
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“The Joint Committee will meet via Zoom to receive testimony from invited guests on the reopening of schools; what is working successfully and what needs improvement”

LOCATION: Meeting via Zoom

DATE: October 19, 2021
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Ronald L. Rice, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair
Senator James Beach
Senator Joseph P. Cryan
Senator Declan J. O’Scanlon, Jr.
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly
Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce
Assemblywoman Serena DiMaso
Assemblyman Antwan L. McClellan
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca Sapp
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

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Therefore, portions of this transcript may not be completely accurate as portions were inaudible and/or indiscernible.*

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

SENATE

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



JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

ASSEMBLY

Hon. Ralph R. Caputo
Hon. BettyLou DeCrocce
Hon. Serena DiMaso
Hon. Mila M. Jasey
Hon. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson
Hon. Erik K. Simonsen
Hon. Benjie E. Wimberly

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

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

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, October 19, 2021, at 10:00 a.m., via Zoom, to receive testimony from invited guests on the reopening of schools; what is working successfully and what needs improvement.

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

Issued September 29, 2021

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ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Co-Chair): Good morning, everyone.

I want to thank everyone for coming to today's meeting of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools. It's been a while since we had the opportunity to get together, and during that time -- oh boy, has it been a roller coaster.

As you're all undoubtedly aware, the Committee is vested with the responsibility for the oversight of our state's public schools. And we legislators want to hear from you about what can best be described as the obvious reasons.

Never in our lifetime have schools, administrators, staff, ESLs, and teachers ever faced such enormous pressure on so many fronts -- the overarching goals we all agree upon: keeping staff and students safe, addressing the learning delays caused by school closures and remote learning, and a return to as much as normal as we possibly can.

We're fortunate to have with us participation from both houses and both sides of the aisle. We have invited guests representing the perspectives of wealthy districts and underserved districts; urban, suburban, and rural districts, as well as geographical diversity. This will make for a robust discussion about the protocols that are in place, their effectiveness, and how we can improve upon them.

I would be remiss if I failed to address the current Executive Orders mandating vaccinations or testing for teachers and staff, and the requirement that all persons in school buildings wear masks. The one thing we know for certain is that each of these mandates is the subject of intensely held differences of opinions. We respect those differences; but at the same

time, we are responsible for making the environment as safe as possible for all involved. And while there are currently those among us who disagree with these decisions, believing they should be left to the discretion of districts and/or parents, there are others who wholeheartedly support them. All here are free to comment upon the mandates; however, I believe our time would be better spent addressing district protocols, learning content, teacher and staff morale, how students and families are coping this year, and expectations for the 2021-2022 school year. And also how we, as legislators, can help support your efforts.

Before we begin testimony, I invite Co-Chair Senator Ron Rice to say a few words; and remind everyone that today's hearing has a two-hour hard stop. For this reason, I encourage everyone to be brief and avoid repetition where possible.

Let's begin.

Senator Rice.

SENATOR RONALD L. RICE (Co-Chair): Well, thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

Let me just say that I concur with the Assemblywoman Co-Chair's remarks.

I just want to say hello to my colleagues and all the participants; I know we're in campaign mode right now, and only a couple of weeks before elections. But it was important to have this meeting today because school has started. This morning I was looking at News 12 and saw that some of the student population in some of the schools are starting to go up with the number of students who are starting to get the COVID virus. And I think that one may have been even transmitted to an adult.

We don't know where we're going with all of this. We do know the Executive Orders, we do know where the country is with the debates, and where the politics are intervening as it relates to the facts versus fiction.

And so we do want to hear from you; and as the Assemblywoman said, it's going to be masks on and masks off. The real issue is, how do we educate these children? We know in many districts, rural and urban in particular, students fall behind just during normal times. I can imagine what's taking place now, with the confusion in households with parents trying to go to work, trying to work by Zoom, and the different kinds of changes in the lives of these families -- what has happened to these children when it comes to education. We know that our urban and rural community students are always behind. The wealthy districts oftentimes are behind too, but they're still ahead of those in these other areas. And oftentimes wealthy districts can find ways and means to spend more money on private resources, human resources, for their children.

So we need to know where we are, what we can do to help better the situation, and make sure that these kids catch up; because they're all behind right now with learning, I don't care what anybody says.

But once again, thank you, Assemblywoman. And let's get information and see where we go from here.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; thank you, Senator.

I think-- If everyone agrees, I think we're going to start with testimony so that we can leave enough time for members to weigh in as well.

Can we have a roll call first?

MS. SAPP (Executive Director): Senator Beach.

SENATOR BEACH: Yes, I'm here.

MS. SAPP: Senator O'Scanlon.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Here.

MS. SAPP: Senator Thompson; Senator Thompson is here.

Senator Rice.

SENATOR RICE: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblyman McClellan.

ASSEMBLYMAN McCLELLAN: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman DiMaso.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DiMASO: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblyman Wimberly.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Here.

MS. SAPP: And Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

Thank you so much.

We'll start--

SENATOR TESTA: You forgot me; it's Senator Testa. I'm here.

MS. SAPP: My apologies, Senator Testa. I did not know you
were here.

Thank you.

SENATOR TESTA: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN SIMONSEN: I'm here as well.

MS. SAPP: Thank you so much.

SENATOR RICE: Are there any other legislators on? (no
response)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; thank you, everyone.

And we'll begin with Steve Beatty, Vice President of NJEA; followed by Fran Pfeffer, Associate Director of Government Relations of NJEA.

Steve.

F R A N C I N E P F E F F E R: Assemblywoman, before Steve starts, I'll tell you that I'm just here with him for the question part.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. PFEFFER: He's doing the speaking.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right; thank you, Fran. I appreciate that.

Steve.

S T E V E B E A T T Y: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey.

It's nice to see you, and good morning to everyone here -- to all the members of the Assembly, all the stakeholder groups, and some good friends and colleagues. Welcome, and it's good to see you all here.

So good morning. I'm happy for the opportunity to testify.

Again, my name is Steve Beatty, and I am the proud Vice President of the New Jersey Education Association, here representing our 200,000 members from just about every nook and cranny of the state.

I want to begin by noting that there really is so much to be grateful for as New Jersey educators. We work in a state that has prioritized the health and safety of students and staff over these past horrendous 19 months. And compared with so many other states, our schools are safer because of New Jersey's approach and its collaborative nature among school

districts, public health officials, and the Administration -- the Murphy Administration, and the clear support of so many of our legislators.

But we also work in a state that's working hard to overcome past funding shortfalls. Many times the question was asked, "Where can we cut?" And thankfully, in New Jersey, we have so many elected leader asking, "Where can we invest in our students and our future?"

And as a result of this approach, plus the incredible dedication of our NJEA members and other school employees, our administrators, our principals and supervisors, our boards of education, and our parents, we have the best public schools in the nation, we have the best public schools in America. And that gives us plenty of reason to be proud of what we've done. But what it also means now is that we're here to pay special attention to where we need to. And when I speak to members across the State of New Jersey -- and I've been very fortunate these last 19 months to speak to literally thousands of members, local presidents; visiting schools, again, thankfully, these last few weeks, and talking to rank and file members in just about every nook and cranny -- they're weary and they are sometimes fearful and frustrated; and they share that with me. And it's not because they are ungrateful, and it's not because they don't care. It's because, more and more, we're asking educators to do, under current conditions -- even under the best current conditions -- what we're asking, simply, is impossible in many cases. And for educators who only want to see their students succeed, being put in impossible situations takes a mental and physical toll that has left too many of our educators at the breaking point.

If I had time I would read to you a *Forbes* article-- I think, in my written testimony you'll get there's a link to an article that was published,

talking about these conditions. And when I read the article, as a classroom teacher of 25 years, it brought me right back. It was a visceral reaction to seeing and visualizing all the things they were talking about. It struck me.

And there is one quote in there I do want to share as that perspective, in a quote where it says, “Teaching is a 10-gallon bucket in which educators are expected to carry 15 gallons of stuff. And so they make choices; and if they refuse, stuff just spills anyway. And society is always trying to add more to that bucket. You need a new public health program? Let the schools do it. People in this country don’t seem to understand some issue? Pass a law having schools -- they can explain it.

“And the pandemic has only exacerbated the situation. Teachers are now required to be able to run both in-person and online classes, create packets for students who can’t do either, negotiate mask and anti-mask policies of parents and colleagues, take care of social and mental strains on the students that they’re experiencing. Managing safety--” And the list goes on and on, dumping more and more into that bucket.

It’s not a complaint; it’s the reality that our members face every day. And these last few weeks-- And again, in my testimony -- I won’t take time to read through -- but I received an e-mail from a member in a school district talking about her struggling, right? Cases of COVID with preschoolers who can’t be vaccinated. One classroom with an unvaccinated teacher who was forced to leave and take her own sick days, while another was vaccinated, and in school without having to quarantine, all students having to quarantine. There was no guidance on some of those issues. How do we deliver related services, IEPs? Different procedures taken for different classes.

I've reached out to the President of her Local to get some (indiscernible) perspective. And what he said -- she represents so many other teachers who are struggling to do what is best. And he, as a local President said, "I don't feel like I'm a local President anymore of my members; that I'm the president of COVID."

And this is a story that is shared by so many. And again, these members didn't write to complain; they were reaching out in desperation, in many cases, because they just have done everything and it still isn't enough.

And those are just two conversations that I've had. In fact, I was in a school, again, two weeks ago, in East Windsor. I had the good fortune in the middle school to talk to their two school nurses. And of course, I don't have to explain to you the extraordinary burden our nurses face on a daily basis. And when I was a local President in my District in Bridgewater Raritan, the nurses rarely, if ever, got a break; and now they are simply breaking. And this is something that we must address: the mental health of all of our faculty and staff, but our nurses especially, who are on the front line every day dealing with the mandates, trying to navigate; being made pseudo administrators of public health. We must support them in every which way that we can, because they are that vital link in our faculties and staffs -- and making sure we support our nurses.

So my message to you today is relatively simple. Please, let's not pretend anything is back to normal in our public schools. We are working hard -- hard every day to make sure things are as normal as possible for our students. But there's nothing normal about those conditions. So we're not just going to tough it out; we need to continue this collaboration, continue the partnerships that have gotten us this far successfully. Despite the

stressors, despite all the things, we are still number one in the nation in public schools for a reason; 200,000 of them, including our educators, our principals and supervisors, our parents -- all those who have a hand in educating and supporting our students.

We must look at reevaluating our evaluation system that imposes incredible amounts of paperwork. It does nothing to benefit students; a system designed to add stress and fear, rather than promote collaboration, support, and encouragement. And no, that wasn't the intention; but I can tell you firsthand that's what we have. Our system should be based on the premise that educators are professionals and want to grow, and learn, and succeed; not that they should be monitored, controlled, and criticized to see if they're really doing their work or measure some metric. Regardless of the intent, it's counterproductive.

So in closing, what I would like you to do -- and I have some more comments in my written report that I hope you read -- but my ask of this Committee here is simple. Speak to three educators who live in your District, preferably people you don't already know -- I would be happy to provide you with names and contact information, if that would help you -- and ask them how their year is going. Ask them what support they need and what their students need now, but also in the future. We must always work with intention and sustainability towards those ends of meeting every single student and their families where they are. Kids go to school, but they live in their communities; they live in there with their families. We must always keep that in mind.

So ask them what they need, ask them what's getting in the way of their success, ask them what their elected leaders could do to support them

in their efforts to help our students. And I believe you'll find exactly what I have found to always be true: that they are passionate, that they are empathetic, that they love all of their students no matter what the conditions. You'll find that they are beyond exhausted by the demands that are put on them, and you'll find that they're not sure whether or not they can sustain the pace and the pressure of the past 19 months that shows no signs of slowing down. Then ask them, "What can we do to reduce that pressure? What can we do to help you focus on your students and make it better?" Because they'll tell you; and when they tell you, do that.

So I thank you for your time very much, and I appreciate any comments or follow-up in addition, now or later on.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; thank you, Steve.

I appreciate all of your words. And I'm going to ask our members to hold their questions until we have a chance to hear from everyone. Because we do have a long list of speakers, and we do want to hear from you.

Assemblyman McClellan is on; he's not on the Committee, but you've joined us, so thank you very much.

And Senator Joe Cryan is also on the call now.

With that, I would like to ask-- Fran, you're going to hold until the end -- right? -- and answer questions.

So next up is Melanie Schulz, Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Association of School Administrators. And she will introduce her Superintendents, who would like to speak this morning.

MELANIE SCHULZ: Good morning Co-Chairs, Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey; and members of the Committee. It's good to be here with all of you.

Thank you for inviting the New Jersey Association of School Administrators to join in a conversation about school reopening -- what's working, what needs improvement, and what the State can do to help.

With me today are three Superintendents, who are here to give you information about their Districts -- what they have seen transpire during this unprecedented time in history when the COVID pandemic changed all of our lives; but certainly as it has affected our students, our school leaders, our teaching staff, and our communities.

With me today -- first is Dr. Diana Mitchell; Dr. Mitchell leads the Plainfield School District. Located in Union County, this former Abbott District serves students in grades K to 12, as well as the Plainfield Public Pre-School program.

Next is Mr. Tony Trongone. Mr. Trongone is the Chief School Officer in the Millville Public Schools located in Cumberland County. Also a former Abbott District, students range in grades from Pre-K through grade 12. And Mr. Trongone is also an officer of NJASA as our President-Elect.

Our final presenter is Ms. Sarah Bilotti. Ms. Bilotti is the Superintendent of North Warren Hills Regional High School District, which is located in Warren County; and the District serves students in grades 7 through 12.

I thank you again for the opportunity to converse and collaborate with you. And I would just like you to hear from our members, so I'm going to end my remarks there.

And I believe Dr. Mitchell will start off, if it's all right with all of you.

DIANA MITCHELL, Ed.D.: Sure; thank you, Melanie.

Good morning, Senator Rice, Assemblywoman Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

Thank you for listening to some of the burning concerns we're experiencing in Plainfield Public Schools.

My name is Diana Mitchell; I'm the Chief School Administrator. This is my third year, and this is my 30th year in service to students and families in public education, and probably has been one of my most challenging years due to the pandemic.

A little bit about Plainfield: We're located about 35 miles southwest of New York City. We have an annual operating budget of \$220 million. We serve 13 schools, 14 Pre-K centers, 8,238 students, 1,500 employees. Of those, 80 percent of our students qualify as free and reduced meals; 16 percent of the students with disabilities; 42 percent English language learners; and we are a former Abbott District.

Our student demographics: 23 percent African American, 75.5 percent Hispanic, 1.18 percent other; and 0.34 multiple races.

I'm here today to share a few concerns with you.

Number one: Over the past three months I have registered 818 new students -- and I know that Ms. Schulz shared with you my presentation as a part of the transcript -- and this is really unprecedented as opposed to previous years. We're used to having 300, 400, 500 -- maybe up to 700; we have never registered 818 students in three months. This is from July 1 to October 15. Of those, 532 qualify for bilingual, and 286 are English speakers.

This has effected our facilities; we are bursting at the seams. Our classrooms are 28-plus students. We have a teacher shortage -- bilingual teachers are basically non-existent; we can't find any. Employee morale is sinking as I speak due to the COVID protocols and the added stress of additional students. And social distancing is almost impossible.

There is an added stress on our food services program, and also we have had to purchase additional curriculum and instruction materials in order to accommodate the additional students.

Transportation: In a good year, I would have 37 buses operating. Today I have 16 buses. Some students are getting home at 5 and 6 o'clock in the evening due to this transportation concern -- and we're talking little kids, kindergarteners and 1st graders. And some students are just not being transported. Soliciting bids from the contractors is ineffective. Some have given us quotes as large as 500 to 1,000 students (*sic*) per day for one student.

Vacancies: I have 30 teaching vacancies today. Substitutes are non-existent; we get who we can. There are current delays in getting the teachers that we can get processed at NJDOE, which I have spoken with my Union County Superintendent, Mr. Palmieri, about.

Also, there is added stress, especially on our nurses. The additional staffing required for COVID vaccine management. My Director of Student Services can no longer service through this because her day revolves around COVID management.

All of these concerns have added to the stress of teaching and learning, which is why I, along with my 1,500 employees, report to work every day.

Thank you for your time, and thank you for listening.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Superintendent Mitchell.

I was sitting here making notes as you spoke. And I have heard some of these numbers before, and I-- Clearly, we're going to have to figure out some way to support districts like Plainfield.

And I will just say, on a personal note, my sister lives with us now, and she teaches in a high school in Newark. And so, on a daily basis, I hear about the challenges that teachers, and students, and parents are facing. I can't say that we have the answers, but I think that together we must come up with some ways to support all of you. It's an untenable situation, certainly.

Thank you.

Next up, Sarah Bilotti, Superintendent of North Warren Regional School District.

SARAH BILOTTI: Thank you.

Good morning. Thank you for inviting us to speak to you today on these important issues.

A little bit about North Warren: We are a rural, secondary Regional District in northwest Warren County. We have about 800 students, but our District covers over 100 square miles of land. To help you visualize it, the Appalachian Trail actually runs across the entire northern border of our District. It's a beautiful area of the state, with a wonderful set of parents and students; and I'm proud to represent the community as its educational leader for the last seven years.

I want to open my remarks with some positives. The energy that we have felt this year has been incredible. These kids want to be back, they

want to learn. They want to be middle schoolers and high schoolers. We have had a huge up-swelling of school spirit. Kids have asked if the pep band could *play us in* on Fridays, which is where the pep band stands out front when the students get off the bus and then goes around the hallways to start off our first period -- and we've been doing that.

The students decided that their song for this year is going to be John Denver's "Country Roads" -- very appropriate for our region -- and it's been a blast to support them in that. We've played it over our PA system in the morning; the band and the chorus purchased the music for it and began learning to play it on their instruments. Last Friday night we had a spectacular homecoming football game, where we played it at the very end after our alma mater. And the marching band horn section joined in as all of the students sang it at the top of their lungs. And the sheer joy on their faces gave me some relief and some hope that things are going to be okay. These students are resilient, and we are seeing that.

But that said, we do still have hurdles to overcome. We recognize that the students need a lot of extra. This is the most traumatic thing that they -- well, *we* -- have ever collectively experienced, and these kids need support academically and emotionally. Our school counseling department is in overdrive, supporting our kids. Our intervention teams are providing three times the amount of intervention support than normal, and we are focusing on data and our own benchmark assessments to make sure that we address learning gaps, and are continuing to meet students where they are and bringing them to where they need to be.

These efforts take a lot of resources, both time and financial. Assemblywoman Jasey mentioned staff morale, and Mr. Beatty mentioned

that teachers are weary. It's been hard. There's a lot of pressure on them to make sure that our kids make substantial learning gains this year.

I heard a phrase the other day that really resonated with me. I heard that our teachers are *June-tired*, meaning that the general level of stress we are experiencing is being felt by our staff, and they're almost feeling the same stress they would at the end of the year as we're wrapping up -- and it's only October.

We're doing things internally to help with staff morale, as well as our own school spirit; but I wanted you to be aware that this is a phenomenon that we're seeing.

In addition to all of this, we, unfortunately, are a District that is facing a 25 percent overall budget reduction through S2, chapter 67. These cuts have been very difficult for us to manage, even pre-pandemic. And as a result, despite our creative efforts at funding and expense allocation, we've lost many programs, specifically in our lower-enrolled courses such as career tech ed and AP classes.

We're managing all of these things, along with our budgetary losses; but I am concerned about our upcoming budget cycle. We would ask the Legislature to consider a 2 percent cap exemption for COVID-specific expenses. Right now there are exemptions for healthcare costs that allow you to go above the 2 percent cap when circumstances beyond your control cause your healthcare costs to rise. I think we need a similar solution for unexpected COVID expenses, such as the extreme increase in the cost of transportation due to the shortage of bus drivers; the cost of substitute teachers due to the shortage of teachers statewide; and the rising fuel costs.

As an example, we were paying under \$1 per gallon for our heating fuel; but because of the supply chain issues and overall increases to fuel costs, right now our commercial heating fuel is coming in at over \$2.50 a gallon. The increase we are anticipating for fuel this year is going to be the equivalent of 1.5 percent of our tax levy. That eats up almost our entire allowable rate.

A bus run last year that may have cost us \$115 a day can now be as much as \$300 a day, and that's for bus companies that truly are trying to help us and are not price gouging.

I know a cap extension bill for underfunded districts was vetoed by the Governor in January of 2020, but our situation has changed dramatically since then and we feel it should be revisited. He stated that the reason he was vetoing it is because it didn't have enough deliberation. However, I think this new climate of unexpected costs, especially since it did have joint support in 2020, means that it really needs to be revisited.

For a District like mine, a 2 percent tax levy exemption would probably be the most impactful piece of legislation that could help us maintain focus on kids.

For our District, we pride ourselves on being very efficient. Our costs per pupil are well below the State average, and we've worked hard to instill trust in our community.

I often say that we did everything right. We gave back to our taxpayers when we could, and we maintained small tax levy increases over the last 15 years.

With the budget cuts from S2 and the unexpected fixed cost increases due to COVID, we're very concerned about what this will do as we move forward.

I've heard from the State that we should be using ESSER or (indiscernible) or ARPA money to offset these costs; but in my District we're losing almost \$2 million over the next three years, but have only received \$400,000 in ESSER costs (*sic*). It's just not commensurate.

I know you know about the bus driver shortages, and I understand that the regulations around bus driver licensure are largely driven by the Federal government. But any leeway you can give -- with the scheduling of tests or the administration of the exams -- would really help. We have routes not running, and we have students being picked up an hour-and-a-half before school starts and being dropped off over two hours after the end of our day.

As for the teacher shortage, school nurse shortage, and substitute teacher shortage, I want to be sure that we're cautious in our solutions so as to not dilute the quality of our teacher pool. In New Jersey we are often ranked number one in the nation instructionally. This is due to our strong and prepared teacher candidates. Our teachers make us great, and we need to make sure that any allowances for easier teacher certification have considerations for how we, as school districts, will support, mentor, and retain teachers in our ranks once they're hired. If we make it easier to become a teacher we must ensure that measures are put in place to adequately train those teachers to the high caliber that we are accustomed to here in New Jersey.

I'm aware of the equity concerns with our pre-service teacher training programs, and I do support measures that level the playing field for our teacher candidates. But I also feel like emphasis must be placed on maintaining a teacher force that continues to drive our students to the top. Educational researchers, such as Linda Darling-Hammond and Thomas Friedman, both conclude that highly trained, well-licensed teachers are the single most important factor in student success. We in New Jersey are often used as a case study nationally because of our high caliber teacher training programs, our teacher evaluation programs, and our pre-service teaching programs. We turn out highly qualified teachers more so than other states, and we don't want to lose that rigor.

I think, similarly, we must approach any policy regarding the permanency of virtual learning as an option for New Jersey students with caution. Many regions of our state, including mine, do not have consistent, reliable access to high-speed Internet. We learned that during the pandemic. We also saw that virtual learning disproportionately impacted students of lower socioeconomic status, and disproportionately impacted students in homes where primary caregivers worked outside the home -- again, impacting our lower income families. Virtual instruction was also shown to be difficult for students with certain disabilities.

Any changes to allow a full virtual option for students must be carefully considered. We have seen throughout this pandemic that in-person face time with students is precious.

While we managed virtual learning successfully over the last 18 months, there are caveats and lessons learned about the disproportionate negative impact of virtual instruction on our most vulnerable students that

we must consider and mitigate if we're going to consider a permanent virtual option as we move forward.

I also want to extend thanks and appreciation to all of you for continuing to support our students and our schools. We're grateful that you are taking the time to consider these important issues facing our great State's students as we emerge from this pandemic and figure out our new path forward.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Superintendent. That was a lot of good information, and I made notes. I hope that your comments, and all the comments given today, are also in writing and can be submitted to our staff so that it can be distributed.

Next up we have Superintendent Tony Trongone; I don't know if I pronounced your name correctly.

T O N Y T R O N G O N E: You said it correctly.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Oh, thank you; good. Millville Public Schools.

MR. TRONGONE: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Good morning.

MR. TRONGONE: Good morning, members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today, and thanks to my colleagues Diana and Sarah for their testimony. And I concur with their concerns.

I am the Superintendent of Millville Public Schools in Cumberland County. I'm also proud to serve as New Jersey's Commissioner

for Military Connected Students; and I'm also the President-Elect of NJASA, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators.

In Millville, we're approximately 6,000 students and 1,000 employees. We just finished a successful Pre-K to 12 summer learning program. We had close to 800 students enrolled in that program that provided meals, an academic program, enrichment activities, and a social/emotional program, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. And we had before- and after-care, and it was for four days a week for five weeks. And we're looking forward to doing the same, if not better, for next summer.

For the current 2021-2022 school year we reduced class sizes in grades K-5 to keep kids in school a full day, five days a week. We have a cap of 15 students in grades Pre-K to 2, and a cap of 18 students in grades 3 to 5. Previously, we had class sizes upwards of 29 students in a class in those grade levels. We hired 24 more teaching staff, and in the midst of sustaining those positions we are tightening our belts fiscally to keep those position when the CARES Act funding goes away.

We are very proud to say that we've had a successful opening of school. Kids are in school again every day for a full day; and teaching and learning is taking place.

We also have implemented weekly COVID testing for unvaccinated staff during their contractual hours, and also provided a community pod for members of our community, that began October 4, for both the in-school COVID testing for our employees and also for our community outside the school.

I polled various superintendents across the state, and here are their concerns.

As was mentioned, CDL licensing and bus drivers. We need to lobby the Federal government to remove the portion of the test which requires the under-the-hood knowledge. As you know, bus drivers drive buses, they don't repair them. Due to the lack of access and frequency to the CDL testing process, the Motor Vehicle Commission needs to reallocate their staff to expedite licensing.

Staffing: Reallocate more New Jersey Department of Ed staff to expedite teaching and learning -- teaching and substitute certification. The process has been slow, and there's a significant backlog that needs to be addressed.

And finally, postpone the QSAC cycle for the 2022-2023 school year. Almost all the auditing, finance, governance, and facilities already takes place on a monthly and annual basis. The instruction and program portion of the QSAC process is heavily weighted on State assessment data, and the last Administration of the State test was two years ago in the 2018-2019 school year. So instead of having that process for this year, reallocate Department of Ed staff in county offices to support schools in their instructional programs. And oversight of facilities -- going through a checklist via walkthroughs.

Changing up now-- The Legislative Branch needs to work with the Executive Branch to utilize the billions of dollars the Federal government has allocated to the State to address emergent infrastructure needs, such as HVAC and drinking water needs in all schools. Simply put, follow the existing ROD grant process. If you're familiar with that, it's Regular Operating Districts -- ROD grant process -- and include the SDA districts in the ROD grant program. Instead of the State funding 100 percent of all

emergent HVAC projects in SDA districts, have them pay a percentage based on the school funding formula. Millville is an SDA school district; I'll let you know that. So for example, Millville would level its ESSER III funding for its 27 percent funding formula share of the cost, and then the State would provide 73 percent of the cost of an emergent project. Of course, there needs to be a vetting of the needs -- of which the FDA is currently assessing -- so there will be checks and balances in the process.

As I mentioned, Millville will be responsible for 27 percent of an emergent project; Bridgton, 77 percent; and Newark, 16 percent. And the cap for local contribution for other LEAs would be 60 percent which, as mentioned, is the current ROD grant process. The current process has 429 emergent projects that have been submitted to the SDA, with the SDA only funding 15 of the 429. Surely this process needs to be adjusted and follow the school funding formula to be fair and also financially feasible to everyone.

Again, thank you for your time, and I'm open for any questions that you might have.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

I was writing as fast as I could. So I look forward to seeing your comments in print, because these are the kinds of recommendations that we really need. And those of you who are on the ground, working in districts, managing budgets, are the best people to inform DOE in terms of what you need.

Thank you very much.

Next up we have Deb Bradley, Director of Government Relations for New Jersey Principals and Supervisors. And with her is Karen Bingert, I believe, Executive Director of Principals and Supervisors.

DEBRA BRADLEY, Esq.: Good morning, Chairman Rice, Co-Chair Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee.

I'm Debbie Bradley, Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors. We represent principals, assistant principals, directors, and supervisory staff leading our public schools.

It's my distinct pleasure this morning to introduce to you Karen Bingert, our newly appointed Executive Director. Karen is a life-long educator, having served in both urban and suburban settings. Most recently, until July 1, Karen was the proud Principal of Hillsborough High School. And this morning we'd like to share with you the input of our members on the school year so far.

And Karen will start out, and at the end I'll chime in with some recommendations.

KAREN A. BINGERT: Thank you very much, Debbie.

Good morning, Chairman Rice, Co-Chair Jasey, members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools, and other esteemed guests.

It's truly my pleasure to meet with you this morning to talk about what's happening in our schools, and the impact of the pandemic on our members and on the schools that they lead.

So first and foremost, I do want to just thank our principals, vice principals, supervisors, and directors of New Jersey. These are our members who have worked so hard to open schools this year and to overcome truly unique and evolving challenges.

I also want to thank the teachers, support staff members, custodial and maintenance staff members, the bus drivers who are coming in,

and all of these people who are making our schools welcoming and safe places for New Jersey students.

Our New Jersey educators, across the board -- any role they play in a school -- are truly spectacular, and they deserve thanks and acknowledgement every minute of every day. And we can't ever let them forget how much we value them.

I'd also like to thank you for your ongoing support, and for giving us a forum today to check in to share the experiences of our members in -- I can't even believe I'm saying it, but yet, another year of a pandemic.

So in your possession is a more comprehensive document that outlines what we're hearing from our members right now. We had the opportunity to sit down with several of our members -- actually, quite a wide array of them, K through 12, north, south, and central Jersey, urban, suburban, rural -- and get information from them about what's working, what's not working. We asked them to share any pleasant surprises for the things that they were nervous about that went better than expected, as well as to share their worst fears come to fruition -- which they had as well, unfortunately.

So first the good news -- what's working: Kids are back in school. Teachers love having them back. I think Sarah hit the nail on the head when she talked about the joyful experiences that are happening in our buildings, as students and staff re-enjoy the learning, and academic and extracurricular experiences of what it takes to go to school. We know that teachers don't teach subjects, they teach children. We know that principals are there for kids to do what they need to do, and we're just so thankful that those

childhood memories that people treasure for the rest of their lives are having the opportunity to happen again with schools being open.

And the work is definitely underway. Students are being assessed; they are giving-- Where they are right now is being identified, and they're being given the extra supports to move ahead, to accelerate, to fill in any gaps as they reveal themselves. And they are being given the chance to feel the success that we all know they are capable of demonstrating.

Their social/emotional needs are being met in every way possible, although we know that all of this is a very difficult process to go through because not everybody's feeling the same right now. We've all talked over the years about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. And if your personal well-being, your food, your mental and physical well-being are not taken care -- if you're exhausted -- education takes a very far back seat because you, first and foremost, need to be in good shape. And that is a very tall order right now.

Our leaders are working and our teachers are working on issues of equity, trying to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, both in our staffing, as well as in the experiences of our students, recognizing that this pandemic has hit people in vastly different ways depending upon how fortunate they are with some of the circumstances in their life. And that has presented new challenges as well.

And all of this just takes a lot of extra TLC from our teachers and our administrators. And they are giving, and giving, and giving, and they're working hard to restore, in schools, the social norms that have led to safety and success for their students.

I even want to chime in and say we've actually heard some very good feedback on the Start Strong assessments. That's not to say that it

wasn't really frustrating to try to set those up at the beginning of the year, because it was still a full standardized assessment set up, and that is quite labor-intensive. But the people who we've heard back from with favorable commentary did talk about the fact that they got their results right away, and could look at that and factor that into the other measures that they were using to assess their students. And they just found it to be far more helpful than other standardized assessments where the results may be coming in months and months later.

So these are some of the things that have been going really well, and we're just so happy to be able to celebrate that with the staff.

You've heard some commonality and concerns that we're facing right now. And let me touch upon some of the things that are not working, according to what our members believe.

To say that COVID management is all consuming is actually a complete understatement. We know that there are not enough school nurses. The nurses are working all day, every day, late into the evening, weekends, to try to handle everything that needs to be done when it comes to contact tracing, and on top of handling all of the other health concerns in a school. And you're going to hear a phrase from me a few times, and that phrase is that these people are *at the breaking point*.

Our VPs are being reassigned. Instead of handling student discipline and helping with the social/emotional factors that are going on in schools, they are working on contact tracing all day, every day. And our Vice Principals are at the breaking point. In our schools where principals are the ones -- where there are no vice principals, there are no other administrative support positions in place -- our principals are handling contact tracing all

day, every day, all weekend, without break, leaving very little time to do the things that they need to do as the school leaders that they are. And our principals are at the breaking point.

It is truly a 24/7 job to contact trace, especially in the larger schools and especially with limited staff. So this is happening, probably, and interrupting, probably, I would say, 50 to 65 percent of a person's day if contact tracing is your responsibility. And everything else gets shoved to after hours or in the minutes in between. And I think that it is so important to understand that we can come into a meeting like this with some of our members and we see a screen full of all of these different faces -- with people who somewhat know each other, or barely know each other, or don't know each other at all -- and our principals are fighting back tears; their voices are breaking as they're describing what they're experiencing. They are talking about retiring early. They are talking about just flat-out resigning, even if they are not eligible for retirement. And they are at the breaking point.

I think Sarah was the one who said that it's like June in October. In my school we always talked about March. March always seemed to be the month that there were no breaks in; there wasn't a single day off, and everybody just felt it. And we always joked about it being March Madness and having nothing to do with basketball; and that March was just this month that just kind of pummeled you. And it's March or April, May, or June in schools right now, and it is only the third week of October. And that is the level of exhaustion that people are feeling.

Now, our school leaders want to provide solutions. They light up as they talk about what their students are doing, and that's where they

find their energy. But they are running out of steam in being able to continue this at this pace.

Staffing is a massive concern. Substitutes, as has been mentioned-- When there are no substitutes to come in, people are being pulled from their other very important responsibilities. School counselors go into classrooms and are teaching. Supervisors are being pulled from the district level and being put into classrooms. Vice principals are going into classrooms and providing coverage. Principals are sitting and providing coverage, and that means all of those other things are not getting done.

We know about the busing issue. No student should get home at 6 o'clock at night for need of waiting for a bus, and I know that we're all in agreement on that.

Even cafeteria staff and paraprofessionals are hard to find, and very often those roles could be filled by people who live in the community and just want to be a part of the schools. And we can't find people to fill those as well.

And I have to tell you, as a career educator, and as somebody who's here to advocate for our school leaders and our principals, the teacher pipeline and the principal and supervisory pipeline -- we're not just looking at a pool that is now shallow; we are looking at a pool that is running incredibly dry. And we are very concerned, looking down the line, that even should the pandemic settle, it will be a decade or more until schools rebound with the staffing that is needed.

And then I just have to address that tensions are high and tolerance is low. I don't know that people can really understand what school leaders go through in responding to parent concerns, just in general, as well

as when an issue arises. The e-mails that come in are attacking, threatening, heartbreaking, and completely devoid of understanding that people have the limits thrust upon them that they're dealing with. Our members are experiencing pushback on matters that are completely out of their control, and people still show up at board meetings, call them out by name, and threaten to fire them.

On a scale of 1 to 10, not everything should be a 10. But most things, most questions that are coming in at this point, are coming in in that 7, 8, and 9 range. And then once social media gets involved, it vaults over a 10 and is starting to land in that 20 and 30 range of your whole world, your whole personal life, your whole reputation that you've established over the course of your career, is now blowing up and being undermined.

We hope -- and I think it's one of the things that I love about being an educator is -- that we are eternally optimistic. I don't know how we do it; I really don't. But we are always hoping that tomorrow is better. And the student who makes a mistake today is going to come in with a clean slate tomorrow. And the parent who is difficult and attacking of us is going to be given another opportunity tomorrow. But I don't know that everybody gives principals and supervisors the opportunity that we're affording them. And as service leaders, the resilience that we have is starting to wear thin. And I'm really very concerned about our members' well-being. We really need to assume good intentions on all sides, and we need to focus on collaboration and communication.

And I know this information is all very broad, but I really did want to paint a little bit of a picture for you, especially because I have seen people who I have known for decades, both through my role as a principal,

my work at the county level, my work at the State level. People who I have known to be the eternal optimists, the cheerleaders, the ones who are always coming up with the bright ideas. And I am seeing them breaking down in front of me, and I'm heartbroken for that.

And so because educators always like to bring suggestions and solutions, we actually -- we know that you want to help, and frankly we want you to help, because we will take all of the help that you can give us. We're always looking for solutions, and so I'm going to turn this back over to Debbie Bradley to talk about some of the solutions that we have to offer. We are here at your disposal with any questions at any time, and we just really do appreciate the support that you have afforded us throughout the pandemic and today to try to move things forward and support our educational leaders in the state.

And I thank you for your time, and I'll turn it over to Debbie Bradley.

MS. BRADLEY: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Karen.

MS. BRADLEY: We have a few recommendations I'd like to share with the Committee, the first being making the issue of school staffing a top priority of the Legislature, especially for teaching staff members, critical school staff, and the leadership pipeline. And specifically, you've done that in a lot of areas in the past by moving legislation dealing with substitutes that's been signed into law, and some legislation dealing with school nurses.

But we urge you to support the final passage of legislation you introduced, Assemblywoman Jasey -- Assembly Bill 5576 -- that would allow retired teachers to return to the classroom during a State of Emergency to

help us out in terms of staffing. These individuals bring experience and expertise to us, and that legislation would allow them to come back to work to help us man our classrooms.

Additionally, we recommend that you introduce legislation to eliminate the residency requirement to work in New Jersey schools, through the repeal of the New Jersey First Act. This statute has served as a barrier to hiring. To many potential staff members, New Jersey is a state that borders several other states, and our members have been ready to hire qualified staff members from New York, Pennsylvania, and Delaware but have been unable to do so due to the provisions of that residency law.

Thirdly, we recommend that you consider developing additional legislation to create incentives for individuals to enter the teaching profession and to continue efforts to streamline certification without sacrificing teacher quality. Particularly, one thing I know Karen wanted to mention was the Governor's Teaching Scholars Program.

Karen.

MS. BINGERT: Yes, I would be happy to jump in on this.

I remember a 17-year-old girl who was going to high school, with parents who owned their own business and really struggled financially. And if it hadn't been for a high school counselor who reached out to her and said, "I hear that you really are thinking about going into education, and I think that that might be a financial issue for you. Have you ever heard of this thing called the Governor's Teaching Scholarship?"

That girl had not heard of it. That guidance counselor said, "We're going to put you in for this, and let's see what happens." And lo and behold, I found myself at a reception with Governor Kean being awarded the

Governor's Teaching Scholarship. And in return for attending school in New Jersey and agreeing to work either in an urban, or a suburban, or rural district -- urban for a shorter period of time, suburban for a slightly longer period of time -- my entire college was paid for. And I have to tell you, I wouldn't have been able to go. And programs like that make the difference.

I was on the fence: Did I want to go into journalism -- because I'm an English geek -- or did I want to go into education? And I went into education; and, clearly, as I'm sitting here as the Executive Director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, I never looked back.

So programs like that, that take kids who have so much promise but may not have the opportunity presented to them, and providing them that opportunity -- that stuff is life-changing, and let's build that teacher population and that teacher pipeline that way.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much for the specific recommendations. I really appreciate that.

Deb, do you have anything else to add? Because we have a lot of people to hear from yet.

MS. BRADLEY: We can wrap it up really quickly -- just saying we agree with the prior recommendations on QSAC, and we simply ask that the Committee be willing to work with us, bring us to the table, before we enact new mandates that would shift us away from working with kids.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

Moving along -- Christine Burton, Superintendent of Milburn Township Public Schools, representing Garden State Coalition of Schools.

And I would ask if something in your remarks has already been mentioned that you skip it and move on. Because I want to hear from everyone. And as I said earlier, we have a hard stop at noon, I believe.

Thank you.

Christine.

CHRISTINE BURTON, Ed.D.: Thank you.

Good morning, Chairman Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey, and the members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

Christine Burton, Superintendent in Millburn.

I'm just going to jump down to focus on three main areas in our planning for the start of school: mental health supports, curricular revisions, and the start time.

To prepare for mental health concerns, we did engage with additional mental health consultants who would help at all of our eight schools -- we have just under 5,000 students -- who were used to help throughout the week. These were Federal grants that we used to help offset the costs for these mental health professionals. They provide one-on-one counseling for our students, professional development. They just did it at our Oktoberfest and Development Day, as well as in-home supports for families.

Over the summer we addressed essential content and assessment in our curricula, fully understanding that our students, on some level, would need to have a review, refreshers, or re-teaching in order to have, really, those prerequisite skills to effectively engage with the new grade levels or their new courses.

We have also-- With regard to time, we had a multi-year, district-wide investigation where we were able to take-- This year was a first step in our later start time for our schools. We knew that the stamina would need to be built up again for a full day of school, and having a slightly later start time with more sleep would help and would be advantageous for our students.

So the challenges-- Certainly we had preparations; but the magnitude, as my colleagues have mentioned with regard to bus drivers, teachers, lunch aides, crossing guards-- We had to combine busing routes that eliminated some of our subscription busing, again trying to find solutions to these problems, to gain drivers, to service our mandated routes.

Our sub service-- Again, they do recruiting events; they can find no one, as my colleagues have mentioned.

World Language -- that was the hardest to find. We've had to go with a virtual vender to continue to provide our programs, as opposed to having and forcing our kids to take other world languages because we couldn't find teachers.

(Indiscernible) add to, in the realm of the support that the districts need regarding transportation, echoing the CDL. Bus drivers -- the under-the-hood and the mechanical requirements. Bus drivers are not truck drivers; they don't have to go under the hood. They fall back on calling for a backup bus.

We would need legislative advocacy, particularly focused at the Federal level, that would help making the bus driver requirements commensurate with their duties in driving a school bus.

Also I'd add that the new training requirements won't allow school districts, as well as our bus contractors, to train new drivers; and, therefore, we'll need to seek out Federal DOT approved instructors, again taking more time and more resources to secure (indiscernible).

On the personnel front -- I understand that there is legislation in the pipeline for individuals with 30 versus 60 credits. This measure, again, would help open up some of the availabilities of additional candidates.

We certainly (indiscernible) for several years (indiscernible) reportage, and I think that eventuality is here today.

It would be helpful to have additional staffing at the State level who could help expedite the criminal background checks. Even if we were able to -- and speaking with my director of HR -- if we were able to find personnel to fill vacancies, the fingerprinting and criminal background checks add weeks to the process for getting our personnel in our schools.

Another time saver we could use help with, regarding the engagement with the NJDOE on reports and NJ Smart submissions -- the electronic software is woefully in need of upgrades. For example, just last week the October 15 submission was due. The wait time for processing the NJ Smart submissions took a good part of a day to wait just for an error confirmation that literally adds days to this process. Again, that's time that our staff is just waiting around. Some of them are up until 11 and 12 o'clock at night because of the -- just the time that it takes for submissions.

And I'll add, in terms of the COVID-related requirements: Our district nurses have been, again-- I mean, I deal with all of them, with them, contact tracing over the weekends until late at nights. They've been responsible for all the COVID protocols, the contact tracing, in conjunction

with the DOH. Now they also have the responsibility of this most recent COVID data collection reporting. They've had to keep elaborate spreadsheets beyond simply-- We have a District Dashboard of positive cases; but also the testing, symptoms. Honestly, the data reporting requirements are overwhelming. I refer to them as my most resilient staff (indiscernible). Regarding (indiscernible) students and families since February of this year and will continue for (indiscernible).

And I certainly want to acknowledge our community that has partnered with us to support the health and safety of our students and our staff in order to keep our schools in a full day of teaching and learning.

Members of the Joint Committee, again I thank you for your time, attention, and the opportunity to share this testimony with you this morning.

So thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Superintendent. I look forward to seeing-- I was making notes, but I think I'll wait for the written -- for the suggestions that you made as well.

Next up we have James Earle, Superintendent of the Trenton Public Schools.

Superintendent Earle.

J A M E S E A R L E: Good morning, and thank you to the members of the Joint Committee for inviting me to share information about Trenton.

I'm in my third and fourth month of this year, so I'm just getting started, and joining Trenton in probably the most difficult time of our lifetimes and certainly in the District.

So the first thing I'll say is, I won't repeat what my colleagues have shared because Trenton, of course, is in a similar position with staffing issues, and shortages, and transportation, and buses -- you know, the process of getting people approved to drive buses.

New teachers: I do echo the sentiment about maybe rescinding the rule that allows people from out of state to be hired in New Jersey, because we border -- we're right on the border of Pennsylvania, and there are opportunities there, particularly when you're in shortages.

We have-- I echo Superintendent Trongone's message about -- we feel like, under the conditions of not being here for two years, we had a successful opening. However, there are tremendous challenges. We are still concerned about transportation. We're better today than we were when we started. We finally have bus drivers here, and a bus driver for each bus. And then we're dealing with one-to-one aide shortages for students with special needs. Those are critical areas for us, and to be able to process those very quickly.

But our students and our staff -- they've been very compliant with health and safety protocols. I'm excited that they are back in the building. That gives us some excitement and something to smile about, because we are able to see each other every day, and they've been compliant. The large majority have been compliant with health and safety protocols. So we're really excited.

I often tell our staff, and I'll say to this group, the pandemic and COVID-19 doesn't allow you to be perfect. So when we are assessing and analyzing data and attempting to make decisions, COVID pulls you away

from those tasks, as you've heard here so often. So I want to echo those things.

We have -- as Ms. Bingert said earlier about receiving Start Strong data -- we've received the data, and our data is very challenging, as it is in most of your school districts. And particularly in urban school districts, it's very challenging. And so my major concern is, addressing gaps, as we looked at our data. And what we really started to talk about was: is this our reality. And I would challenge all of you on the call -- if that's our reality, what are we catching up to? What's the new target for this year? Maybe I pose a question because I'm echoing many of the concerns that my colleagues have shared. But are we rushing to get somewhere, when you really should just start where people are? We need to address the social and emotional needs of staff and students, and do that well, and do it first. So if we don't reach some of those academic targets, or some of the evaluative targets that are set by the NJDOE, is that okay? So I'm very concerned about the staff, just as some of my colleagues have said. I'm concerned about students -- making sure that everyone's socially and emotionally healthy.

So that's going to be kind of our focus. What are we racing to? What's our new target, in light of knowing that the frustration of starting school again, after two years of not having everyone here-- Some level of hybrid helped us kind of get through this; now everyone's here, we're excited to have them back. We're challenged with COVID-19 mandates and those types of things.

So where do we go from here, in terms of addressing gaps? And so we're going to focus on-- We've focused on staff; we want to focus on students. And then, what does that mean for many of those reports and

different things that are due at the State level? So I would love to, maybe, have a conversation, or just to have that on the minds. If this is our reality, and this is where we need to start, what gets taken off the plate when the plate is so, so crowded?

And I think just the last thing I'll say is, we-- You know, in Trenton we are excited about instruction, and that focus. And that the limits that some of COVID-19 and all of the challenges that we face -- the limits on us moving instruction. And so as we think about the next steps in instruction, how do we make sure that our students are having access to high-quality teaching when our teachers are balanced and healthy?

And then, so, we're really focused on the things that matter to people. I feel really excited about our direction. But as my colleagues have said, the challenges just outweigh, sometimes, some of the work that we can do.

So I really appreciate the opportunity to share, and look forward to any questions and/or responses that you may have.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very, very much, Superintendent Earle.

We're going to next go to Dr. Stephen Genco, Interim Superintendent for Toms River Regional Schools.

I would ask that if you have additional information to share, that would be appreciated, because we want to have time for members to ask questions and be in the discussion as well.

And to focus on reopening -- budget issues are something we can deal with, perhaps, at another meeting. This is a lot to--

S T E P H E N G E N C O, Ed.D.: No; most of what I wanted to talk about was covered.

I mean, obviously Toms River is a large suburban District. We are an S-2 District, but that's not what we're here to talk about today.

A lot of our ESSER funds we're using to maintain class sizes, though, and that eventually will catch up with us.

I really wanted to actually start by talking about getting out the last couple weeks and seeing students with smiles on their faces, seeing pep rallies, seeing football games, and seeing some sense of normalcy. But in that sense of normalcy, obviously we're dealing with a number of trials and tribulations; staffing being the center of them. I mean, we had to change the start time of five of our schools. Now, Toms River has 19 schools, but we had to change five start times because we were 30 bus driver short. So we've talked about the bus driver shortage. Now, from a small District, we've heard-- From a large District -- obviously, we've gone to four tiers now. So our last tier of students, with traffic and so on, they're getting home a half-hour, 45 minutes late. And that's consistent. We're trying to work through those bugs, but I don't know how much more you can without bodies.

Paraprofessionals, teachers -- we're doing a tremendous amount to try and cover classes, because you just can't find qualified people, especially when you're running three high schools. There's only so many chemistry and physics teachers out there to begin with under normal times, you know? So those types of certifications from the State to look at. I know there are alternate certifications, but really trying to push more people into education, from the sciences and math, would be a huge help.

Ultimately, also, I did want to mention that we are trying to balance a tremendous amount. Starting from the beginning of the school year to now, people are on overload. We've lost two nurses already who have moved on to different career paths because of the amount of work that is being -- they're being asked to do. And I get that; I truly do. But in reality, I mean, we have to get to a point where we can exist with all of the COVID mandates, and obviously work through and try and educate students.

I'm very, very grateful for the Health Department -- that has been tremendous; that's a tremendous partnership. The DOE has been tremendous, and the Department of Health has been. I'd just like to see where it ends. And like I said, I don't want to take any more time because the other Superintendents have really spoken about all of our different issues.

So I just want to thank this Committee for giving me the opportunity to speak.

So thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

And clearly, we're going to have to have some kind of follow-up meeting of the members to figure out what we can do on a legislative level to help. I wrote down a couple that I think we can work on immediately.

Jonathan Pushman, Director of Governmental Relations at the New Jersey School Boards Association.

So I want to recognize that Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce is on this meeting, in the meeting as well. Thank you for attending, BettyLou.

Jonathan.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Let me just say I was following on another -- on my aide's access in, because my laptop is having a problem. So I finally got in, but I can't go on (indiscernible).

J O N A T H A N P U S H M A N: Good morning, Assemblywoman, Senator Rice, fellow members of the Joint Committee.

Again, my name is Jonathan Pushman, Director of Governmental Relations for the School Boards Association.

I do want to be respectful of everyone's time as well and leave time for questioning. So I'll probably scrap most of my written -- verbal remarks. I did provide written testimony as well.

Before I get into what I wanted to highlight, I do want to associate myself with pretty much everything that Diana, Christine, Sarah, Tony, Stephen, and James mentioned; and then the recommendations of Deb and Karen. So many tangible things that you guys can do in terms of the cap on 2 percent property tax relief, QSAC delay, urging the Feds to loosen up those CDL requirements for bus drivers. We're hearing about it every day. Getting more of that American Rescue Plan funding out to schools, and loosening and relaxing some of the certification and licensing requirements for nurses, substitutes, and certificated staff, without reducing quality.

And the New Jersey First Act is something we've advocated for repeal from, basically, since it was signed into law to increase the pool of applicants.

But what I wanted to do was also just highlight some of the work that the Association has been doing to try and help our members move forward as our buildings reopen, and restore some sense of normalcy to our

students' educational experience at a time when life has really been anything but normal, as you're well aware.

When I last appeared before this body in February, we had just issued the fourth in a series of reports that we published on education in the pandemic. And this hearing is very timely as well. Just last month, we issued our fifth report on education during the pandemic. It's entitled *Rebuilding Opportunities for Our Students*, and it looks at all the challenges facing school districts and students in terms of dealing with pandemic-related gaps in both academic and social/emotional learning.

So I just wanted to spend a couple minutes kind of highlighting some of the key findings and recommendations. But I did provide that to Rebecca as well, and hopefully she shared that with the Committee, and I encourage you all to take a look at that. It includes a lot of tangible recommendations, and I think it really paints a picture of all the things that students, administrators, and teachers are dealing with. This was a report that was the culmination of the NJSBA's Committee on Post-Pandemic Learning Gaps and Academic and Social-Emotional Learning. It consisted of NJSBA staff, local board members, school leaders from across the state, and resources from a lot of the organizations that are represented here today.

When we returned to full-day, in-person instruction last month, we knew that the major challenge that we would be facing is adequately assessing the academic and emotional impact of the pandemic on students, and developing strategies to address individual needs. So to meet this charge, the Committee provided information on effective practices and programs, guidance and support; and includes a number of insights, findings, and recommendations on: identifying, as well as addressing, academic learning

gaps caused by the pandemic; embedding social-emotional learning into the curriculum -- something that has become a more common part of our nomenclature over the past few years; recognizing the role of arts education, in social-emotional learning; a lot of focus on meeting the needs of our special populations, such as students with disabilities and English language learners; directing Federal coronavirus relief funding so that it has the optimal impact on growth and learning for all students; and, more specifically, on ensuring adequate transportation for students to maintain full-time, in-person instruction, something that has been incredibly disruptive in the first month of the school year.

While we relied on a lot of nationwide and statewide data on student learning during the pandemic, we know that each individual districts' and students' experience has varied widely over the last 18 months. So we encourage districts and educators to rely on things like formative assessments and ongoing measures of progress. Efforts to address social-emotional learning have to precede and be embedded with accelerating academic learning -- things like that.

So in the end, we had about 15 tangible recommendations for the educational community to consider, that I won't go into detail on because I do want to be respectful of time and answer any questions you have. But things like closing learning gaps, and all nine content areas need to be a focus. We need to have a focus on an asset-based mindset that places a really positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.

And we also need to be cognizant not just of students, but staff members' emotional health. We've heard a lot about the toll that this has

taken on our educators, and the health of staff is directly related to the ability of students to process the trauma that has resulted from the pandemic. So we want to encourage things like support for employee assistance programs, professional development, and other activities to really boost the mental health of staff as well.

I'll sort of end my testimony there, because I did provide it in writing, and I know we still have a lot of people to hear from.

Assemblywoman, Senator Rice, fellow members of the Committee, I just want to let you know that the School Boards Association stands ready and willing to work with you on any initiatives that will enhance student achievement of students throughout the state.

And I thank you for your time and invitation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much, Jonathan; I appreciate that, and I look forward to getting the written copy of the recommendations.

We have just a few more people, and then we can open this up to discussion and questions.

And I will remind members that much of the information shared thus far is in writing, and we can get that out to you.

Next up is Peg Kinsell, Institutional Policy Director for SPAN Parent Advocacy Network.

Peg. (no response) Did we lose Peg? Oh, there she is.

P E G K I N S E L L: *(there was significant interference on the Zoom call for this witness)*

Yes, I could not get my mute button off. I mean, the trials and tribulations of Zoom.

So first, Assemblywoman Jasey and Senator Rice, and members of the Joint Committee, we very much appreciate the invitation today.

SPAN is the federally designated Parent Training Information Center and Family Health Information Center. We also house the statewide Parent to Parent Program, the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health Chapter, and the New Jersey Chapter of Family Voices -- among many other programs. But I will hold back on our commercial with regards to our time constraints.

In our role as the PTI we receive thousands of calls and contacts for technical assistance, information, resources, and training from both parents and the professionals who support them. And today we're here to share some of what we're hearing from the field.

I do want to say we understand that providing public education in the midst of a public health emergency is no easy task. And that flying the plane while building it is a necessary evil for our times. But with that in mind, here are some of the concerns that families are sending us or speaking to us about.

One is continued confusion around parents' understanding of the legislation that this body passed about IEP teams, concerning the expanded eligibility for students with disabilities when they're transitioning out of their educational entitlement. Equally difficult has been families' attempts to secure compensatory education for inadequate or undelivered services.

Most of what we have concerns about we're going to say need a higher level of intervention and leadership from the Legislature and from the

Department of Education so that we have consistent messages going across the board.

We also have received multiple calls regarding transportation issues for both general ed and special ed students. And we believe this issue also calls for a systemic approach, versus each school district trying to manage it on their own. There was a shortage of bus drivers before the pandemic, and this has certainly only exacerbated the situation. Districts have tried different approaches; some have been really creative, but they don't always work for all families. Aid in lieu of transportation is great, if you have the ability to provide that transportation. But we are also hearing from some families about additional costs for obtaining umbrella insurance policies if they're going to transport their student and request reimbursement.

Bus passes or other mass transit, where it's available, is fine if the student can travel independently. Younger students and many students with disabilities cannot do that safely. And besides the issue of affordability, how many parents can spend an hour or two taking their child to school, and then returning to pick them up each day? It's not conducive to most work schedules; and again, for students with disabilities who are not educated in their neighborhood school, that trip back and forth to an out-of-district school placement could involve hours and hours of travel for the parent.

We agree that most students need to be in the classroom with their peers for the most successful learning experience. But the announcement that all schools and all students had to be in-person all day caused a great deal of consternation from families across the state, especially families who have children with mental health issues, anxiety, school phobia,

school refusal, bullying, and safety concerns; not to mention students of families who have compromised immune systems.

Many families have requested that a virtual or hybrid learning experience continue for this year. Some were just flatly denied, saying their hands were tied and they couldn't offer it. Other families reported information being relayed on how to obtain home instruction if they wanted their -- if they did not want their students to attend in-person.

Let me note some of the barriers to that. You need documentation from doctors, then approval from the school physician. And some calls were about refusal for home instruction requests without the school offering any avenue for appealing that decision.

I also want to make sure the Committee understands that the minimum requirement for students with IEPs -- special education students - - is 10 hours of home instruction per week. For students without IEPs, it's only 5 hours of instruction a week. Now, there certainly can be additional hours offered; but our experience is that most of the time that floor is what is offered to families. And for example, we worked with a family a few weeks ago that had a 4th grader who had an organ transplant over the summer and has not been cleared yet to be in school because of the worries of immunities -- not even to just COVID, but to a cold, to the flu, to whatever. That 4th fourth grader was offered 5 hours of home instruction a week. So think about your 4th grader and that being the amount of learning that they were going to have for what the 4th grade -- our learning standards are, and you can see why we really believe these regulations need to be revisited.

We have also heard from families concerned about sending their children to school that they could disenroll their students and they could just

homeschool them if they wanted. So we never want to see school districts saying, “Oh, well, you always have the option to disenroll and homeschool a child.”

And we also, unfortunately, have families that were being threatened with calls to Child Protective Services, truancy officers, and assorted other disincentives for not bringing their child to school. And the attendance policies, again, have to be flexible to engage these families and the barriers to attending school safely and productively.

We are also hearing about the shortage of both teacher-related services and support staff; students not always being in typical classroom settings, but relegated to larger rooms where they can be supervised by fewer staffs -- and not with certified staff, and not participating in a direct instruction model. We certainly get a lot of calls about IEP services that aren't being delivered.

And we continue to be concerned about the lack of formal, kind of, transition planning, more formalized to all students. We all had to abruptly kind of leave school. It was nobody's fault, but I think we needed to be more thoughtful in our planning of the transition back into the classrooms. And this transition is especially difficult, again, for students with disabilities. Many of the students -- and staff, for that matter -- have experienced loss, isolation, socioeconomic concerns, and countless other traumas. With that being said, trauma-informed practices at schools are critical, as well as the promised social-emotional and mental health programs or supports. Some parents are concerned that they're either not accessible, or not apparent to them. And I think that is a shortfall that we can address as well. These programs are critically important to the well-being and healthy

education on all fronts -- students, staff, etc. But they can't be sporadic across the state. They have to be an investment in children across the board for it to work.

And although it's impossible to address all these calls we get in three minutes of testimony, I included in these written comments some of what we have received from parents with their personally identified information redacted.

We do understand that this is a public health emergency and has created huge issues. But we remain confident that they can be addressed with robust partnership with all stakeholders. We emphasize that the calls we are receiving cover all types of students; disproportionately, though, those students and families who are already most hurt by the pandemic: students with disabilities, special healthcare needs, students of color, immigrant and English language learners, low-income students, and others who have the most to lose if we do not provide what they need to recover and thrive.

With that said, we very much appreciate the invitation to share our experiences. We look forward to assisting in any way we can.

I'm going to close with a -- number 11 and number 13 of the Thirteen Principles (*sic*) of Leadership of recently passed General Colin Powell.

Number 11 is have vision and be demanding; and number 13 is perpetual optimism is a force multiplier. And I think if we use this as our guidance we can move forward productively for all parties.

Thank you all for the commitment to New Jersey students and families.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Peg. I appreciate the reference to Colin Powell, and I love the idea of being perpetually moving forward and productive.

We have two more people to hear from; actually three.

Julie Borst is next; Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey Community Organizing, and Board President of the New Jersey Community Schools Coalition; followed by Harry Lee, President and CEO of the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association; and Gemar Mills, School Leader of the College Achieve Paterson Charter School.

And once those three people have presented-- And I ask you to try to add something that we haven't heard from others. I know it's hard when you're the last speakers, but I do want to give some time to the members to ask questions or make comments before we have to stop.

Thank you, Julie.

JULIE BORST: Good morning, everyone.

Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey and Senator Rice, for the opportunity to speak before this Committee. It's good to see everybody. I still feel like we're just, you know, on that edge, and so it's good to see lots of familiar faces and some new ones.

And I have to say I would certainly echo everything that has been said up until this point. You know, I think that everybody has done a yeoman's job getting our children through the pandemic; certainly, the last 18 or 19 months have just been-- You know, the people who think creatively -- those people have sort of risen to the top and dealt with this. And I think that there are some holes unfortunately, and we're seeing more of that as we're coming back.

So Save Our Schools New Jersey is a membership organization. We represent 37,000 families across the state; we're in every legislative district. We have membership in every DFG -- rural, urban, and suburban communities.

And I think-- So first I want to say I think teachers have done an incredible job. And I have some very wonderful friends for many years who are teachers, and they have struggled mightily and lost an awful lot of sleep. I have some wonderful friends who are superintendents in this state and in others, and building principals. And they are just working so hard; you just see it in everything that they do.

But I will have to say there are a few things -- and special ed really rises to the top here -- and Peg, thank you very much for your comments.

I want to expound a little bit on something, and that is in the last week I have had three parents from three different types of districts come to us because their kids were sitting for PSAT, and none of their accommodations were provided. And I think part of the problem here is, yeah, sure, parents should know kind of what the rules are, and had access to these things. But I also feel like school districts, guidance counselors, and Child Study Team members should be informing and providing the things that they need to find in order for the children to have those accommodations met.

So we are seeing holes in things that are really basic. And in one of these circumstances, the child sat there for two hours and did self-harm to herself.

So let me take a breath there, because I'm very upset about that.

You know, special education, in general, is such a hard thing in this state. Funding -- school funding, lack of funding over the years, has certainly impacted what happens to our kids in schools. And I'm not even talking about the children who are sent out of district; that's a whole other story. And we have to find a way to make it so that these children feel like they are welcome and they are seen, and that they are well cared for. And that leads us into, I think, social/emotional learning, whatever those mental health supports are. I know that my 118 main organizers are extremely concerned about mental health, not only for their students, but for their teachers. And this is kind of like the airplane thing, where you put on your oxygen mask first before you help somebody else. And we can't do that if our teachers are not supported; and building staff, in general, is not supported.

I think that there are certain environments that help facilitate that; certainly community school models absolutely support that sort of framing of how education happens and what the supports are for students and staff. I think we need to do much more of that.

I also want to say that I don't think that the response has been universal. We hear from lots of parents whose kids are being well supported when they've had to quarantine. They have had access to some online instruction; and some, whether it's live or not, at least they feel supported. And there are other districts where they feel like they're just completely on their own and their kids aren't getting anything.

And I think what that boils down to is a general lack of support out of the Department of Education. Guidance has not been clear; interpretation is happening that is just-- I don't know how a superintendent

can determine whether or not a student was exposed to COVID in school versus out of school, and then choose not to provide instruction to somebody who has to quarantine for a couple of days. And those are unexcused absences, so they count against that student.

So there are things like that where it just seems like we need to do a much better job of communicating to our districts and supporting them to be able to support students. Because it seems like that is a hole that's happening there.

I also want to comment on something that Superintendent Earle had said, and that is, what are we racing to? The *what* and the *why* of where we are and where we want to be. It seems to me that we should be doing what we were talking about for the last 18 months, which was this is the opportunity to do something different, and better, and more student-focused. And it seems like we have come back to school and immediately our kids are being subjected to standardized testing. So not only the Start Strong tests, but districts have their own tests that they have in relationship to their own curriculum.

And I just want to point out one story, and then I'll stop. And that is -- imagine 1st graders who are operating probably more like at the kindergarten level taking three ELA tests and two math tests so that the teacher can provide data to the district, to provide data to DOE as benchmarking. Now, there should be benchmarking, obviously, right? But this seems really excessive. And the reason they're doing those three tests and two tests, respectively, is because that's part of the curriculum package. And it seems like there are places where -- this is not the time to do that. Where is the social/emotional learning? Where is getting children re-

acclimated into school, especially when you're 6 years old? Learning to love learning and being joyous in the classroom does not happen when you're taking five tests in the first couple of weeks of school.

There are, of course, other things, which I will turn in with some written testimony. But I think, as we go forward, we've missed the opportunity to rethink how we're educating our kids. I think we need to focus back to that. And obviously, everybody has talked about the extreme issues getting -- with the staffing issues in particular. Those things really do need to be addressed, and it sounds like we're going to have to be really creative in order to do that.

So thank you again for your time -- very much so. Thank you to all the associations who represent your constituents so well in the state.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Julie, I wrote that down. "We are missing an opportunity to rethink how we educate our students." There's a lot of truth to that. I thought about my 6-year-old grandson; he really doesn't like school. He's in 1st grade, and he's always loved school,

Harry Lee, President and CEO, New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association; and paired with Gemar Mills, a school leader from the Paterson Charter School College Achieve.

Harry.

H A R R Y L E E: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey, Senator Rice, and the Committee for this opportunity to present.

My name is Harry Lee, and I lead the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association.

Our educators are exhausted, and there so many individuals leaving the teaching profession. Which makes things extremely challenging, and it really is our students who are suffering.

I know we are low on time, so I'm going to get right into it. I want to offer a few solutions that I hope members of this Committee will consider.

The New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association represents 87 public charter schools in New Jersey, and we currently serve 60,000 students statewide. There are an additional 36,000 students on charter school waiting lists today. Three-quarters of our students come from low income backgrounds, and we're mainly in our urban districts. In New Jersey, public charter schools were the first public schools to open this school year. Many of our schools, such as in Paterson, have extended school years and started at the beginning of August. Our schools have had to modify our classroom spaces to ensure students are safe.

There has been Federal money available, but charter schools. still don't get dedicated facilities money from the State, unlike other public schools, which has made things very challenging.

I think we can all agree that all children, whether they attended a district, charter, or private school, deserve safe and secure buildings.

We also need a deeper sense of urgency to solve issues, which others have already noted.

Transportation and bus drivers: We need to create a statewide plan that offers solutions. I'm going to offer new ones, such as bringing in the National Guard to drive buses like they have in Massachusetts, or direct outreach and matching of individuals with CDLs to incentivize them to drive

buses, like they have in New York. Or allowing 15-passenger vans to transport students, with a temporary waiver from the CDL requirement. That would be a State waiver, not Federal. And so supply has not met demand, and if students are not in buildings, they cannot learn.

The second big challenge I want to echo is around teacher and school nurse shortages. And we applaud the Bill that was sponsored by Senator Ruiz and Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson, recently signed by the Governor, to create a pilot teacher certification program to increase the number of teachers in the classroom, particularly our teachers of color. And we need the DOE to get that program up and running as soon as possible. I believe they have three months to do so. Many districts -- I think every district on this Zoom call and every charter school can be applying for that pilot program.

And we need to do more on certifications. I understand the concerns around quality, but some of the requirements do not make sense and do not align with quality teaching. And because of some of our requirements, we now have long-term subs in many of our classrooms, which means less quality instruction, which is an unintended consequence here. And so let's let our school districts develop great teachers, which is what they do best, and we need to increase that supply. So like Dr. Mitchell and others noted, nobody can find a substitute school nurse or other hard-to-staff positions, like bilingual teachers, special education. So we need to really think through how we're going to fix this, because as someone else noted, it's going to take a decade or longer to try to get these staffing challenges sorted out.

So I'm going to turn it over to Dr. Mills, one of our school leaders in Paterson, to share his experience.

G E M A R M I L L S, Ph.D.: Good afternoon -- or good morning, everyone.

Thank you, Co-Chair Jasey and Co-Chair Rice, and the JCPS Committee for having me today.

My name, again, is Gemar Mills. I'm the Co-Founder and the Executive Director of College Achieve Paterson.

All of what you all said, specifically around staff concerns, I echo, and support, and agree with -- that the shortage is real. And even when we have teachers inside of seats they are essentially calling out because they, too, have concerns of their own, and families that are requiring them to be out, where they may need to quarantine; which is affecting their sick day bank and their personal day bank, and so on and so forth. And so I wanted to just double down on those things shared, in support. Everyone is saying that we need to figure that out. A solution may be to leverage some existing legislation that has allowed TFA to put teachers inside of our classrooms after working toward certification, as well as programs such as NJCTL, the PSI program and PMI program that allows teachers who are certified in one subject area to get certified in another subject area while working towards their certification. That may expand the pool a bit more rapidly.

But as far as the experience that we have had here in Paterson, it's been a tumultuous journey, but ultimately we've allowed it to be rooted in our families' choice. And so we got out of the gate early in August and were able to open the doors at the height of the pandemic because a little above 50 percent of our families elected to have in-person instruction. So we

were able to provide that. And what we did was shorten the school day, as well as extend hours of tutoring for students in the afternoon. And so this allowed for teachers to transition from the schoolhouse to their homes, and then offer that virtual tutoring to those students while actually in the comfort of their own home and filling our seat.

And so I don't take lightly the fact that teachers put their lives on the line early in the pandemic in order to make this happen; and even currently the experiences they're having, and just the distress levels that they're going through and why we are experiencing high levels of call-outs. But I will say that they have done the good work here in Paterson. Specifically at College Achieve, we have had a ton of successes. I think that we have built things that have actually made us stronger. One of those examples is our Parent University; being able to now have frequent meetings with parents virtually; them feeling comfortable with the technology, and offering them ways in which to support their students from home and doubling as kind of like a teacher's aide, and understanding what the curriculum is offering; and then even going as far as offering them some professional opportunities to grow their skill sets as adults and parents in their own households.

And so with that being said, I know that I am the last person before the Q&A starts. There's not much more that I can actually say, because I think that most of everyone on this call has covered it. And Harry has already given some clear recommendations from the charter organization, so I will stop there.

I thank you for my time, and I will turn it back over to you, Chairwoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Dr. Mills, and thank you for your patience.

All right, so we have -- oh, shoot -- only 12 minutes left.

I would like to hear from members, if you have an issue that has not been touched upon. And also remind you that we can provide a transcript of the meeting testimony to you.

Who would like to begin ?

Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson; I see you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Hello, everyone.

I want to thank all -- everyone for coming on and testifying today. You definitely gave us a wealth of knowledge.

But the one thing that I did not hear about was pay equity. And I think we have to address the elephant in the room. I think you know that we have a workforce that has been paid not what it should be; we are faced in this climate that we are now. I think New Jersey is a high-cost state to live in. Our teachers, our support staff -- all of the people who really make our schools run are not being paid what they should be paid so that they can work one job and support their families. So I think we have to address some of those issues as well.

Definitely the social/emotional learning; everything that everyone has said on this call. But I do think we have to definitely address those pay equities that have been silent on this call.

So thank you so much. That's all I have for today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much. That was brief, but well received, I think,

Anyone else?

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes; how are you?

SENATOR O'SCANLON: I'm doing well, thanks. Great to see everyone.

And really, wonderfully informative. I was very much looking forward to this session this morning.

And look, we don't all look forward to every Zoom session; let's be honest, at this point. (laughter) But what I was hoping to hear was much of exactly what I did here -- which is solutions. We're all hearing these issues. And from organization representatives, the NJEA, superintendents, we've heard some real solutions. And I'm interested in signing on working with you and the other legislators on here. We've already requested a bill to remove residency requirements; and we're going to do one that will remove all residency requirements, since we have problems staffing across the board right now. It's encouraging to me to hear, especially from the border districts -- like we heard from the Trenton Superintendent -- that there are people in Pennsylvania interested in coming over, there are people in New York interested in coming over. That is encouraging to me. I don't know how those states don't have some of the same staffing issues, but I'll take it.

I'm really interested in working with everyone to actually implement some of the solutions that we heard today.

It is distressing to me to hear the reference -- which I haven't heard before, but I understand completely -- *June-tired*; and that our teachers and administrators, particularly the optimistic ones -- I'm sorry, I can't remember who said that, but it was moving to me -- are already that tired.

And the optimistic ones are already pessimistic. We have to do all we can to get through this school year. God willing, next school year becomes a normal one, or maybe the second half of this one.

So we hear you, and there's going to be a bipartisan set of supports here to make some real progress.

I did have one thing; and I know contact tracing is a big problem, and I don't know that this solves it. But it solves keeping kids in seats. The Test to Stay (*sic*), or *Test & Stay* initiative. It's going on in Ohio and Massachusetts, and many places in Europe. That seems to be keeping kids in seats for thousands of more days; tens of thousands, in some areas.

I'm interested in anybody's comment. I don't want -- I know we have only a couple minutes, but I'm not sure if that would help with some of the burden of contact tracing, but maybe it would. But have any of you looked at it, and -- particularly the NJEA -- can we together start encouraging the Administration to, at least, pilot this program?

MS. PFEFFER: Assemblywoman Jasey, if I may.

I don't know how much we've looked at it; I just know, from our school nurses, that they are afraid of adding that to their burden. Many people here referenced the school nurses and the burden that they are facing right now. They said they're like mini Departments of Health, on their own frequently. And one of their concerns was that if you add Test & Stay to their plate, it is just another thing that they are doing, when some of them are working from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day already.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Yes, that's a great point; that's a really good point -- that we'll have to balance out the resources for it with the pro-student aspects of it. That's a really good point; I appreciate that. And I

will add that to my list of things I have to advocate for, in advocating. for piloting this program -- would be resources for that.

Thank you; I appreciate it.

And again, thank you everyone for being here. There's a whole list of things here that we need to work on, and I'm interested in doing that. So thanks everyone for being here.

MR. TRONGONE: Senator O'Scanlon, we do have a vendor. It's like a market economy with testing, so the more testing, they do make money off the testing. So they want to provide that; it's just opening the door to do it and not putting the burden on the nurses. And that's what we're doing here with a beta group here in Millville, to get the testing so the kids stay in school because of the COVID-like symptoms. So it is happening.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Tony, so you pilot Test & Stay? I wasn't sure that that was possible. Did that come from DOE or--

MR. TRONGONE: No, we did it on our own, with consent from parents. Because the parents want the kids in school.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Yes.

MR. TRONGONE: It's a lift, but it can be done if you get the right vendor, with the right leadership, and with the parents to get that -- so you take the subjectivity out of the COVID-like symptoms. You don't have that now. It excludes the fever piece, because that needs a 24-hour period of symptom-free. But other than that, we're working it out where we have -- if you get a negative test, the kid can stay in school.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Expanding that, what they're trying to do is say -- and I don't want to monopolize this, but it's important, I think

-- rather than permit a test to get back in, you would proactively test students so they're not out at all, and avoid even that initial week or so out.

And again, if there are vendors able to do this, testing materials available-- They figured out how to do it in Ohio and Massachusetts. So we're looking into that.

But again, keeping these kids in schools, in seats-- Look, it helps on the backend of resources of you guys having to accommodate tens -- or hundreds in some districts, thousands in some districts -- of kids out in quarantine. So I think it could be a creative solution.

So Tony, we may be in touch with you to talk to that vendor.

MR. TRONGONE: Okay.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Thank you; I appreciate it, guys.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, thank you, both.

I saw Assemblyman Wimberly's hand; yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Hi, Chairwoman; how are you doing, Senator Rice?

Just briefly, Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson hit on it: the pay equity part when it comes to bus drivers, cafeteria workers, security. I know here in Paterson I think they're short of almost 200 staff members. I think, as a State, we have to be more creative when it comes to non-traditional certification of staffing; in particular, when it comes to ESL teachers, special needs teachers -- the areas that are short on staffing. No student is going to be successful with a substitute all season, or all school year. It's just not going to be productive. So I think that, as legislators, as an Administration, we have to look at these things -- how we can look at new ways of emergency certification with these amount of vacancies.

Also, the mental health aspect. My wife is a 2nd grade teacher. It was well put that teachers feel like they're already in June, and it's only October. I think we have to look at a different way when it comes to mental health; breaks for our staff and students. I know we have a mandatory 180 days. I think we need to look at mental health in a different way because of the COVID. So this is something I think as a Legislature we should look at and we move forward. We do not want people, and staff, and students burned out come November, December; and our attendance rates go down, behavioral issues will increase. I've heard about the behavior issues in many districts and schools due to students not being in the building for such a length of time and they come back. It's a social issue. It's something I think we can overcome, but I think we have to look at non-traditional ways to address these issues.

So thank you for this hearing, and each of you guys added something. It was very, very productive and hopeful, as we move forward to a new year and a new way for the coming school year.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman. I hear you loud and clear.

With the two minutes we have left, Senator Rice, would you like to weigh in? You've been very patient.

SENATOR RICE: Thank you very much, Co-Chair.

And to all those who participated -- I'm listening; I'm just looking forward to having all the information sent. I'm going to ask the staff to not only send the information, but prior to sending it go through each -- well, you can send it, but go through each of the documents and extract the recommendations being made. And so when we read the information, we will

read it with the substantive information on the (indiscernible) of recommendations. But the recommendations themselves, I would hope that you put them in bullet form and send it to us so we can have further discussion.

We're talking about educating kids now, getting back on track, and the stress on teachers. But what always disturbed me, after 35-plus years in the Legislature, I can never get this coalition of academics to go beyond what they do. Keep in mind that we're still struggling, particularly those of us in the Legislative Black Caucus, to get funding to get these school playgrounds in urban facilities opened back up. Because you're not going to educate kids not giving them an outlets to release some of that energy.

So hopefully when you talk about education in the future -- I know this is a priority now -- that you also get on board with us about setting aside some dollars for those facilities. It's nice to go to some of the counties that have facilities for these kids after school; that's wonderful. But it's not good for the urban and some rural communities not to have them. And then you act, as organization educators, that it doesn't matter. In fact, our playgrounds -- you're parking your cars in. But kids should be on the playground and cars should be on the street. Now, I understand why that is.

But once again, thank you for participating on the academic side, talking about the stress, and the COVID. But I want you on the other side of this, too, and that's going to be my goal as we come into a new session. I'm going to hold everybody on this call accountable on this call for recognizing the other piece that should be hand-in-hand with what we do with education -- the way it was when I grew up, and many of you who are a little older than some of the people on this call.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator Rice. You're absolutely right.

And I remember, like, 15 years ago we were talking about this. We were visiting schools in our cities, in particular, where parking-- There were cars parked on the playgrounds, and not children.

So yes, we have to keep that front and center, because what you're saying is absolutely true.

I understand we can have a few more minutes if there's anyone who would like to weigh in.

I want to thank all of the-- Everyone who provided testimony today, I really do appreciate it. This is a monumental issue, and it's not going to go away tomorrow, or next month, or-- I think we're going to be feeling the effects of the pandemic long after the health issues are resolved and the immunization issues are resolved. And so we have to keep that in mind.

But I'd also like to end on a positive note, and that is that there are many solutions that have been shared during these last two hours. I've been writing feverishly, but I will also take a look at the transcript to see what we can move on immediately. There's some-- I know legislatively we can move on opening up our borders, if you will, so that we can attract more teachers and other staff. But long-term, we have to also be thinking about how do we incent our students to go into the profession to begin with. I've been banging that bell for a long time; and unfortunately, sometimes it requires a crisis to get us to really move.

But I think there are things that we can do; and not being Pollyanna, but perhaps we can use this as an opportunity to build more into

our schools to create resources. Because our children are our future, and if we don't invest in our kids then there will not be a future for them.

So with that, I'm overwhelmed with all the information, but very grateful for it.

If there's anyone else who would like to make a comment before we close, just raise your hand or jump in. (no response)

Okay, I guess everyone is pretty well spent. So I will thank you all for coming, for staying with us for this entire session. And if you have -- if something occurs to you after this, please send me an e-mail, send Senator Rice an e-mail -- to our District offices -- and we will respond to you.

Thank you very much, everyone.

ALL: Thank you.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)