



## Governor Sherrill Highlights Mental Health Resources as New Jersey Students Head Back to School

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**TRENTON** – As the new school year gets underway, Governor Mikie Sherrill today highlighted the comprehensive mental health and wellness resources available to students, families, and educators across the state during the 2026-2027 school year.

New Jersey is investing more than \$125 million in school- and community-based mental health and wellness programs this school year. These investments are part of the Sherrill Administration's commitment to meeting students where they are, providing families with accessible resources to combat the youth mental health crisis, and giving educators the tools they need to support young people.

Building on a robust system of supports, the Governor also signed legislation establishing the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) pilot program to further connect students with behavioral health services within the school community. The Fiscal Year 2027 budget included \$8 million in funding to support this program.

"Our kids are facing unprecedented pressures, and as they head back to school, we need to make sure they know that help is there when they need it. Combating the youth mental health crisis takes all of us – families, educators, and government working together to ensure that our schools are places where every child feels supported and ready to succeed," **said Governor Mikie Sherrill**. "From reducing digital distractions in the classroom to strengthening school-based mental health services and making it easier for students to connect with care, we are taking a comprehensive approach to supporting the well-being of New Jersey's young people. With the launch of SPARK, we are building the continuum of supports to make sure every student has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive."

This complements the Governor's [earlier actions](#) to prioritize kids' mental health with a legislative package signed into law this summer to better protect New Jersey children online, support youth mental health, and hold technology companies accountable for harmful and addictive platform designs. The package included codifying the New Jersey Age-Appropriate Design Code, requiring covered online services to prioritize minors' safety and privacy by limiting data collection, preventing social media platforms from sending notifications to minors overnight and during the school day, strengthening default privacy settings, and establishing safeguards for interactions between minors and adults.

#### Youth Mental Health and Wellness Programs Available During the 2026-2027 School Year

The [New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services \(NJ4S\)](#) network, operated by the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (NJDCF), provides social, emotional, and mental well-being supports for students and their families through a regional hub-and-spoke model. For participating school districts, NJ4S regional hubs provide specialized prevention and brief intervention services for students, as well as consultation and support for school faculty.

NJDCF also supports students through its [School-Linked Services](#), including 90 School-Based Youth Services Programs, five health centers, 40 Family Friendly Centers, three Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency Programs, eight Parent Linking Programs, and 10 Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Initiative Programs.

Beginning this school year, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is also implementing [bell-to-bell restrictions on internet-enabled devices](#) – such as cell phones – for students in kindergarten through 12th grade in all New Jersey public school districts. The policy is designed to reduce classroom distractions, promote greater student engagement, and support students' mental health and academic success.

"We know that when students feel safe, supported, and connected, they are better able to learn and thrive. The SPARK program offers an opportunity for New Jersey to test innovative models for increasing student access to clinical mental and behavioral health services," **said Dr. Lily Laux, Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education**. "This legislation aligns with our broader work to improve student well-being, address chronic absenteeism, promote online safety, and ensure every student has the support they need to succeed in school and beyond."

"The signing of this bill establishing the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) Pilot Program further cements Governor Sherrill's commitment to her promise from day one, and that of the state's Legislature, in keeping youth mental health a top priority," **said Joseph E. Ribsam, Jr., Acting Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families**. "The SPARK Pilot Program will serve as part of the State's overarching plan bringing together key state agencies and system partners, including DCF and DOE, to address the mental health epidemic young people are facing, helping to elevate the critically important robust array of support programs and services available whether in school or in community, and expanding the mental health and wellbeing continuum across the state."

#### Governor Sherrill Signs Legislation Establishing SPARK Pilot Program

Building on these resources, Governor Sherrill today signed legislation, [S4413/A5253](#), establishing the School-Based Partnerships for Access and Resilience for Kids (SPARK) pilot program, which will create an additional pathway to connect students with behavioral health services and supports.

Under the legislation, the pilot program, which will be implemented by NJDCF, in consultation with NJDOE, aims to:

**Strengthen school mental health policies:** Help State and local school leaders develop and implement evidence-based student mental health policies.

Services will be made available to K-12 students in participating districts upon a referral by a teacher or school mental health professional, with the permission of the child's parent or guardian.

The pilot program will begin delivering services in early 2027 in up to 10 school districts selected by NJDCF, in consultation with NJDOE. School districts will be recruited this fall to participate in the pilot, and a Request for Proposals is expected to be issued in the coming weeks for the development of a mobile application to support the program.

The legislation is sponsored by Senate President Nick Scutari and Senator Joe Vitale, along with Assemblymembers Linda Carter, Andrea Katz, and Vinnie Kearney.

"When a child suffers from a mental health condition, their ability to learn, grow, and develop is severely impacted," **said Senate President Nick Scutari**. "Oftentimes, it's incredibly difficult to navigate the mental health system and find help. This means support from educators and schools is crucial. The SPARK pilot program works with schools to streamline the process for students and families to access mental health resources, helping ensure students are seen and heard when they are struggling and are properly directed to services."

"Access to mental health support should be the standard for every child," **said Assemblywoman Linda Carter**. "By strengthening the connection among schools, families, and mental health providers, this legislation will help students receive the care and support they need before they reach a crisis point. I am proud to see this legislation signed into law and proud that New Jersey is taking another step toward building a stronger, more supportive network of care for our youngest residents."

#### Mental Health Resources Available to Students and Families

New Jersey students and families who need mental health support do not have to wait for services through their school. Several statewide resources are available to connect young people with support when and where they need it.

New Jersey students and families can access mental health support at any time:

- If you are experiencing a mental health or behavioral health crisis:** Call or text **988** to reach the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#) for free, confidential support 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- If your child needs behavioral health services:** Contact New Jersey's **Children's System of Care** at **1-877-652-7624** or visit the [PerformCare website](#) to learn about behavioral health services and supports available to children and families.
- If you are a young person looking for someone to talk to:** Call or text [2NDFLOOR](#) at **1-888-222-2228** for free, anonymous, and confidential support 24/7.
- If you need help finding mental health services:** Call [NJ Mental Health Cares](#) at **1-866-202-HELP (4357)** to speak with a behavioral healthcare specialist who can connect you with appropriate services and resources.

**If you prefer support online or through an app:** New Jersey youth can access digital mental health and wellness resources through [Soluna](#) or the [2NDFLOOR](#) app, available for download via the App Store and Google Play.

#### Resources for New Jersey Educators

Additional resources are available to help educators identify students who may need support, prevent behavioral health crises, and strengthen mental health and resilience throughout school communities.

[Prevent Suicide NJ \(PSNJ\)](#) provides resources, training, and engagement opportunities for professionals, parents and caregivers, and young people. The initiative brings together education, programs, services, and resources from State agencies and community-based organizations focused on youth mental health, suicide prevention, and resilience.

Through [Mental Health First Aid \(MHFA\)](#), educators and community members can receive training to recognize the warning signs and symptoms of behavioral health challenges and learn how and when to initiate appropriate responses, including Behavioral Threat Assessment team responses in K-12 settings.

The New Jersey Department of Health also supports school districts in implementing the [Lifelines Trilogy](#), a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention that helps school communities prepare to identify and respond to students at risk.

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