellness centers and the community providers, but there is an opportunity for telehealth to be part of that system to be able to identify

needs a little earlier on; to be able to add to the network and the type of providers.

We know that youth are certainly much more inclined to attend counseling sessions -- to follow through on mental health services -- when they can talk to somebody who looks like them; who sounds like them; and who actually understands their cultural background. And, so, at Hazel, that's what we've done, is really be able to try and build our team of providers that represent the populations and the communities that we're actually serving. So, that's one aspect that certainly is very important.

The other aspect is the clinical outcomes that we see. Our studies have been verified by Clemson University a couple of different times now, so a Tier I university. And, after they have examined over 15,000 of our students, what they have found is that we've been able to show a decrease of almost 80% in anxiety and depression symptoms after just a few telehealth sessions. And, this is vitally important because we know that by using some of those validated measures, if we can reduce by even one point on a PHQ or a GAD, for instance, it allows an enhanced learning opportunity; it improves that quality of life. And, that certainly is very -- it's very characteristic, then, of wanting to be able to come to school.

And, so, by then, addressing the absenteeism issues, we've had several of our school districts across the country do some independent studies that have taken a look at how Hazel and telehealth services can actually impact absenteeism. And, some of these school districts are really upwards of 40-50% of absenteeism rates, which is fairly common across the country. And, what we have seen, then, is that by introducing Hazel at any point along the lines, we've been able to see a drastic reduction in attendance

issues. Sixty-eight percent that have had this -- such an improvement, that they just don't miss any more days.

And, what that allows us the opportunity to be able to do is to really be able to take a look at what are some of the social determinant health issues. Oftentimes, as you've heard throughout several of the presenters today, there's family issues. And, so, oftentimes what we look at clinically is, there's the presenting issues -- which may be the child's grades or truancy issues -- but the assessed issues are usually at home. And, it's -- it's parents; it's transportation; it's parents' health; it may be some of the poverty issues that are there.

And, so, what we have now done, then, is we have an entire care coordination team that will work directly with the family to be able to address those issues. And, so, it really allows us that opportunity to where we've expanded our hours of operation, where we provide those services well into late afternoon and even the evening, to be able to make sure that we're meeting with parents and we're addressing those issues and working with the family members on some of those needs that are there.

And, then, when we've addressed the absenteeism issues, now we can focus on presenteeism. And, so, now that the youth are back at school, now we can start working on making sure that they're prepared for the learning day. It gives us the opportunity to focus on their concentration; any of the bullying that are happening; and, really be able to see some of that improvement, then, in test scores; a reduction in truancy or behavior issues; and, improve graduation rates. So, it gives us that opportunity to be part of this important ecosystem and all the great work that you've heard really does benefit the youth and their families in general.

So, thank you very much for your time, and certainly happy to answer any questions.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much, Dr. McCullough.

DR. McCULLOUGH: Absolutely.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Our next speaker is David Cittadino.

DAVID CITTADINO: Thank you; thank you so much for having us here.

I am David Cittadino, Superintendent of Old Bridge Schools. And, I am going to speak briefly, and then I am going to kick it over to Dr. Caitlin Colandrea, who is my Director of Intervention Services, Counseling, and Grants.

Something we obviously-- We recognize here in Old Bridge is that, if we were going to make improvements, especially post-COVID, we had to look at very different things: engagement; outreach; and the data that would drive both of those. And, just to give you perspective -- so, pre-COVID, we had an absentee rate around 5%; post-COVID we skyrocketed to 18%, a little over 18%. And, today, we're right around 9%. So, we're getting lower and where we need to be at to get where we were prior to COVID.

And, I think we've had some very successful programs. We brought in mental health coaches and attendance liaisons. We used SFRA funds to look at that engagement piece and see these students who were -- and, Dr. Colandrea was a great champion for this -- students who were--

What were they doing at home? A lot of them were up all night with their anxiety; they're finding comfort in gaming. So, we used some of our SFRA funds to put in e-sports. We talked about some people bringing in clubs and activities -- e-sports -- in our high school and middle schools, and we saw a lot of those students who wanted to participate now coming back into the school saying, "I want to be a part of this team." And, most of our teams are made up of these students who are -- were -- a little resistant to returning to school.

Dr. Colandrea, I'll kick it over to you, and your tremendous expertise in this area.

CAITLIN COLANDREA, Psy.D.: Thank you.

And, thank you for letting us be a part of this conversation.

We've really focused on this a lot as a district, even prior to COVID, so that number that Mr. Cittadino mentioned, that was in 2019, that 5%. But, two years before that, it was around 9%. So, we had already incorporated into our tiered systems a lot of different interventions focusing on chronic absenteeism. So, those attendance coordinators that we have, the whole initiative, was to partner with families and to look at ways to help to communicate with the families and reach out to them. And, then, we actually have specific intervention plans that go into place for Tiers II and III as students move through those tiers specific to attendance.

So, we were in good shape to look at this post-COVID, and we saw that data right away and realized what we were doing, all those interventions and those tiered supports. The students had missed out on that in those couple of years leading up to where we saw that highest jump in 2022-2023.

So, what we ended up doing -- we did a few different things. We pulled together a school avoidance committee, and this was made up of various different mental health professionals in the district. And, what we wanted to do is to figure out evidence-based interventions that -- what is the research saying? What can we do to get ahead of this? A lot of our students post-COVID had a lot of anticipatory anxiety, where their world was unpredictable for a while, so that was just exacerbated by some of the things that we were seeing with bringing in social media; our (indiscernible) rates went up, and the rate of psychiatric clearance went up, which then put another burden on our counselors because they were then pulled into-- They put an average of eight hours per (indiscernible), for example. That was taking them away from being able to do this work with the students, and, in particular with chronic absenteeism or students who experience school avoidance, it really does take a lot of time.

So, the guide that we ended up putting together out of that school avoidance committee focused on first, assessment. So, we pulled some evidence-based assessments that we could use that were parent screeners and for students, to try and get both of those perspectives to better identify where students fell within that continuum of school avoidance. So, whether it was truly an avoidant issue -- a school phobia type of issue -- or just straight school refusal. And, what was driving or maintaining those behaviors was different depending on the category.

So, the proper identification was something that we decided would be one of the first things that we wanted to look at. And, then, from there, the interventions that we put in place were in different categories depending on what the students' needs were. And, that was

working really closely with the families to helping them to understand why we were doing that and what the end resulting goal was.

So, we have trauma-informed practices; transition; and wellness planning. And, that was more student-centered, so the student was involved in their plan for returning to school and what barriers they identified, also. Motivational interviewing; cognitive -- the CBT cognitive behavioral therapy approaches. Exposure was one of the biggest ones, one of the most important. A lot of times, when students are experiencing anxiety or any individual, really, we don't want to make it *so* comfortable that it becomes something that is even more motivating in maintaining that behavior. And, then, a solution-focused approach.

So, with that being said -- and, then, the second two pieces of the guide where one was a strictly teacher section, so it was what to do, what not to do for teachers, so they can help understand how to support students when they maybe not had that background knowledge for mental health supports. So, that was more like infographics they can have in their classroom; something easy to kind of reference when they have a student experiencing this. And, then, a parent guide -- because it's a lot easier to go through the conversation with a parent when it's in black and white there in a guide, as opposed to mentioning certain things that a parent might not understand right away, or even take offense to, because sometimes the parents are overly involved in the students' plan back into school.

So, the training of our staff was really important. We partnered with different places. School Avoidance Alliance -- that's actually a parent -- there's a parent who oversees that company. And, then, the Center for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in East Brunswick. And, the reason we

chose to partner there is because CBT in the schools really helps with those anxiety-based issues. And, then, the other area that we are seeing as, we surveyed our mental health professionals, is a high-rated, regularly or often that they're seeing within the schools, and it was anxiety-based issues as well as emotion regulation. So, that's where we brought in some of the DBT -- which is also another strategy that can help a lot with those emotion regulations.

So, gaining more staff was a big part of it, but then also training our current staff to really understand--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right.

DR. COLANDREA: --works.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right, right, right.

No, you bring up a really good point, because I think in being able to recognize some of those signals or red flags is really, really important.

And, I think the trauma-informed care is just-- I think we all should be doing it.

Assemblywoman Carmen Morales, I see you have your hand raised.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: Hi; thank you so much, Chairwoman.

So, I'm happy to be listening in to all the conversations surrounding mental health, as well as chronic absenteeism.

What I haven't heard today is are any schools doing anything surrounding SCL days? I know that some of the schools have been

implementing these SCL days for student mental health, to disconnect them from the academic world and get them more engaged with, just, social-emotional learning -- like, anything that really disconnects from the academic and just has them to think about other things. So, I haven't heard that.

The other thing I haven't heard was any shared services. I know that school districts are having a hard time filling social worker positions, as well as counselor positions. And, many times, our counselors and social workers are so overwhelmed with the amount of cases now with mental health concerns that school districts are now looking into some services outside. I know our district here in Essex County, we're working with NJ4S Family Connections in order to really close the gap in assuring that, first of all, our students are getting the services that they need, but also not overwhelming the counselors and the social workers that we currently have.

So, I haven't heard anything like that during the conversation. If anyone wants to answer at the end, I'm OK with that, but those are key points that I would like to learn more about as to what school districts are doing and using.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: That's right--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: As well as the tools that they're using to survey their students.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: This is a great segue into -- I don't know-- Dr. Caitlin, did you want to respond?

DR. COLANDREA: I'll briefly mention what we do in Old Bridge.

We do have an SCL program; we actually have two staff members assigned as SCL teachers in the district. And, that is -- the intention is to embed that within their program, so they might have a full period or a full day of SCL, depending on their needs and the level of needs in tiered supports.

And, the second part of the question was the shared services. We do use NJ4S. We have ESS in the district. We partner with Rutgers for comprehensive mental health systems in the schools. So, those are three that I can--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Well, and, we're going to -- our next speaker is Jennifer Correnti, who is from the New Jersey Counselor Association. She's the President. So, I thought that was a great segue over to you, Jennifer.

JENNIFER CORRENTI: Thank you so much, and well done on that segue.

So, Chairperson, members of the Committee, Senators, and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to speak amongst problem solvers -- that's what school counselors like to engage in, is problem solving. And, we have a group here who is looking to take care of the needs of children across the state.

Today, I am representing about 1,200 school counselors who advocate and work daily with children and families struggling with barriers to consistent school attendance. We know chronic absenteeism is an issue nationwide; New Jersey hasn't escaped the trend, and that post-pandemic absenteeism has surged, disproportionately affecting students from

economically disadvantaged backgrounds; students with disabilities; and those facing mental health challenges.

In addition, more recently, we have concerns from students from the LGBTQIA+ community and immigrant communities that are compounding those existing barriers. School counselors -- we know firsthand how those absences can impact academic success, social-emotional development; graduation rates; and future opportunities. And, school avoidance -- while it is a distinct issue from the chronic absenteeism -- we need people in spaces where they can address the psychological struggle with compassion and comprehensive responding.

We know that students are facing unprecedented levels of anxiety and depression, and without adequate school-based mental health support, many students struggle to cope and withdraw from school altogether. When students fall behind, they often develop avoidance behaviors, fearing embarrassment or frustration in the classroom. And, the more they avoid school, the harder it becomes to reintegrate. And, there could be many hoops to jump through to get a student the support that they need. Visually, we may see what they need, but in order to get to the support, we -- as the school counselor, or any other school-based mental health person -- need to jump through a series of hoops to get to that support.

Also, can't ignore the housing insecurity or lack of reliable transportation that has been referenced before. Parental work constraints contribute to that absenteeism. We have some older students who are forced to maybe have to contribute to the household and care for siblings. Just as an aside, I've had students choose to go to summer school and pay the \$400 for summer school because it's cheaper than paying for before-care for their

family. So, that is 100% factual, that you do have families playing -- prioritizing the survival over education.

And, school climate and safety, of course. Students come to school when they feel safe. If they don't feel safe, if they don't feel like it's a place where they can get care and respite, they don't attend. And, adverse peer interactions; disciplinary issues; or lack of connection to the school community are significant deterrents. School counselors play a significant role in this, of identifying, intervening, and supporting students struggling with attendance. Studies indicate that students who typically have three or more adverse childhood experiences are five times more likely to have attendance issues. However, our capacity is often stretched thin due to high caseloads and limited resources.

You may be surprised to hear that there are schools in New Jersey who do not have a dedicated school counselor in their building -- don't have a dedicated school counselor. The recommended ratio is 250 students to 1 school counselor. Sometimes we hear, "Oh, there's a social worker in the building." A social worker usually is assigned a child study team and is not a school counselor. We love and respect our amazing colleagues, but we all have a role to play, and we're all ready to play that role.

Really, what the school counselor is going to be doing is identifying early intervention and data-driven interventions or analyzing attendance patterns before it becomes chronic. Someone had mentioned earlier, "We want to be preventative; we don't want to be reactive." Living in a reactive space doesn't help anybody; it just creates more of a chaos situation. We want to be preventative, and it helps us to flag the students who are at risk and create timely interventions. It can't be something that is

a month down the road because we had to get approval from X, Y, and Z before we move forward.

We want to create partnerships with families. A lot of times, the first opportunity a family has in a community is the school; it's the first time they're getting involved. And, when the school counselor is unavailable because they're on lunch duty, that does not help build that relationship. Or, I'll reference right now we have NJ GPA going on. When the whole morning is spent doing testing, school counselors are not available for their students, and that's a shame.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right--

MS. CORRENTI: Just kind of putting that out there.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

MS. CORRENTI: The administrative support that we need for school-based mental health programs, the additional funding, everybody has kind of recognized in this conversation we need to be able to provide individualized support.

And, understanding alternative and flexible learning models--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes--

MS. CORRENTI: --being more open to understanding that we are meeting students where they are. We are still adhering to a rigid report card, and our central office has one goal -- they have reports they want to put out, and sometimes they don't meet what we need in the school buildings. We all want students to get a diploma--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right--

MS. CORRENTI: --we all want students to be successful.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

Senator Cryan, I see you have your hand raised for Jennifer.

SENATOR CRYAN: Sorry, Jen; real quick.

Somebody's data in here had that they had counselors -- one for every 225. You mentioned a spec of one to every 250.

MS. CORRENTI: Yes.

SENATOR CRYAN: Any idea on a percentage basis how many New Jersey schools actually meet that?

MS. CORRENTI: Not very many. (laughter)

So, I mean, I can get you the actual data.

We have been meeting with Assembly and Senators because, luckily for us, we have two people on this Committee who have really supported the school counseling community, and we have bills present right now in both houses. And, we-- When we meet with the different Assembly people or Senators, we reference in their districts how many school counselors per their schools--

SENATOR CRYAN: Right--

MS. CORRENTI: --just to demonstrate the need.

I can say, like, for example, my sister is a school counselor in a neighboring district, and there was one school counselor and 900 students.

SENATOR CRYAN: OK, so, it varies and fluctuates--

MS. CORRENTI: Yes--

SENATOR CRYAN: --a lot. OK.

And, just -- I meant to do this in the opening so we're all clear on the stats -- or, at least, I think they are -- that 70% of all districts are experiencing chronic absenteeism on some level. Is that correct? And, the average statewide rate is 16.6%? Just to kind of put things in perspective.

I should have did that at the beginning, and I apologize, because I think it kind of puts the conversation in context.

Thank you, Jennifer; sorry to interrupt.

Thank you.

MS. CORRENTI: No worries.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Senator McKnight.

SENATOR McKNIGHT: Yes, thank you so much.

So, Jennifer, you know myself as well as Madam Chairwoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, we have that bill to codify exactly what social -- school counselors are supposed to do. We've been battling this for a couple of years now; as of right now, both bills are in the Appropriations. So, we're waiting for that.

So, if everyone can get on board and show support for that bill, because school counselors are *so* important. And, yes, I understand that they're helping out here and there. But, they went to school for a goal, and we need to make sure that school counselors are doing what they went to school for to help our scholars to grow.

And, that one -- that ratio of 1-to-250, that's not in the bill because it was hard to get the bill up into where we are, but we are working on that as well. So, we're chopping down a tree -- we're chopping down a tree inch by inch.

But, I just want to say to you thank you so much for continuous, out here, supporting our scholars. And, it is a shame that we have school counselors 1-to-900 students -- or, even 1-to-500 students; that's a lot on one particular person.

And, I know -- I just feel in my heart that if school counselors are doing what they're supposed to do, they are also part of mitigating school chronic absenteeism.

So, again, thank you and your group for all you continue to do to help our scholars grow.

MS. CORRENTI: Thank you for the support.

And, like I said, school counselors are ready to work. We are not a group that's not ready to take on challenges.

And, some of you may be more familiar with a guidance counselor -- that's not something that exists anymore. Guidance counselors do not exist in the State of New Jersey; they haven't since about 2003. And, school counselors are mental health-based trained and accredited through colleges like that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

Thank you for that.

So, we're going to move onto our next speaker, Dr. William George; Superintendent of Schools from Monmouth Ocean Educational Service Commission.

WILLIAM O. GEORGE III, Ed.D.: Yes, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak today.

First, I want to thank the Legislatures for your time and your commitment in reviewing the information we sent beforehand. That's clear to me-- And, I really just want to say that I really appreciate that.

To my colleagues in education who I'm speaking to today, I got the Number 1 thing out of this that I wanted, which was to hope to learn from all of your best practice. So, thank you all so much.

And, for the support agencies that are joining and supporting and are very much taking on this very important issue, I am so grateful.

Carmen Morales, thank you for your questions -- great questions.

At Monmouth Ocean Educational Services Commission, that's what we do. We're a public entity, but we provide programs; services; cooperative purchasing; on top of that, shared programs to help public school districts *and* private school districts across the state on everything from managing funding to developing shared programs to maximize staff members, like counselors, or all related services. So, I think that was a really great point that you brought up.

I am here to share some of the best practices that we do at Regional Achievement Academy. We are located in Monmouth County, right off of exit 105 on the Garden State Parkway. But, we work with school districts from as far west as Trenton and as far north as Bayonne and Edison. We work in multiple counties. We primarily work with all the school districts in Monmouth and Ocean County, but our Regional Achievement Academy -- which is approaching 40 students right now; we are expanding that facility for next year -- works directly with school districts to provide these services.

We provide therapeutic services; strength-based counseling; solution-focused counseling; crisis intervention; psychiatric services, including an on-site psychiatrist one day a week and medication management and telehealth.

We-- When you talk about some of those things we do around SCL, Ms. Morales, we do experiential learning; hands-on outdoor activities; goal setting and reflections; team building and relationships; resilience; coping skills -- all of those kinds of things that I know I caught my colleagues in public education across the state are doing as well. We just have the opportunity to provide a more -- a deeper, more therapeutic experience for students who may need it at that level, that the school district may not be able to support it.

Project-based activities and electives; STEM lab; we have a New Jersey virtual school to do personalized electives -- that's another service we provide at Monmouth Ocean Educational Services. We have an onsite greenhouse and hydroponic systems, and personalized learning, and an e-sports program. And, with our new facility, we're expanding to an e-sports lab for next school year.

Who do we service? We-- We can be a full-year program or an alternative interim placement, both 45- and 90-day programs that we accept. Because, ultimately, we want to get the students back to the least restrictive environment. We serve public school -- I mean, we serve regular ed., special ed.; we deal a lot with school phobia and those behaviors yet. We talked earlier about attendance rates, and our overall attendance rate is above 90% -- our most problematic grade level is--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Wow--

DR. GEORGE: --grade 11. That could be just nothing more than the students who -- and their needs and their level of at-risk at that grade level. And, that's 83%.

We go down to fourth grade -- and through 12th grade -- and our elementary grade levels are higher attendance rates of 97% at that level. So, just a little bit more there. We--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

DR. GEORGE: Sure. Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

DR. GEORGE: Do you want me to stop there?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

DR. GEORGE: OK.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Does anyone else have--

DR. GEORGE: Any questions?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: --does any of the Committee have any questions? (No response)

Thank you so much, Dr. George. I appreciate your information.

Assemblywoman Morales.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: Really quick, thank you, Dr. George.

The students you said who you're servicing -- they come from not only Monmouth and Ocean County? They come from as far -- as you said -- Bayonne. And, these are students--

DR. GEORGE: At this time right now, we service-- Bayonne is one of the districts that we've provided programs and services with. We don't have any students from Bayonne right now. We do have students from Edison.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: And, what's your student number population right now?

DR. GEORGE: Approaching 40 students.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: Forty.

And, these are intense programs, that's why. These are students who really need more of an intensive program, and they are given this opportunity through the school district, correct?

DR. GEORGE: That's correct.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: OK.

DR. GEORGE: That is absolutely correct.

Thank you, yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN MORALES: Thank you.

DR. GEORGE: Thank you all for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you, Dr. George; thank you.

DR. GEORGE: Happy to--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Our next speaker is Dr. Mark Schwarz; Superintendent of Schools from Wood-Ridge (*sic*) Public Schools.

MARK SCHWARZ, Ed.D.: Hi, everyone.

Yes, Ridgewood Public Schools.

Nice to see you all today. It was nice to be a part of this.

Thank you to Melanie Schulz who extended the information about joining.

Thank you all so much for your interest and your service and your commitment to public schools.

There's been so many great things said about fighting chronic absenteeism here, so just hats off to all my colleagues. And, we're all - I'm so grateful that we work in a state and live in a state where there's just so many -- so much great work being done for kids.

I am going to just adjust what I was going to share to focus on things that have not been said just quite yet--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you.

DR. SCHWARZ: So, just to be clear, the reason I wanted to speak and the reason I'm passionate about chronic absenteeism is it touched me personally. I have a younger brother who is significantly disabled, and I spent a lot of my years going to -- when I was in school -- helping him get out in the morning. He had a lot of school avoidance. He went to school until he was 21 years old.

When I became an educator, I kind of developed an early knack for working with kids who were disengaged in school. I did a lot of home instruction and tutoring, so I know what it's like inside a lot of these homes. When I became an administrator, I went to a very small school district in Rockaway Borough, New Jersey -- about 600 students. At the time,

Chris Cerf was the Commissioner of Education in New Jersey, and we had the priority schools and focus schools initiative, so many schools were being kind of pressured to turn around. We were able to turn things around in the school, and the only way to do it was, as many of my colleagues shared, was to really get to know your families and recognize all the unique circumstances that lead to chronic absenteeism.

Because of our success, I was able to become superintendent there for two years. I then had an opportunity to go to Madison Public Schools -- for those of you who are familiar with Madison, it's a great school district. Much more affluent place than I had served before. And, after six years in Madison and doing -- I think -- some good work there, I was recruited to come over here to Ridgewood Public Schools.

So, I've only been here for a few years. Both here and Madison and Ridgewood we have pretty high rates of attendance in schools. But, we always-- In all school districts, you have families who have difficulties. And, so I just thought that I would share a few things that, in my opinion, don't always necessarily show up in the research and sometimes get confused in the conversation.

So, a couple of key points. First of all, when we talk about chronic absenteeism, we talk about a reported number. So, that number is reported -- self-reported by the districts through their student information system exports that go to the State. Then, they show up in the performance reports. And, to be clear, depending on what district you're looking at, these numbers sometimes can be skewed based on how the data is reported. So, it's important to note that we're talking about a generalized number. And, something that should be done is when we're having these conversations is

we should be mindful that when we -- we shouldn't look at -- be careful about looking at any one district. Large trends are, I think, are important. But, districts, when they're concerned about their chronic absenteeism, they should look very closely at their numbers and they should always do test cases on students who are showing up in their chronic absentee reports.

Another issue that I want to point out is that, in high school districts, special education -- New Jersey's rules about chronic absenteeism is significantly problematic -- I'm sorry, about graduation rates particularly, is particularly problematic, because some of those enrollment figures -- schools that have special -- students who are graduating or in school up until 21 years of age often hit their graduation rates unfairly. And, so, what ends up happening is the connection that I wanted to raise-- I want to make that point, because that's something that New Jersey has to fix, and I know there's some initiative about that. So, schools that have 18- to 21-year-old programs are often penalized in that graduation rate.

But, what I want to share about chronic absenteeism, particularly, is the fact that often it's the cases -- when you talk about mental health -- the cases where students are profoundly mentally ill, or diagnosed and are known to have a true mental illness. Those are often not the cases that are hitting us the hardest in chronic absenteeism, because those students often end up eligible for services or end up eligible for an additional placement. Additionally, students who are chronically ill, often, those students *do* end up on home instruction. And, remember, home instruction does not count against chronic absenteeism; nor is it an out-of-district placement.

We're talking about circumstances where students are in kind of a weird limbo, where they're dealing with something -- often, it's a family circumstance, but it could just be an issue with them as well. But, they're struggling, and they're -- they're kind of falling between the cracks. Chronic absenteeism often is a falling-between-the-cracks issue. And, the major crack -- a major seam -- that chronic absenteeism touches upon is the bridge between the home and the school. The reality is that it is truly primarily a parent's responsibility to get their child to school.

I like to talk and think in terms of, we have a circle of control that we can control, and then we have a sphere of influence. We cannot directly control students coming to school, but we can try to influence it. And, that's where you hear all these different strategies that folks have shared with you.

But, I would say the biggest pain points are students who are ill often, but not necessarily fully diagnosed as chronically ill; families when they're in crisis -- when parents are not in a circumstance where they can really help, they can't be relied upon to get their kids to school. And, then, I would say a lot of times in some communities, parents just don't understand what chronic absenteeism is, and they think that by letting their child stay at home, that they're really doing something nice for their child.

So, I would-- And, just, finally, just to shift to what are some things that we can -- that, as members of the Legislature, things that you can do; just throwing some ideas out there.

When we talk about transportation funding, schools are not required to provide transportation within 2 miles. Depending on a school's need, particularly for chronic absenteeism, there could potentially be

subsidized funding for transportation for districts that have additional challenges. Ridgewood would probably not be one of them, but there are many schools that may benefit from that. I know that we're not in a time where we have more money, but that is something that could certainly help districts with more chronic absenteeism problems.

I think statewide awareness campaigns, we dedicate certain months for awareness--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON:
Absolutely--

DR. SCHWARZ: --raising awareness about the importance of sending kids to school, maybe something early in the year like at the end of August or beginning of September -- a big campaign where we blast billboards all over the place, "Your kids need to be in school." I think that would be very helpful.

We talk about the importance of support for families, but I want to make-- We haven't talked a lot about truancy in this conversation. And, in my experience, those two go hand in hand in a lot of school districts because they hear all this talk about the need for supports. They're sometimes afraid to push on truancy, and that is the stick that accompanies the carrot. So, I would say it's very important for school districts to make sure that they are doing what they need to be doing to keep that pressure on, to get kids into school--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Got it--

DR. SCHWARZ: --(indiscernible) noncompliant.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Schwarz.

Thank you; thank you.

And, thank you Melanie, for making sure we got him here today. So, thank you for your help.

Our next speaker is going to be Peg Kinsell. This is the Policy Director for SPAN Parent Advocacy Network.

P E G K I N S E L L: That's right.

Peg Kinsell; thank you very much.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with the Committee on what we feel is a really important issue.

We have-- Well, let me tell you a little bit about SPAN first. SPAN is what they call the Parent Training Information Center. It is a family support center that is designated under IDEA -- the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act -- to provide technical assistance, training, support, as well as parent leadership, to parents of children with disabilities and special health-care needs.

So, I definitely appreciate the mention of students with disabilities and students with other health-care needs, because that is kind of the crux of my comments today.

Although we support other families with children at risk, and we could talk on multiple levels about their issues with school attendance, I am going to focus the beginning on this, and then certainly happy to answer any questions.

We also have found that, since COVID -- hard to believe it's almost five years, or five years now -- and the return to physical school buildings, that our calls have -- related to school refusal or avoidance; children's mental health; behavior; and school removal, which I'll talk about

in a minute as well -- have increased by at least 30%. So, it's -- as you can hear from the varied conversations today -- it's kind of difficult to just point to one cause. And, if you don't -- can't -- point to one cause, you certainly can't point to one solution.

And, while I like to focus my work now kind of on the Elvis philosophy -- you know, a little less talk, a little more action -- this is a subject where we still need a whole lot of talk. I put down just a few of the multiple reasons that we have been -- that we have found for school avoidance from bullying to IEPs and 504 plans, as well as individual health plans *not* being implemented fully, or the lack of resources or options at the school; schools not recognizing or not supporting parents looking for those supports. We have multiple families who call and say they've asked for IEP evaluations; they've asked for 504 plans; and kind of hit a brick road.

We have a lot of issues, still, around school removal. And, even though the Department issued a letter around these informal removals, those numbers still are off the charts -- although we don't really know, because nobody is collecting that data. School-- As folks have talked about earlier, school anxiety; social anxiety; depression; the social deficits. And, the other issue that we have also found is that a lot of kids that have a disability or health impairment also have a comorbidity with a mental health issue. And, because everything we do is so siloed, it's difficult sometimes to cross over those resources for families.

For example, we had a school district that was not a poor school district; they even had contracted with a company to supply mental health services. Those mental health services ended up with a 7-year-old in a partial hospitalization program. Of course, their family had insurance that

could pay for it, but that kid spent half a year out of school with the minimal bit of instruction, and by the time he transitioned to his second-grade year, he was -- had an incident the first couple days of school, and the recommendation was to put him back in the hospital. Luckily, the agency that provided the mental health services wouldn't accept him and said he just needed some outpatient support. But, these are the kinds of things that families are trying to wrangle with.

I am certainly-- Don't think every school district is bad, or not doing what they need to do. But, the bottom line is parents call us, students call us when things aren't going well.

So, I wanted to talk-- Because somebody else brought up-

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ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Peg, you bring up a really-- Your organization really helps parents navigate through the system of, "How do I get help?"

I find sometimes, if a district doesn't have a school counselor, they really don't know what to do, and your agency does a really amazing job around that.

We're going to -- one more point, and then we're going to wrap up and go to our final guest.

MS. KINSELL: Yes, I would just say that we try our best, but there is a lack of resources, and there's certainly difficulty navigating the resources.

I just want to make sure folks understand that home instruction is five hours a week for a kid who's not classified, and only 10 hours a week for a student who's classified. And, if you taught that with

virtual instructions -- which we all know how difficult it was for a lot of students with disabilities -- those kids are basically going uneducated or under-educated.

And, just, my last parting thing -- especially around the truancy -- is that different families get treated different ways. And, I've had families who have access to resources and can work things out with school refusal. I've had other families in other districts without those resources that truant officers and police officers came knocking on their door for their kid. They ended up in court. Those kind of things -- and, reported to the Department of Children and Families.

So, there's a lot of inequity in how different families and different communities are treated. So, I just wanted to--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you, yes.

Thank you so much for sharing that.

Thank you very much.

Our next guest is Betsy Ginsburg, and I believe you're introducing Dr. Rachel Goldberg.

ELISABETH GINSBURG: Yes, indeed.

And, without further ado, since it's been a very long but very interesting hearing, I will introduce Rachel Goldberg, Dr. Rachel Goldberg, who is Superintendent in Springfield.

RACHEL GOLDBERG, Ed.D.: Thank you.

I know I am the last one, so I am going to-- And, I provided some testimony, but I've adjusted it a bit kind of based on what some of the other feedback has been.

So, my name is Dr. Rachel Goldberg. As a note, I am a taxpayer in South Orange here in New Jersey. I am the parent of three students who are in the public school system. And, I am the Superintendent here in Springfield Public Schools in Union County. I am also a member of Garden State Coalition.

I want to just really shout out, as we come to the end, thank you to Ms. DiBenedetti for listening and being at the table for Garden State, to what educators are really challenged with, and helping to organize the session.

I also just want to do a really quick point of gratitude to the Governor's Office and Commissioner Dehmer, and the Department of Education, for accelerating a budget communication this year, and for making it clear.

I don't know if you've heard from a lot of us who are deeply grateful for that, but I just wanted to take a second and make sure that you as legislators know that we hear and see when we're being acknowledged, and that's deeply-- It makes us feel good about the work we do.

So, for a little context, we are a GH district. For those of you who remember and still think about the codes, we have approximately 2,200 students. We serve a full day of pre-school through grade 12. And, 72% of our budget comes from our local taxpayers. Our per-pupil expenditure per year is \$19,352 -- that was for this school year. And, that's really important, because what I'm going to be talking about a little bit here is what the cost of these are. And, unlike some of the other districts that have presented, we are a smaller district. And, so, we often don't have more

than one student in each grade, or we may have a much smaller level, and that really impacts how we can allocate resources.

Peg did a great job of talking about resources, and you've heard some other points of resources. Assemblywoman Carmen Morales brought up some issues with resources as well, and I'm going to bring that in.

We have really worked over the past few years to strengthen and build a system of supports for our students. Senator Cryan, you were referencing our school district. We have -- our guidance counselors in the middle and the high school, we have kept them with our -- I'm sorry for saying guidance counselors, Ms. Correnti. (laughter)

Our school counselors -- they kill me too -- our school counselors have less than the recommended ratio right now. They range between 216 and 226, I believe, is the caseloads in those schools. And, we're working really consciously to do that. In addition, we have a full-time SAC, who is a social worker who also offers individual and group counseling. In our upcoming budget, we are adding another second board-certified behavioral analyst, and we are opening and creating a position specifically for therapeutic options, along with using some capital funding to develop a therapeutic space in our middle school.

And, that is specifically so that we can start addressing some of the student triggers that are leading to school avoidance. We have -- just from a context -- we have less than eight -- I'm not being very specific due to privacy and trying to be random -- but we have less than eight students right now who are attending out-of-district schools because -- specifically because school avoidance is some part of their student profile. Each of those eight has an IEP. Their cases are not isolated, and has been noted before,

each of them is complex. They are an interplay of factors that include mental health diagnoses; academic difficulties; some level of bullying. Almost in every case where bullying has occurred, it is amplified by social media that has a direct impact on their coming to school. And, then family dynamics certainly has a role in that as well.

Most of these students began exhibiting specific school avoidance behaviors in middle and high school. They may have had their IEP that includes anxiety as a diagnosis, possibly prior to that, but we don't -- we haven't seen the school avoidance really begin until that adolescent period, at least in Springfield with the cases that I'm talking about. We have a couple of cases among those that the school avoidance really began, and we haven't been able to bring them back consistently since the pandemic school closures.

So, it's really important to know the financial implications on this. As I said, 72% of our budget is locally funded by the taxpayers of Springfield. And, in the '25-'26 school year, we've budgeted over \$650,000 for this small group of students -- and, that includes the out-of-district placement costs as well as the transportation. And, it's really important to know because the majority of these are private out-of-district placements. They operate without cost caps, meaning that we have to plan when those students leave that we're going to see an increase in those costs and an average between 7-10% a year.

So, despite our best efforts to develop in-house programs - - and, we are going to continue to do that -- the likelihood -- and, I believe a couple other superintendents ago, they mentioned this -- once the students go out, the likelihood of us bringing them back into the school district is very

low. And, just for a cost point, those private programs -- most of them -- there is I think one exception in there -- exceed \$100,000 a year in tuition.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Wow.

DR. GOLDBERG: Now, I'm using that to -- because I reached out to one of my fellow superintendents, similar to Dr. George. She operates -- this is Carrie Dattilo, who operates and leads the Union County Educational Services Commission. They operate five schools, including two alternative schools that specifically address at-risk students from Elizabeth, and one that is a therapeutic school. Their cost for their therapeutic school -- where they are servicing students from multiple districts, not just Elizabeth -- but multiple districts -- who are exhibiting similar behaviors -- is \$63,000 a year. And, that includes daily group -- daily group; weekly individual counseling; occupational speech therapies; and small class sizes. They have a robust support system, and they're working to provide those supports to other districts outside of that Union, as a part of their education services piece.

But, this is where we come into the place of what challenges we're facing and what help we need in navigating some of these pieces. As Assemblywoman Carter noted, in both Springfield and UCESC, staffing shortages and certification challenges -- they get very, very difficult for us to find the staff necessary to build or expand programs to meet the academic needs of students. There is a line that would say, "Well, if you're spending so much money on out-of-district placements, why don't you build the program in your district?" And, one of the challenges building the program is finding the right staff.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Wow.

DR. GOLDBERG: And, so, I'm going to finalize my piece here by asking for some suggestions. And, these are outlined, of course, in the submission, and I'm happy to answer any questions after this.

But, first and foremost, we really need to strengthen our State investment in public mental health programming. As legislators, you can help us by encouraging thoughtful development of more district or public options for supporting students struggling with these issues, where districts see population shifts or have actual physical space, that's an opportunity for the State to help develop--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Right--

DR. GOLDBERG: --fiscal support for identifying innovative programs, *and*, as was noted before--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you--

DR. GOLDBERG: --creating shared services.

So, I'll simply say the last piece -- and, this is my ask, and then I'll be quiet for a second -- is that some of your voices who have already been critical in helping us, start legislation to get rid of the archaic New Jersey First legislation. We *really* need-- I'm just deeply thankful for Co-Chair Reynolds-Jackson; for Assemblywoman Matsikoudis, who isn't here; for Assemblywoman Morales -- all of whom have worked to get legislation so that we can start expanding our reach to hire -- to have access to professionals who can help us really build those programs.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much, Dr. Goldberg.

And, then, thank you so much.

And, we have one final person: Jennifer Thompson.

SENATOR CRYAN: One quick question, or just one comment, with Dr. Goldberg. I'll be really quick.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

SENATOR CRYAN: You work with the Union County Educational Services Commission, and we pulled the data there, just to put this in perspective. Now, you're paying a lot of money; taxpayers are paying a lot of money. Their absenteeism rate for 11th and 12th grade is 68%; in K-12, it's 64%.

So, one of the things that we need to be aware of as a Committee is when we're looking at these different ways that are costing us a lot of money. In fairness, it's 51 students, so the mix may not be great. But, it certainly accents your point, Dr. Goldberg, that we all have a lot more to do.

So, thank you.

DR. GOLDBERG: No problem.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON:
Absolutely.

Thank you, Senator Cryan.

Jennifer Thompson, you want to bring us on home?

JENNIFER THOMPSON: I will try.

Thank you, guys, so much for having me.

I am going to truncate what I was going to share today; I don't want to piggyback on or reiterate what my colleagues have shared.

I am Jennifer Thompson; I am the CEO of the United Way of Hunterdon County. I also am a social worker; I have my master's degree

in social work, and a background in mental health. I also happen to be a mother of a junior high student in Hunterdon County Public Schools, so I feel uniquely qualified to have this conversation from a couple of different perspectives.

The U.S. Surgeon General identified youth mental health as the defining crisis of our lifetime, and really called us all to action through the nonprofit, for-profit, and all levels of government. The crisis has certainly been exacerbated by the lingering effects of the COVID pandemic, social isolation, etc. But, what I wanted to really do today is highlight some of the unique needs of some of our rural students. We've talked and we've heard a lot from our more urban colleagues, which is really fantastic, but I think some of Hunterdon County specifically has some unique issues that lead to school avoidance, and that I hope the Committee will take into consideration.

There are two things that I think are really important. Certainly, we've talked a little bit about bullying; academic stress; family trauma; and family stressors as being all part of the students' lack of participation in school. But, two things that we're really seeing in Hunterdon County are the lack of representation in school leadership, and school safety concerns. Studies have shown that, certainly, when students-- Students are certainly more likely to feel safe and engaged in a school where they see teachers, administrators, and staff who share their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. And, the sad reality is that across many of our communities -- and, Hunterdon County specifically, but also around the state -- that's just simply not the case.

A 2023 report from the Learning Policy Institute also found that students of color, particularly Black and Hispanic students, often

struggle with feelings of alienation in schools where they do not see themselves reflected. We see that, time and again, throughout parts of Hunterdon County; it's certainly been heightened over the last couple of months. And, I can share with you, sort of from my personal experience as a mother of a biracial child who *does not* see himself represented in school leadership, that this has certainly been a contributing factor to my son's mental health and that of his friends as well. They also have experienced school avoidance as a result of the lack of representation in school leadership. Actually, my son's former school had *no* teachers or administrators of color. And, I think that that's a real problem, and something that we need to take a look at, and address as we're talking about absenteeism, that sense of belonging, and certainly of mental health.

One of the other things that we've seen impact the students around Hunterdon County, and I'm sure around other counties, is a growing fear of school shootings and violence within our schools. And, that's a very real issue. In Hunterdon County last year, we had schools on lockdown -- our junior high and our grade schools -- due to social media threats. Multiple schools were on lockdown. While the threats were inevitably found out to be sort of unfounded, you can't underscore the significance and the impact on the students' mental health. And, this was even more significant for the students of color, because they were -- they were the targets of the social media threats.

What is happening in some of our schools, unfortunately, is that these are -- these issues also aren't being addressed; there aren't mental health supports in our schools, so our students went back to school without any processing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Yes.

MS. THOMPSON: I'll quickly touch on four things that we're doing. United Way is doing a couple of things that we think are incredibly innovative.

First and foremost, we are offering free mental health counseling to all of our community. We do this through a partner -- a for-profit telehealth partner -- in multiple languages. This reduces some of the barriers that we see in terms of transportation, cost of services, and no wait times. So, anyone over the age of 12 -- youth and parents included -- are able to come to United Way and we will connect you with free mental health counseling by licensed providers.

We're doing workshops throughout the community to normalize the conversations around mental health, with parents and educators.

We have a program called "United in Play," which really aims to reduce the barriers for kids participating in sports. We know that absenteeism in school is significantly reduced when children are part of a team, so we are working to eliminate those cost barriers, as well as educate after-school coaches and recreational coaches about youth mental health, so that they can be part of that solution. And, then, we're also doing education with parents around the community; really trying to normalize what mental health looks like in their youth.

I think going forward, those are the things that we should be thinking about--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON:
Absolutely--

MS. THOMPSON: --as a community; these unique partnerships; how the non-profit, the education, and the Legislature can come together to address these concerns.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Thank you so much.

And, I want to thank all of our presenters today.

This is only the beginning of the conversation. We've heard a lot about school avoidance; from home visits to all types of trauma-informed care. The need for more school counselors. The list can go on and on.

Members of the Committee, I just want you to know there will be a transcript available for this meeting today, and we'll be able to do a deeper dive into it to follow back up on some actionable items that was mentioned here by all of the professionals here.

So, I want to thank you so much for hanging in there with us. I know we went a little bit over, but this was a very important conversation that we really needed to hear.

And, I want to thank everybody for staying on.

So, thank you so much, and we'll be looking forward to our next meeting soon.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)