
Committee Meeting

of

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*“The Committee will receive testimony from invited guests
on Parental Involvement Informing Teaching and Learning”*

LOCATION: Committee Room 16
State House Annex
Trenton, New Jersey

DATE: October 8, 2019
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Senator Ronald L. Rice, Co-Chair
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair
Senator Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblywoman Patricia Egan Jones
Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroke



ALSO PRESENT:

Rebecca Sapp
Executive Director

Ivy Pomper
Executive Assistant

Meeting Recorded and Transcribed by
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SENATE

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

ASSEMBLY

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

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MEETING NOTICE

TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools

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

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will be meeting Tuesday, October 8, 2019 at 10:00 a.m. in Committee Room 16 of the State House Annex.

The topic of the meeting will be Parental Involvement Informing Teaching and Learning.

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 10, 2019

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

And again, apologies for the late start, but there are some things beyond our control.

The topic today is one that is very near and dear to my heart, and I know to Senator Thompson's, who asked for this meeting. And unfortunately, the individual who sparked the interest in having this meeting is still in traffic; but when she gets here, we'll hear her testimony as well.

As a parent, and now as a grandparent, as a PTA person, as a school board member, and now as a member of the Legislature, giving voice to parents is very, very important. And I think that it's always important for us to hear from parents, and to understand what's happening in the classroom from their point of view; and how their voice -- the parents' voice can help, not hinder, what's going on in the classroom.

So I think the goal is to find ways to have informed and civil conversations between parents, and teachers, and administrators, board members, and everyone else involved in education.

And let me just say that while I know that a number of our districts are struggling, it's pretty exciting to have finally beaten Massachusetts, and we're number one. (laughter and applause) So now we have to hold on to that position.

So we're going to start with Cathy Lindenbaum, Robert Acerra, Rose Acerra, and Lynette Howard.

If you would come up, all four of you; I think we have enough seats for you.

Introduce yourself; and so you may begin.

(refers to PowerPoint presentation)

CATHY LINDENBAUM: Good morning.

I'm going to introduce our team.

I'm Cathy Lindenbaum, the President of the New Jersey PTA. Sitting next to me is Robert Acerra; he's the President-Elect; next is Lynette Howard, the VP of Advocacy; and Rose Acerra, Immediate Past President and Federal Legislative Chair.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. It comes at an opportune time for New Jersey PTA. We are recent recipients of a grant on transformative family engagement.

We know we were asked to speak on parent involvement; however, simply put, parent involvement is often more of a doing *to*, while engagement is a doing *with*.

With involvement, schools tend to lead with their mouth, generally telling parents what they should be doing. Engagement, on the other hand, has schools leading with their ear. We hope when we are finished with our presentation, you will agree with us.

ROBERT ACERRA: So this slide simply talks about our mission: to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.

This mission is National PTA's mission. National PTA was founded on February 17, 1897, by Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, in Washington D.C. It has spread to now 54 Congresses, which includes every state in the United States, plus the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, the European Congress; and, of course, New Jersey.

New Jersey PTA is the tenth-largest Congress -- our state -- in the National PTA. We have over 115,000 members. New Jersey PTA was founded on October 27, 1900, starting right in Riverton, New Jersey, in Burlington County; and became part of the National PTA that same year.

So National PTA, in 2007, created the National Standards for Family-School Partnerships, which obviously much of our work through parental involvement, and now family engagement, has stemmed into. So it's six parts, six standards that are put together through puzzle pieces.

The first standard is welcoming all families into the school community -- which is, obviously, one of the most important ones -- that active families, as we all know, active participants in the life of a school will feel welcomed and valued, and want to come back and continue to do more.

The second standard: Communicating effectively. Families and school staff engaging together in regular, two-way communication about student learning is obviously important to our work.

The third standard: Supporting student success. Families and school staff continuously collaborating to support students' learning and healthy development, both at home and at school.

The fourth standard: Speaking up for every child, which PTA was founded on; the advocating for every child. Families are empowered to be advocates for their own children and all children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

Standard five is sharing power. Families and school staff are equal partners in the decision-making; it shouldn't be one side more important than the other.

And then finally, collaborating with the community, making sure that this partnership is threefold: the school, the staff, and obviously, the community; because without the community involvement that would not allow to -- lead to a community services and the civic participation that we hope every student, every family member can participate in.

MS. LINDENBAUM: PTA's role in family engagement.

Parents deserve to feel respected. They need to be treated as equal partners in their child's education.

We advocate to ensure State and local education agencies and schools use Federal funding to support evidence-based family engagement programs, as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act; ensure effective implementation of the statewide family engagement centers' program on both the Federal and State levels; provide ongoing training and professional development on effective family engagement practices for educator and school-based personnel; include evidence-based family engagement strategies throughout the entire education, from early childhood through post-secondary exploration and career opportunities.

We support meaningful engagement of parents and families at the State, District, and school level, on an ongoing basis, in the creation of education policies, especially those that directly impact students and families.

We encourage PTAs to use the four *Is* of transformative family engagement.

Work on relationship building with their PTAs; create a more welcoming environment to newcomers by avoiding using acronyms or making inside jokes; start to question assumptions by thinking about the calendar for the year and exploring where a PTA can rethink tradition or create new ones.

Instead of relying on mass e-mails, try the old-fashioned approach by talking with families directly. The car loop during pickup is a great place to start. Rather than a long PTA meeting that might not be relevant to everyone, mix things up with mini-sessions led by experts on topics parents care about.

Developing an inclusive approach helps families understand that their perspective matters. PTAs need to intentionally build trusting relationships with families in order to ensure they feel comfortable and welcome in the community. When we embrace each other's cultures, it's easier to be inclusive.

Individualized: When families attend meetings, they are looking to find out information that is relevant to their own child. Every parent should leave a PTA meeting knowing how the information presented there is helpful to their child and their family.

Integrated: When PTAs partner with teachers and link PTA programs to learning that is happening in the classroom, it's more effective.

And impactful: Because family engagement is complex and relational, it can feel difficult to measure. But even small steps towards understanding outcomes of your PTA's work can go a long way. When PTAs are inclusive, they embrace and value diverse perspectives. When PTAs take an individualized approach to family engagement, they meet the unique needs of every family and child.

When PTAs have an integrated approach to family engagement, they connect and align their efforts with the broader educational system; and

when PTAs are impactful, they empower families to support their child's success.

MR. ACERRA: So what's next? And we simply put it, in big, large print there, *collaboration*. And that's what New Jersey PTA's mission is now, through our new grant, and working with our educational partners; and hopefully the Legislature is collaborating to ensure that we raise awareness about family engagement among our PTA members, and other parent leaders, and many other groups, by engaging our parents.

And we put an asterisk by *parents* because -- the reason we talk about, in PTA, *family engagement* as opposed to *parental involvement* is because, as we know, parents are not just the only caregivers anymore to our children in our schools. So by parents-- Anytime we reference *parents*, we do mean grandparents, foster parents, any caregiver, any advocate who is working on behalf of all children.

We also are working to engage our parents, teachers, and community members to work as collaboratively as possible. We want to empower these groups, our local PTA groups across the state and across the nation, to be leaders in transformative family engagement efforts through our grant and other recognition programs and opportunities; as well as connect them to other leading family engagement organizations.

We want to influence family engagement decisions and resources by contributing to a community-wide agenda on how the parents' voice shapes family engagement programs, practices, and policies with our decision-makers, statewide and nationwide.

MS. LINDENBAUM: We thank you for the opportunity.

Are there any questions for us?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I have one.

What's your greatest challenge right now, in terms of-- You know, I agree with all of the goals and the approach. But on the ground, what's your greatest challenge?

MS. LINDENBAUM: Getting parents and caregivers the chance to feel comfortable; to come out, feel comfortable, and to--

MR. ACERRA: To basically want to advocate for their children.

Like I talked about, PTA was created in 1897 as an advocacy association. Through these over 120 years now, PTA is sometimes seen as the bake sales, and the book fairs, and the holiday shops. Our biggest challenge is taking that -- taking the great things that our local PTAs are doing and making sure that the parents realize that it's not just about-- Making sure it's great things for the schools and great things for the students; but making sure that it's the education, and that the families and the parents are involved in making sure that decisions that are being made -- we're at the table and we're able to be part of the decisions moving forward.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And so are there approaches that you're trying? Do you know what's working? Like in some communities, PTA is very active, and in others not so much.

MS. LINDENBAUM: That's why we got -- we received the grant and we applied for the grant. Because if we knew that, we'd probably be very rich. (laughter)

So that's what we're trying -- different things; reaching out to different groups. We recently have reached out to Garden State Equality -- that group -- to try to get those parents to know that there is support out there for them. We're working with other groups to try to reach out to some

focus groups around the state. It would be really great to talk to any of you, if you would like to be in on the discussion. That's we're doing -- trying to have-- We have an event October 19, Saturday, to try to get parents to come out to learn different things that are going on in the state; and that's what we're trying.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

Assemblywoman DeCroke.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, my memories of PTAs and going to PTA meetings -- as I think, going back, they were more active than, maybe, today -- and a lot because both parents work, that makes it harder. So maybe the PTA can take meetings on the road. And when I say *on the road*, to the neighborhoods, to very local, local neighborhoods, that they're not getting much outreach from the families being involved; and narrow it down to a neighborhood, and say, "You know, let's get together at one of their friend's homes; lets--" Or at the community center in that area, "and let's just have a talk, you know?" Whether it's cookies, and coffee, or whatever. But break it down to smaller, closer to the people than larger meetings. Maybe you'd be able to reach out to them and get them to talk in greater depth to you. That's what I would think may help.

MR. ACERRA: I think that's a great suggestion.

One thing that we've talked about a lot, and what we've seen is -- we have very strong and active PTAs at times in a lot of our urban areas. But a lot of our urban areas, we do not see PTAs or any other unaffiliated parent group involved. And we think -- we see that as one of our challenges and problems as well.

And one of our things that we've been discussing is something, as like the Assemblywoman pointed out, bringing it more local; going into there. It doesn't, maybe, have to be as formal as electing a president, electing a secretary, having meetings; but getting the discussion there and educating them on how they can be involved in their children's education a little bit more.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman Egan Jones, and then we're going to move to the second presentation.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: I think you told us how many PTA groups there are in the State of New Jersey.

MS. LINDENBAUM: We have 115,000 members and over 600 local unit PTAs. A local unit PTA is the PTA in the schools themselves.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Primarily elementary and middle schools?

MS. LINDENBAUM: We have from preschool to high school, mostly elementary and middle schools though.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: There's another group out there called *PTG*; am I correct? Or PTO?

MS. LINDENBAUM: PTO.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: PTO; you can tell I graduated a while ago from being a PTA member -- which I was, by the way. (laughter)

But anyway -- but I thank you for your work.

Engaging parents is so important to the child's success. And I know in the City of Camden some of the schools actually do it, and they put

enrichment programs on for the parents to get them engaged and comfortable with that environment, which is truly a real challenge.

The other thing that I've heard repeatedly -- and I think the Assemblywoman alluded to the fact that so many folks work full-time jobs and they can't do the kinds of things that they used to be able to do in getting to the school. So engaging those parents is clearly difficult, because time is so short. So maybe children's programs that bring them in are another good way to fathom it; because I know as a grandparent -- the child is in a show, I'm there, you know? And you can talk to me about education at that point as well.

MS. LINDENBAUM: We just had a great program at the Trenton State Museum on September 28 for families; and it was great.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I saw that.

MS. LINDENBAUM: Yes, it was great.

And then we have STEM programs for our families and students in school. The parents come in and they do -- we usually partner with a corporate -- some corporations. We've partnered, in the past, with Bayer Corporation; and we've done some STEM programs in the schools. And the kids and the families come in, they do experiments; it was really good. We had several of those in the state.

We also have Reflections program; that's a national program. So it goes from local, to county, to State, to national. And this year we've had a national winner that will be in the National Showcase at the Federal Department of Education.

So we're doing some great things.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: You mean, from New Jersey?

MS. LINDENBAUM: From New Jersey, yes; Morris County, yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Excellent.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Well, thank you; it's not an easy job you have.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's great.

MS. LINDENBAUM: And I ask you all, if you could, go on our website, *NJPTA.org*, and join the Garden State PTA, if you're not already a member of your local PTA.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: And grandparents can join, right?

MS. LINDENBAUM: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; Senator Thompson.

SENATOR THOMPSON: I just had a comment.

I do recall, in the 1940s, when I was in elementary school (laughter), my mother had a fulltime job, but she found time to be involved with the PTA. She did a great job.

MS. LINDENBAUM: Thank you, and thank--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

All right; Rose Acerra and Lynette Howard.

LYNETTE HOWARD: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; the floor is yours.

MS. HOWARD: So I'm just going to piggyback on what Cathy said about the great work that we involve parents in, around the state.

But we also partner with an organization called Learning Heroes that helps parents be able to talk to their teachers, for teacher conferences,

so they'll know what the standards are and what is expected from their child; and build that relationship on that level.

R O S E A C E R R A: And the other thing I'd like to add-- So just the way, when we became--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Would you identify yourself for the record? Yes, your name.

MS. ACERRA: Rose Acerra.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. ACERRA: --that when we are involved at the PTA, on a state level, we are all volunteers. We had to go to a lot of our stakeholders to make sure that there was a parent voice at the table. That's why we were very appreciative to get this invite to come and present to you today.

And that is what we are also engaging our local PTA leaders -- that they, too, have to make sure that they go to their decision-makers, their Board of Education, principals, superintendents, and use their voice to advocate for their school district. Because, obviously, they know their district the best; and we know that that is also working very well -- empowering them to do that.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; thank you very much. We appreciate your time, and your advocacy, and the information as well.

MS. LINDENBAUM: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And Senator Rice has joined us. He was also stuck in that terrible traffic accident this morning.

I'm glad you arrived safely, Senator.

SENATOR RONALD L. RICE (Co-Chair): Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right; I don't-- Rebekah Novemsky, Family Support Liaison, New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. Brenda Considine -- is Brenda--

REBEKAH NOVEMSKY: She's not feeling well.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. NOVEMSKY: She apologizes for missing--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; and Jeannie Lopez; is Jeannie here?

MS. NOVEMSKY: She also -- she actually got a meeting with a school for her son--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Oh.

MS. NOVEMSKY: --because her issue is that she--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; so the floor--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Her son is out of school, so she had a meeting with the school. She may try and come later, if it's possible.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: No, it sounds like that's more important.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. NOVEMSKY: So thank you for the opportunity, Assemblywoman Jasey, Senator Rice, and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

My name is Rebekah Novemsky, and I represent the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. I am also the parent of a young man with developmental disabilities who's in his final year of educational entitlement. So we made it; we'll see what comes next.

The Council is authorized by the Federal Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act, and the New Jersey State statutes. The Council is *in* but not *of* the New Jersey Department of Human Services.

Many public and private agencies support the lives of individuals with developmental disabilities. The Council provides a platform for these agencies, together with citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities, or I/DD, family members and caregivers, and advocates to develop a coordinated social policy.

To this end, the Council commissions research on policy issues and funds model programs. The Council also funds projects to inform citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities, family members, caregivers, decision-makers, legislators, and the general public about developmental disabilities.

I will share with you this morning some of the key issues our constituents face. They include emergency planning for students with disabilities, and transition services for students needing adult services.

All students with disabilities should be full participants in school emergency planning, including evacuations and drills. While most schools have a comprehensive plan and carry out drills for emergency situations, few have an effective, comprehensive plan to address the complex individualized needs of students with disabilities. And because there is no national model for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in school crisis preparedness, most schools are not fully prepared to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities -- including sensory disabilities,

medical and mobility challenges, behavioral disabilities, and other unique challenges when there is an emergency situation.

So some examples are students in wheelchairs, students who cannot remain quiet during these drills and during the actual crises.

As a result, the Council prepared proposed legislation requiring school districts to discuss and document the emergency planning, response, and evacuation needs of each student with a disability and/or special health care need. This should ensure that people with disabilities can fully participate in the school-wide and building-based emergency response, including full mitigation, practice drills, staff training, and an evacuation process to identify obstacles.

This proposed legislation will require a student with disabilities' Individual Education Plan, or IEP, or Section 504 Plan, or an Individual Health Plan, to provide additional documentation. They will be required to document that the student's unique mobility, sensory, medical, social, communication, emotional, regulatory, and decision-making needs in the event of school emergency evacuation or drill have been discussed and considered. Plans must also indicate whether the student can fully and safely participate in school-wide safety and evacuation drills without the use of supplementary supports, modifications, accommodations, or services.

It is impossible for students to experience full participation and inclusion when their safety is in jeopardy. But for many children and teens with disabilities in New Jersey schools, this is the case. I ask for your support in this critical issue.

The next issue I want to talk about is transition services for students who will need adult supports and services.

Students who need to remain in school until they are 21 must not be pushed out at age 18. This is doing a disservice to everybody.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Do we have information on how often that happens?

MS. NOVEMSKY: I do not, but I can get some.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, thank you.

MS. NOVEMSKY: And it happens more when they're in-district placements, anecdotally, than when they're out-of-district--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. NOVEMSKY: --when they're in the specialized schools out-of-district.

Okay; so real planning needs to involve the student and the student's family. There needs to be visioning for the life course, not just write in the plan, "They're going to go to college," or, "They're going to get a job." It needs to be comprehensive.

Family involvement and planning will inform instruction, which will prepare the student for a full and meaningful life, fully integrated in the community. Segregated settings will not serve us well. Family members will be involved long after educational entitlement. Early investment in special education and related services will serve to reduce the dependence on supports when they're adults.

Family members, like myself, are the most important member of the IEP team, and must be recognized and included as such.

So historically New Jersey has been more advanced than most other states in the country in recognizing the effectiveness of transition services for students with disabilities who are required to include transition

plans in their individual plans after they've turned 14; which is better than the Federal guidelines, which is 16. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 allows students with a disability -- either with an IEP or a 504 Plan -- to be eligible to receive pre-employment transition services, regardless of whether they have applied for or are eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. The students must be enrolled in educational programs, including post-secondary programs; non-traditional or alternative secondary education programs, such as homeschooling and other recognized educational programs -- such as those offered through the Juvenile Justice System. The maximum age of such a student is 24.

Under WIOA, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, such students are also eligible to apply for full vocational rehabilitation cases. According to the New Jersey Office of Special Education Programs, or OSEP, there are approximately 76,000 students with IEPs under IDEA in New Jersey. They do not track 504 Plans unless they need special accommodations, so we don't have accurate numbers on those. But to contrast that, there are only, like, 100 VR people throughout the state -- counselors -- so some work needs to be done.

WIOA requires that each State VR agency spend a minimum of 15 percent; so that, in New Jersey, is \$8 million for these services.

WIOA requires that states develop interagency agreements among State Educational Agencies, Local Educational Agencies, and VR agencies. The agreement should coordinate and assign financial, programmatic, and information dissemination responsibilities of each agency.

It is critical that funding streams from respective agencies be effectively used without duplication; and to achieve maximum outcomes for

students, including those with the most significant support needs, to transition to post-secondary education, vocational education, continuing and adult education, competitive integrated employment, adult services, independent living, and community participation. Unfortunately, the Memo of Understanding, or MOU, among Office of Special Education Programs, DVRS, and CBVI -- the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired -- has yet to be executed. It still needs the signatures of the Commissioners of Human Services and Education, and this is a big hurdle.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Wait; would you back up and repeat that?

MS. NOVEMSKY: Sure.

So we need -- so there needs to be a Memorandum of Understanding. It has been signed already by VR, but it needs to be signed by the Departments of Education and Human Services Commissioners, because the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired sits in the Department of Human Services; that's where they are involved.

An Act has already been in effect, and this Memorandum of Understanding has not been signed. So that's an issue for us.

In its audit of DVRS this summer, the Rehabilitation Services Administration, or RSA, included in its findings the absence of a Memorandum of Understanding to be an item of concern. Without the Memorandum of Understanding in place, \$8 million in spending by Vocational Rehabilitation on Pre-Employment Transition Services, or Pre-ETS, plus spending of Local Educational Administrations, cannot be effectively coordinated to enable students with disabilities to reach their transition goals.

We urge the Legislature to assume an oversight role on tracking services received and the outcomes of the Pre-Employment Transition Services and transition services, to ensure effective utilization of public funding to achieve maximum post-school outcomes.

Effective oversight will help New Jersey students with disabilities to reap the full benefits of one of the most promising Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act initiatives. With early and more intensive interventions of Pre-ETS and transition services, it is critical that families, educators, and vocational rehab counselors must assume competence in students.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: You're talking about expectations.

MS. NOVEMSKY: I'm talking about high expectations. One of the biggest things we need to battle -- among families, among educators, among the public -- is low expectations of students with the highest support needs. We really need to expect them to be full members of the community. It will be better for the community, it will be better for them, and it will be better for everyone.

For students to be successful, all parties must work collaboratively to develop transition plans which encompass high expectations on students, with adequate and flexible supports, reflecting interests, attributes, and needs of the students. So they still have support needs, but we expect them to participate fully in employment and every other aspect of life.

Spending on transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services will return high yields to the state, while helping students with disabilities launch promising career pathways.

I also want to talk a little bit about the Special Education Parent Advisory Councils, or SEPACs. We ask for your support in ensuring that Special Education Parent Advisory Councils in underserved areas be supported and enhanced. The SEPACs are a great vehicle for parent involvement and engagement. In order to be successful, they must be family-led, but in cooperation and supported by school district personnel.

Thank you for your attention to these very important matters.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you; thank you, Rebekah, for your testimony. There's a lot in there that we're going to have to unpack and follow up with.

So stay in touch with us.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, just some things that I have run into with some constituents, whether they're in my District or not. They know I'm on the Joint Committee and they call.

And I'm wondering if -- and I don't know if there is -- on a yearly basis, the IEPs for students from year to year. In other words, I'm just going to use numbers. If you have 10,000 this year, and next year, all of a sudden, you have 6,000; well, what happened to the ones who were in there? Because, you know, even in suburban areas, there are parents who have come to my office crying--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --because they know their child needs the help. The child is lost, but the IEPs are disappearing, or they're being diminished to a level that's not helping their child.

So, you know, I don't know if there's a requirement--

MS. NOVEMSKY: That's very concerning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: It's more than concerning--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --and I've -- you know, in my District Office, one-on-one--

So what I think we should ask for -- and I don't know where we ask for it -- but that kind of number to be given to us. You know, what does the Department of Education show -- how many IEPs are in the State of New Jersey in January or September of 2018; and where are we in September of 2019? How many? Did the number go up, did the number go down? And what are they saying -- why it did or it didn't?

Because I think we're going to find a lot of what you're talking about; and those individuals coming into me, upset that-- The ball's being dropped by boards of ed of some of the school districts that just don't want to deal with it.

And I've seen it, I've heard it, I've gone home upset myself--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --trying to help somebody get through this for their child. And I'm not going to lie; I think when I first became a legislator, both of my sons had learning disabilities. And I had to be their advocate.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Of course.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: But I was a real tough mother who put the Child Study Team one-on-one, and said, "You don't like me and I don't like you. But we're not here to like each other; we're here to do what's best for my children."

MS. NOVEMSKY: Right. Well, they were lucky to have you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: You know, so I was a fighter on that level; but not everybody is and can be.

And I think things are getting lost here; and to have that in my District Office-- I think maybe we, as a Committee, can start looking into requesting some statistical numbers on the issue.

MS. NOVEMSKY: I think that would be great, and I'd be happy to work with you on that. And I would also be happy to talk with any of those families--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Okay.

MS. NOVEMSKY: --that are coming into your office upset.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Oh, very upset; in tears.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes; no, I'm not -- sadly, I'm not surprised to hear that. But Districts--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And not just my District.

MS. NOVEMSKY: No.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: They just know that I'm an advocate for it--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --so they come in.

MS. NOVEMSKY: No, no, no; this is a statewide issue for sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, it is.

MS. NOVEMSKY: And it cuts across every demographic.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: It does.

MS. NOVEMSKY: And for us to have the information from those families would be helpful in our statewide advocacy as well.

But I want to say that your kids were lucky to have you, but--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Not everyone does.

MS. NOVEMSKY: --Child Study Teams can be very intimidating to parents.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes; and absolutely. I mean, they absolutely can be, and I know that for certain.

MS. NOVEMSKY: And that's their strategy, yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And I think that's why, in my very beginning-- And I said to the Assemblywoman and others at the time -- Melanie Schulz was on it -- that that was something -- why I wanted to be on this Committee to watch, and listen, and hear, because-- You know, life's lessons are the best lessons of all.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So for what I went through, I don't like seeing anyone else have to go through it. And someone may not be as strong, and some are; and some are even stronger than me.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Right; and some of us get worn down, right?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: But we all should be working together; we need to work together on this.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes, I'd be happy to work further on all of that with you.

Thank you so much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Rebekah and Assemblywoman.

Senator Rice.

SENATOR RICE: So just a couple of things for the record.

There are some Child Study Teams out there that do a real good job--

MS. NOVEMSKY: Absolutely.

SENATOR RICE: --in the public school system. But as you look for numbers and you look for what's going on, keep in mind the charter schools.

So a lot of the IEPs are written, good plans are written for the student. And I know in the Newark District, for example, in the past, a lot of the students would go to charter schools; and they didn't follow the plan, or they would tell the parents they didn't need it. The student -- if they were transferred back to the public schools, the IEP plan never came back.

MS. NOVEMSKY: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: And so there are little things that people don't talk about; but if they would talk to IEP people -- if they would be honest about it -- will tell you that there are other problems, etc.

And that's why we're not here to get into a fight with public versus charter, but that's why I continue to say, and have been saying for a number of years, that we need to pay attention to charters and get them on the same page, with the same kinds of regulations that public schools have, etc.

So that's just for the record and information that needs to be investigated by the Department of Education.

MS. NOVEMSKY: No, that's a great point. Thank you for bringing that up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Next up, we'd like to hear from Kaleena Berryman, Director of the Abbott Leadership Institute, Rutgers University-Newark.

And congratulations on your promotion.

K A L E E N A K. B E R R Y M A N: Well, thank you. (laughter)

Good morning.

SENATOR RICE: Good morning.

MS. BERRYMAN: Thank you so much, to the Joint Committee, for having this hearing.

This, too, is my favorite topic of conversation, because I believe that parents are truly the best experts when it comes to the education of their children.

For the past 17 years, the Abbot Leadership Institute, housed at Rutgers University-Newark, has developed informed and effective education advocacy for Newark's public schools by introducing parents, students, educators, and stakeholders to education policy and practice, and strategies for meaningful family engagement in schools.

I have served as Director for about a year -- Junius Williams, our Founding Director, retired in 2018 -- and as a staff member and student of ALI since 2006.

At ALI, through classes mostly held on the Rutgers-Newark campus, we provide parents with the knowledge, skills, confidence, and support to serve as leaders in the education of their children. This is especially important in high-poverty districts like Newark, where schools are

struggling to prepare students to meet State academic standards, education reform plans change frequently, turnover in school leadership is constant, and schools are historically underfunded and under-resourced.

At ALI we believe that parent involvement in communities like Newark is simply not enough. We aim for parent empowerment. In Newark, parents have had to fight for a seat at the table. Parents have observed the ways in which schools are unwelcoming and unsupportive of parent advocacy. Parents looking to develop parent organizations have, on many occasions, received little support from school administration. And parents who advocated for changes in school leadership, or against cuts to programs, or who brought attention to educational inequalities within the District were often labeled as *antagonistic*.

ALI has, over the years, built the capacity of parents to overcome these obstacles through the power of information and organizing; and has provided a meeting place at Rutgers-Newark where parent advocates can share strategies, support one another, lick their wounds, and achieve wins for children.

These obstacles to meaningful parent engagement are not specific to Newark. When I became a mom seven years ago, I was immediately able to put my ALI advocacy skills into practice, because my son was born 16 weeks premature weighing 1 pound, 5 ounces. I understood that for him to survive against all of the odds I could not simply be involved in his care during the five months that he was in the NICU. I had to be engaged in every part of his health plan, I had to do my research, and I had to be empowered with information to have a voice in decision-making to ensure his survival.

Well, when I attempted to employ those same strategies to his education, I found that his school -- a public school in Jersey City for children with severe medical and intellectual disabilities -- my son has cerebral palsy and autism -- did not have a parent organization, a school leadership council, or even a governance body for shared decision-making.

This year, when parents received notices that the program, as we knew it, would no longer operate as of June 2020, we were appalled that no meeting had taken place to discuss this decision with us. It was not until the Mayor and the national news media responded to a letter that we, the newly formed PTSA, sent to school leaders and legislators that the plan to end the program was pulled.

Parents should not have to involve the Mayor and media to be heard around the education of their children.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires schools to engage parents of public and private school students in the development, implementation, and annual review of school programs for Title I students. This is not happening in schools as we believe the law intended. This is because there is no clear definition of or standards for meaningful and effective parent engagement in schools. There is a lack of professional development in meaningful parent engagement, and no requirements or in-depth monitoring processes for reporting parent engagement strategies, other than meeting attendance sheets.

Title I funds are not being used in many schools in ways that empower parents to meaningfully engage. When we speak to parents across the city of Newark, we find that schools do not offer meetings at varying

times of the day, and do not provide support, such as childcare or alternative options, for participation.

In Newark, Superintendent León, our first Superintendent under local control, has developed and implemented plans to improve parent engagement in the City. He has held community meetings around strategic planning and has prioritized making sure that every school has a PTA or parent organization, and a school leadership council. However, any improvements made can be quickly eliminated if the District were to undergo another change in leadership, as these things are not required by the State.

It is the recommendation of the Abbott Leadership Institute that the Joint Committee on the Public Schools develop standards and provide incentives for schools and school districts to operate at the level that engages parents as partners in all decision-making, and equips them with the knowledge necessary to support their children's academic achievement.

We offer the following recommendations.

One: That the Joint Committee on the Public Schools should develop a Parent/Caregiver Family Engagement Task Force to clearly define *meaningful parent engagement* and develop statewide standards and best practices for meaningful parent engagement in and with schools and school districts.

Develop legislation that requires, or an incentive program that encourages, school districts to build the capacity of parents to meaningfully engage; which could include: involving parents in the development of trainings to improve teaching and learning, covering costs for transportation and childcare for parents to attend meetings, providing training to parents to enhance their capacity, training parents to develop other parents, arranging

school meetings at a variety of times of day, adopting models of best practice, and establishing a district-wide parent council -- all currently optional under Title I.

Implement the Statewide Family Engagement Center in New Jersey, with the input of the Task Force, to help school districts better support schools and educators to better engage parents. This could possibly be created in partnership with a University, such as Rutgers.

Require school districts to review all district job descriptions for parent liaisons or school staff responsible for parent engagement, to ensure that the responsibilities are related to parent engagement, and are in alignment with the standards possibly created by the Task Force.

Require school districts to involve parents in the development of the district-wide parent engagement policy through a series of public meetings.

And lastly, provide grant opportunities for professional development in meaningful parent engagement, and create incentives for teacher and principal certification programs to develop educator expertise in meaningful parent engagement.

These recommendations, we believe, will result in the development of standards that allow the State and local school districts to ensure that parent engagement is treated as an important component to improving student academic success.

The Abbott Leadership Institute and Rutgers University-Newark are committed to participating in the exploration of these recommendations. In the very end, this will improve educational outcomes for children by holding schools accountable, increase the capacity of parents to be active

participants, utilize the expertise that parents have to offer, and give parents the power to have a say in their children's education.

And thank you.

SENATOR RICE: Thank you very much for the work you've done and the work you're doing. I've known you a long time--

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: --and we certainly appreciate Junius Williams and all the work he's done.

We also appreciate Rutgers University and the partnership.

I've always argued and oftentimes upset some parents, primarily because parents have a responsibility to attend these meetings--

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: --whether we set rules or not. And I think the thing that offends me the most in cities that I go to is the turn out. And it's very interesting; parents will complain about the schools, and the conditions, and what's happening in the schools, and don't want the kids to participate. And you can put a charter school across the street, and all of a sudden the charter school says, "Well, if you're going to be here, you'll be here on Wednesday of every week," and parent show up.

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: We need to find out, legislatively, how to mandate parents' involvement -- whether they want to be there or not. And I have often said, going back about 30 years ago, I said that maybe every parent, during the daytime, can't be at schools, and sometimes they can't get there at night. But if I'm there, I can look out for your child, too.

MS. BERRYMAN: Absolutely.

SENATOR RICE: So I said maybe what we should do is take these subsidy checks and figure out what schools the parents go to and have them pick up their subsidy checks at the school. And before they actually get the check, they have to walk through the school and talk to people, you know? (laughter)

MS. BERRYMAN: Oh, my.

SENATOR RICE: It sounds radical, but sometimes you have to be radical to wake up parents, particularly young parents today. They just don't get it.

So I would hope that as-- And I think the recommendations -- they sound good and sound. But I think that we need to make a note to staff -- because I can't see, so that's why I'm doing this (indicates) and all this stuff, okay? (laughter) -- that as we look at these recommendations, we brainstorm; put our heads together and see what we can do to incentivize or even compel parents to take more responsibility for being on top of their children's education.

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: Those who have the time and those who do not have the time -- because we know schedules can be complex -- those parents who go, if they're looking out for their kids indirectly they're looking out for mine too.

MS. BERRYMAN: Yes.

SENATOR RICE: Okay.

MS. BERRYMAN: And, you know, I have a unique position because I am the Director of the Abbott Leadership Institute; I've worked in parent empowerment for over 10 years; I have a Master's degree. And I went

to my child's school looking to be that very engaged advocate parent. And when I was able to help them secure \$10,000 from an entity, I was, "Oh, great; great parent leader." But when I began to ask very hard questions and begin to demand a certain level of inclusion and decision-making, I was treated as if I didn't know anything.

So I think that, at the foundation, there has to be a culture shift. And with all culture shifts in education, unfortunately they have to become the priority of our legislative bodies to make sure that people are not creating conditions in schools that-- If I had been a regular parent who wasn't about that life, I would have been turned off from the way that my son's school treated me at first.

So it's a two-pronged approach that we had to think about.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: We appreciate your testimony and you sharing your experience.

And we have your testimony in writing, and we have it recorded. So we will look at the possibility of having that Committee or Commission formed.

MS. BERRYMAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And we'll be in touch with you--

MS. BERRYMAN: All right; thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --as well as others.

MS. BERRYMAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much.

All right; so I know that Julie Borst is here; I'm going to let you catch your breath.

I believe Marcella Simadiris is here; yes.

But I'm going to ask Rosie Grant, the Executive Director of the Paterson Education Fund, to come up; then followed by Marcella Simadiris and Julie Borst, okay?

ROSIE GRANT: Good morning, Assemblywoman Jasey, Senator Rice, members of the Committee, and members of the audience.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

I'm Rosie Grant, for the record, Executive Director of Paterson Education Fund.

PEF, as we're commonly known, has a mission to stimulate community action for change in Paterson Public Schools so that every child achieves high standards.

Several years ago, we realized that this cannot be done unless parents are engaged in meaningful ways. As our children's first teachers, beginning at birth, parents have the primary responsibility of making sure their children gain the foundational skills that prepare them for school.

As a child matures, the parents' roles change, yet remain critical.

In our work at PEF we define these roles in three categories: to support, to monitor, and to advocate; making sure that their needs are met, watching over and guiding them, and speaking or acting on their behalf as needed.

Our Right Question Project workshop is based on a strategy we learned from parents in Lawrence, Massachusetts. It helps parents build relationships with teachers and administrators by asking questions. The two primary questions are, "What is my child's learning?" and "What does my child need to learn?"

By exploring these questions, and the difference between them, parents learn how to support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education. They develop the questions themselves, they prioritize them, they learn how to go deeper, how to ask open questions to facilitate conversation and relationship building.

Effective parental involvement is more than a one-way communication by sending home flyers or by giving information at occasional meetings. Meaningful engagement gives parents and caretakers the tools that they need to help them help their children.

It also means that we effectively use whatever assets parents bring to the table. In order to do this, schools must see parents as real partners with something to offer. Schools must recognize that parents bring assets to the table as well.

Parents have led workshops in Paterson in their areas of expertise. If you're a nurse you can teach basic first aid; a chef can teach cooking classes; EMTs have done classes -- life saving techniques, etc.

AT PEF our most dedicated volunteers are the parents of the children we serve. Parents are the most passionate advocates because they are fighting for their own children's futures. Passionate determination goes a long way when you're fighting for systemic change.

A great example of how parent engagement can affect teaching and learning is seen in community school strategies. Paterson Public Schools' Full Service Community Schools model is the ultimate expression of this. "It takes a village," is the philosophy. By removing many of the barriers that can keep students from achieving academically, this initiative takes a comprehensive approach in improving the lives of our students and their

families. After-school programs and activities, adult education, social services, and health clinics are all available at school. The school-based health centers provide vision, dental, mental health, and pediatric services at little or no cost to the community. The schools become community hubs, with the well-being of the child being the focal point.

Full service community schools are focused around the philosophy that student achievement will improve greatly if children are healthy, happy, and supported. Seven schools are currently implementing the strategy. You have before you the Full Service Theory of Change chart, which is the detailed chart -- and no, I'm not going to go through it; it's the one on the 11 by 17 paper, the colorful one -- but I wanted to just highlight that all those yellow boxes are where there are specific strategies around engaging parents. While they're active in the other areas, there was some deliberate work around how we do meaningful parental engagement.

This has helped to improve the culture and climate, attendance, discipline, and student performance at these schools.

We're also beginning to explore sustainable community schools, and you have details on that on the attachment with the blue headline, from the Journey for Justice Alliance. The overview of Sustainable Community Schools, which you have, shows evidence-based school improvement models that offer whole-child education strategies by engaging the community in designing and implementing six key pillars. The pillars are on the back; they are curriculum, teacher support, wraparound services, student-centered climate, parent and community engagement, and school leadership.

There's a movement by several national education leaders -- including Journey for Justice, NEA, AFT, and others -- to implement

community schools strategy in 20,000 schools across the country. With your commitment and support as the Joint Committee, New Jersey can be a leader in this movement, and we're well on the way with activists in many of our communities.

Parent engagement and, in fact, parent initiative and determination has positively affected several policies in Paterson. These include our new discipline policy, which is based on the Dignity in Schools Campaign's Model Code to end the school-to-prison pipeline by keeping students in school. We all know kids who are not in school are not learning. The Code incorporates the use of preventive strategies, such as Positive Behaviors in Schools, PBIS; and restorative practices, which helps students build relationships and prevent, acknowledge, and repair harm that they may cause to their community.

Our Breakfast After the Bell program was initiated by parents, piloted in one school and then gradually implemented district-wide. It was met with major resistance at first; but thanks to parent persistence and the collaboration of several community partners, Paterson Public Schools are now feeding every child breakfast and lunch.

Similarly, our attendance and promotion policies were revisited when parents and community members published data, gathered from the School Progress Reports, and demanded change. They didn't stop at the demand; parents and community members sat at the table with school administrators, teachers, and other staff to develop the new policies.

Similar collaborative work was used in the development of our strategic plan, our Long-Range Facilities Plan, and the Every Student

Succeeds Plan. Parent voice has affected the rewriting of curriculum; and we hope that we will continue to do so.

Our motto is “Gentle pressure applied relentlessly,” so we’ll keep being relentless until we find more ways to uplift the parent voice.

We believe and we’ve proved that if the community -- especially parents -- is part of creating a positive vision for our schools, and holds itself accountable for student outcomes, and is engaged in identifying and implementing those solutions, then high expectations become a part of the community culture and kids will soar academically and socially.

I would like to invite the Committee, as a whole or members, to come to visit our schools to talk with our parents to get a first-hand view of some of the work that is being effected and how it’s affecting student achievement.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much.

And while I’m listening to you, I’m remembering the amazing day that we did spend in Paterson visiting community schools. And it’s probably time to come back and visit again.

MS. GRANT: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Because, you know, if I had my druthers I think we’d have community schools in every community, because the concept is, basically, we’re a family and families need resources. And if everything is based at the school -- health care, immunizations, these kinds of things; tutoring, after-school programming -- it leads to success.

MS. GRANT: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And I especially enjoyed the Right Question Workshop idea; because now I have grandchildren, and sometimes I stumble at-- I don't want to say, "How was your day?" I need other questions. And I also, you know, like the idea of "What is my child learning?" "Tell me what you learned today? What was new, what was interesting?" I think we can all continue to learn.

So thank you for the work that you're doing.

And let me ask-- Let's see; is Ronsha Dickerson here? (no response) No? Okay. Because I noted that she's with the Journey for Justice Alliance, so I thought you two might be testifying together.

MS. GRANT: Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

MS. GRANT: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: We appreciate it, all right?

MS. GRANT: Thank you, Rebecca, for pulling this together.

(laughter)

MS. SAPP (Executive Director): Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right; now, Marcella, you have slides that you want to use?

MARCELLA SIMADIRIS: (off mike) Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; so perhaps while we're setting those up, I can have someone else come up. Because we all started late, as you know.

Let's see, Michael Vrancik, Government Relations Director, New Jersey School Boards Association.

Would you like to come up?

MICHAEL VRANCIK: (off mike) Sure.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay; and is Michael Cohan here?

MICHAEL COHAN: (off mike) I am.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: You are; okay.

If you gentlemen would like to come up and give your testimony while we're setting up for Marcella's.

And I appreciate everyone's patience. It's been a trying morning, I know, for most of us, in terms of the traffic and the accident that caused us all to be late, pretty much.

MR. COHAN: So good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address you this morning on a topic of importance to the success of all students in New Jersey's public schools.

Parental involvement in schools is something widely sought after by all educators, and often unevenly found in some schools. And I'm here this morning to add the support of our organization to much of the testimony you've heard this morning from many of the previous speakers.

There isn't much I've heard that I find--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Could you introduce yourself, just for the record?

MR. COHAN: Oh, I'm sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I'm sorry

MR. COHAN: Michael Cohan; I'm the Director of Professional Development and Instructional Issues for the New Jersey Education Association.

There isn't much I've heard this morning with which I can disagree.

So what does good parental involvement in school look like? The strongest evidence of parental involvement that yields benefits for both families and schools involves a number of things. Goal setting, with children, and fostering achievement of those goals; parents paying attention to student learning and growth to ensure that their kids are on track; strong relationships between teachers and families, with regular contact about students' progress; parents engaged in advocacy for improvements to school facilities and programs through participation in meetings of local boards of education, and meetings like this -- of State agencies -- and with the Federal government.

There are many documented benefits of good parental involvement. Many studies -- including work done at Johns Hopkins University, the American Psychological Association, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- have shown that high levels of parental involvement improve student achievement and learning; grows parents' confidence in their children's education; and also can yield higher grades, lower absenteeism, better social skills, and improved behavior among students.

How does this involvement lead to student success? The CDC has found that strong connections at school can help young people feel more connected to the adults in their lives, resulting in the benefits I've noted a moment ago. They also found that students who feel connected to school have positive health outcomes, such as a lower likelihood of alcohol or tobacco use, fewer incidents of gun violence, less frequent sexual intercourse

as adolescents, and are far less likely to have emotional issues that lead to such adverse outcomes like eating disorders and suicide.

And while the benefits of parental involvement are well-documented, so are many barriers to effective participation by parents in their children's education. The immediacy of modern communications often means that parents don't want to take the time to visit schools. They favor the use of digital tools, which can offer opportunities for quick communication between the school and the home, but students miss out when parents don't offer their time and presence. The demands of work schedules, transportation issues, cultural and language barriers, and even adverse personal experiences with school cause some parents to avoid contact with their child's school despite the benefits that would come from their involvement, connection, and presence.

There is also ample evidence that involvement is insufficient, as you've heard from previous speakers. The true goal should be engagement of parents in the school community. And what's the difference? When there is engagement, parents and teachers share responsibility for student outcomes. When schools and teachers involve parents in meetings and events, and parents volunteer support at home and at school, there's a deeper commitment to the common goals set for children and their learning. In fact, the Federal Every Student Succeeds Act focuses on stakeholder engagement, and clearly parents are our most important stakeholders.

There are many effective strategies to increase parental engagement. Teacher contact information should be provided the students early in the year to help them feel comfortable reaching out to the school. Opportunities for parents to connect with schools should be identified, such

as volunteer shifts, class activities, and parent-teacher collaborative committees. There should be frequent discussions about classroom and parents' goals and expectations. Both schools and parents should commit to frequent contact and interaction via multiple platforms, such as e-mail, social media, websites, newsletters; in addition to phone calls and face-to-face meetings.

And there should be a school focus on those common challenges and barriers faced by parents who want to be engaged, and will help them to break down those barriers.

In short, parental involvement and engagement is a partnership; parents and teachers working together focused on kids' welfare. And there is something you heard from the immediate previous speaker that I learned early in my career. Parents are the students' first teachers; and our partnership with them is both logical and natural, and we should never forget that reality.

I've also provided you with some selected research for your records.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

Two Michaels; I just confused myself. (laughter)

Thank you very much, Michael Cohan.

Michael Vrancik.

MR. VRANCIK: My name is Michael Vrancik; I am the Director of Government Relations for the New Jersey School Boards Association.

I've given you a written statement which summarizes, largely, the policies that are part of our advocacy manual.

We're a member-driven organization, and everything that we do with the Legislature is a reflection of policies that are adopted by our members. That said, what I've given you is a summary of some key points.

We believe parental involvement is critical; in fact, the middle paragraph in my statement I just want to read into the record.

"The New Jersey School Boards Association believes that partnerships with parents should be forged through a policy of inclusion that establishes two-way communication between the school district and the family. Training to teach parents about how the school system works, how to effectively communicate about their children and school issues, and how to develop a home environment conducive to study, and how to help with homework, are also important components of parental involvement."

We provide model policies for individual local boards to adopt that reflect our overarching statewide policies. And, I mean, for us this is critical. I see this as a process where we're learning, but we're also helping to educate; and we want parents to play a role in that.

I have an 8-year-old grandson who lives with us. And the first question I ask him every day when he comes home from school is, "What's for homework?" because I want to know. We went to a back-to-school night a few weeks ago, and we met all his teachers. And we spent a lot of time -- it was great -- they spent a lot of their personal time with us. And we walked through what a typical day is like and what the homework requirements are going to be; so we know. So when he tells me, "I don't have any," I know that's not true. And even if he finished his homework in school, in his extra time, there's still a sheet that we have to sign. So we're engaged, and I think that's critically important.

Also, on the back of my statement I reference some things that are in QSAC that reference requirements, in terms of evaluating district performance, that speak to parental involvement. I mean, I think that perhaps listening to other speakers, the State could do more to require this. But there's at least a minimum baseline where the State now requires, as part of their district performance reviews, that the district has to certify, in some fashion, that they're engaged in parental involvement.

Anecdotally, I think it's important from my perspective to say that board members are the ultimate parental *involvees* -- if that's the right way of saying it -- because a lot of our board members, although they don't necessarily have children in the district now, their initial engagement was a result of their deciding to be involved because they had students in the district. And school board members are essentially volunteers; they're not paid, they're not compensated, and they give a lot of their time. And we actively encourage them to engage the community to participate in the educational process.

There's been a lot of conversation, most recently, about fixing the school environment and making it more conducive to learning and improving the social aspects for students. And I think it's critically important to understand the parents' input, and to make sure that that's part of the conversation. Because we want students to feel at home in school, and when they're at home to take back what they're learning so the parents are engaged. And this whole process can't work without everybody being involved.

That's all I have to say.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I couldn't agree more.

And the entire morning I've been sitting here thinking about my experiences over the years with my three kids, and now my grandchildren. And I feel like there's been some progress made; but I also realize that we still have a ways to go to make sure that every parent or caregiver feels listened to, valued, and involved.

So this morning's conversation -- discussion has, I think, given us some ideas. And I think that when we hear from the last two speakers, we will have even more information to use and, perhaps, have that conversation about setting up a committee or a commission.

Yes, Assemblywoman Egan Jones.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Thank you.

One of the things that I wrote down here as we're talking about this-- Because I think the most successful students are the ones with parents who are engaged. There's just, across the board, no question; it's historical, and it will continue to be that way.

I remember greeting some folks who weren't great students -- they're intimidated by the school system, by teachers. How do we remove that from those folks? Because they're going to help set their child up for a lack of success. They may do okay, but they'll come out and feel the same way the parent did. And it always disturbs me when I hear folks say, that they just -- you know, they don't trust it. I know children with special needs and IEPs -- the adversarial activities with those parents are fraught with danger. I mean, I had one parent who was suing the school district because she didn't feel that they were listening to her. And maybe she was a little off base; I can't say that she wasn't, because sometimes parents, when they're

advocating for their children, take it a step too far, that's for sure. But we would like all parents to step forward.

And I know I've heard so many efforts to do that, but I don't think we've found the cream for the coffee yet.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman DeCroke.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And I'm just going to ask this, for the sake of asking.

And I know what you're saying -- that there are some parents who do take it further, and they do hire lawyers. In one case, with an IEP and a student who was having a hard time, the family just couldn't afford to hire the lawyer. Which was an astronomical amount of money, by the way; I'm not even going to say, because it's almost embarrassing to talk about what it was going to cost these people to represent their children.

And that was really far; that was down in the southern part of the state. And here I am, in northern New Jersey, and I'm getting the phone call, okay? So it was something hard for me to rationalize, when I heard the real truth.

So if there's a situation like that, where a school district and a parent hit so hard, and legal -- they're seeking legal protection or fighting, is there, for that -- for an instance like that, a mediation, maybe? We could set up mediation where we could bring the two parties together and mediate so that it doesn't get to a lawsuit that's going to cost the taxpayers money on the side of the town, through the board of education; and then an individual who can't afford it. There is a mediation that we could put together, and I think maybe this Committee take a look at, for those types of incidences when it happens.

What do you think?

MR. COHAN: Well, I was going to address Assemblywoman Egan Jones' question first.

But as I heard you talking about the special education issues early in the morning, it brought to mind a very personal situation in our own family. I have a niece who's on the autism spectrum; she's 16. She hasn't attended school regularly for years.

There was a dispute about how to meet her needs, as described in her IEP. The school district decided that they wanted to exclude her from daily participation in school, provided home instruction; which, from my perspective, was inadequate.

I'm loathe to criticize my colleagues; but they just failed to meet her educational needs. As with many students on the autism spectrum, she's a very bright child; she has innate intelligence. She communicates that intelligence differently. Her socialization skills are more limited than some of her peers. And the only place she's going to learn some of that sort of socialization is to be in a setting with other children and other people.

Thankfully, for our family, my sister-in-law and brother-in-law have means, and they've been able to provide for her needs. And I think that illustrates your point exactly -- that shouldn't be the case.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Right.

MR. COHAN: We have so many families and communities that have deep and broad needs. And I believe that it's our responsibility, as a society, to make certain that everybody has that equal opportunity. I believe that is -- that constitutional right of a thorough and efficient education that we talk about.

But on the other hand -- to segue back to the concern of Assemblywoman Egan Jones -- I think there are limitations to what we can mandate, and put in compliance rules, and so on. I think that the way for some of these issues to be addressed is perhaps through that community school model that you mentioned, Madam Chair. It's through the building of community and the establishment and nurturing of relationships that we're really going to get at the heart of things, right? I mean, there are so many barriers and challenges that we face together as a society, where folks like to take their opposite corners and not try to find common ground. And that's really what's going to make a difference. It's at the heart of every human interaction, and it certainly is going to be at the heart of what we do when we're working on behalf of students, their learning needs, and their growth.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I can't imagine saying it more clearly.

And I know you have another comment. I want you to make it brief, because--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: No, real quick.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --we still have two more people to hear from.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Just that we agree to take that thought and look at it on a county-level mediation. So, you know, maybe we can have some kind of workshop or get-together to talk about it, because I think it's an area that may help us in all this.

Thank you.

MR. VRANCIK: Assemblywoman, I think there are some opportunities for mediation through the Department of Education. I know it's been tried as a way to reduce the number of court cases. There's no requirement, but it is an option.

Unfortunately, oftentimes the two parties are so far apart on what they believe is appropriate that it ends up in a court case.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Well, that's why I think we look at bringing it down more to a county level, than a State level; and the county has to report to the State. But get it more to the local area -- the mediation -- because for somebody to communicate their problems to the Department of Education is not easy, and hard for an individual to understand.

So I think we could do some work on that to make it better, and make it happen, and try to help people along in the process.

MR. VRANCIK: In response to Assemblywoman Egan Jones' question, I guess I would just say that although there's no one size that fits all, we're using an educational model that's several hundred years old, but we're a far more sophisticated society than we used to be. We have a lot of tools that we didn't have before.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Right.

MR. VRANCIK: And generally speaking, people are a lot more aware, especially when it comes to their own family members. I think there's an advantage and an opportunity to take advantage of that awareness, and underscore the fact that we're all constantly learning. And this isn't a process that stops at some point; it's always going to be capable of some

improvement. And I think engaging people in an ongoing conversation is ultimately the solution.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I think that's very well put, and I appreciate your sharing your grandson's experience. And I also appreciate your sharing your niece's experience. And I think that it reminds me that we all have more in common than different.

And so on that note, I'm going to thank you for your testimony and ask that Marcella Simadiris come up.

And our last presenter will be Julie Borst.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Is it afternoon? Good afternoon.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Good afternoon.

MS. SIMADIRIS: First, I want to thank Director Sapp for dealing with me, because I was coming all last year.

(refers to PowerPoint presentation)

First I came here with Miss Berryman; she brought her researchers from last summer -- not this past one, but the summer before last -- and they presented their research on chronic absenteeism. And so I just kept on coming throughout the year; and I was like -- I was listening to your testimonies from all these different professionals and scholars on access and equity.

And Senator Thompson, I believe it was you who made a comment when Ms. Berryman's group was up, about the parental input. So it kind of just meshed together, because there is no access or equity without parental input.

So I really appreciate the time to come here and present. And this is my first time presenting in this type of space, so you legislators are my first. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And I want to say I'm really glad you got here safely. I know the traffic accident that occurred early this morning has disrupted a number of people. And I also know that we have a couple of legislators who have now turned around, going home because they're still -- they were still in traffic.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Okay, just a little background on me.

Today, I'm sitting here before you as a parent and an activist; mostly a parent. But just to give you a little bit of background -- I have a Bachelor's degree in Health and Physical Education from Montclair State University; a Master's in Education in Curriculum and Instruction, with a focus on ethics, social justice, and equity from Concordia in Portland, Oregon. It was an online program, but I learned a lot. And I applied what I learned while I was working.

And I've been a teacher of physical education and health in Paterson for the last 19 years, since September of 2000. So that's just my background.

And those are my children; so my children are of African descent. And we live in Montclair; I moved to Montclair specifically, because I did my student teaching in Montclair, at Nishuane gifted and talented school, under the great direction of Frank Gentle and Ginger Reilly. They were the best physical education teachers I've ever met. I loved the culture within the

school, to the point where my mom helped me buy a house in Montclair so I could send my kids to school in Montclair. And also because there was all this information out there saying that Montclair was this great community for multi-racial children. So that's why we moved there.

But I want you to know, through all those children I've encountered the same issues over, and over, and over again. And I'm an activist, so not to say that I've always been this way; I've developed and I've evolved as the years have gone on and situations have occurred. But I've always, I want to say, advocated in some way for my children.

So just to give you-- And I'm going to do this presentation more like a story; so I'm going to tell you my story. But just to give you one story that kind of gives you an idea of what I'm talking about-- My daughter -- she's was a very strong math student in 1st grade at her school, Nishuane. They had an elective piece, a piece where if you were more advanced you could have, like, more advanced math classes. And up until 1st grade she was involved in more advanced math classes.

But going to 2nd grade they, I guess, raised the test scores so she was not able to take that advanced math class in 2nd grade, and she was then put back into regular math. And so she was taken off a track; she was taken off a track in 1st grade. But I knew she had math skills; I knew it.

So fast forward: When she goes to 3rd grade-- Now, she gets this teacher who my older son Altereque had. Now, the funny thing about this teacher is when he was in 2nd grade I heard so many wonderful things about this teacher. And in the summer when I got the card saying that she was going to be my son's teacher, I was so excited.

Unfortunately, my son did not have the greatest experience with her. So while other parents thought that she was a great teacher for their children, she wasn't really a great teacher for my child. And I thought, you know, as an educator I don't want to come down on educators. So I thought maybe it was a relationship piece or whatever.

So when my daughter got her in 3rd grade, I was like, well, you know, this is going to be a different relationship. Nancy's a scholar, she likes math, she likes doing her schoolwork.

The teacher was suggesting low-level math classes for my daughter, just like she did with my son.

But at this -- when she suggested them to me for my son, I sucked it in and I followed her direction. Even though I was an educator, I was a phys ed educator; she was more of, you know, in tune with math standards and whatnot. So I trusted her and I put my son in those classes.

But when she recommended my daughter, I was like, "No." My daughter was in advanced math classes; "No, you're wrong about her." And she was, because that year was the first time my daughter took the New Jersey ASK; that was the last time she took a standardized test. And she did; she placed "advanced proficient."

So I know that was a little bit of a long story, but I just want you all to see how -- when I talk about I've had so many different, like, vantage points, just by being an educator in an urban school district, just by being a parent of black children, just by going to school for what I went to school with. And it's evolved. So this is -- my testimony is going to have a little bit to do with that piece.

Okay; we'll go to the next one.

All right; so this parent's unique vantage point.

Being of European descent, and having children of African descent, while teaching in a suburban school district provides one with a very unique vantage point on the world of equity and education. This perspective has evolved through the years as life experience and happenings changed me in the way others think about me.

I remember my very first year teaching, and one of my colleagues called a mutual student the n-word in a private conversation we were having. I couldn't believe what I had heard, and had no idea what to do. So I made mention of my black children with the hopes that it would be known that I did not entertain racism.

Looking back, I knew I should have had a much deeper discussion with my colleagues; but during that time, I was not capable. Even though I did not know how to approach the situation, I knew this was going to be something my children were going to be confronted with as they made their way through school.

So here I kind of listed a whole bunch of different spaces that I've provided testimony. NJDOE had focus groups; I attended those. I testified at Budget Committee meetings, at Senate Committee meetings, at NJDOE Board meetings, board meetings all over the state. Like, you name it; not just in Montclair, because I am an activist, and we work together and we show up and support each other. So, like, a lot -- like, different districts all over the state.

So I want to tell you that -- the one where the State was taking an assessment collaborative-- We have a Christopher Tienken from Seton Hall -- I don't know if you all are familiar with him -- but he's an Associate

Professor at Seton Hall. And he has -- I'm going to read you just an excerpt. And this is part of my research paper; I know I've provided that to you all before. I don't know if you ever got a chance to look at it, but if you look through my PowerPoint at the end, I reference it. And the other two -- I've referenced this study, which was done by Christopher Tienken.

And it says, "The finding of Sforza's, Tienken's, and Kim's study indicated that the standards that were in place just before the implementation of Common Core 'provided more of the Level 3 and 4 higher-order skills cited in mainstream business and education publication as necessary capabilities for competing in a global economy.' In their account, they reported that difficulty does not represent creativity and strategic thinking. They suggest that most of the CC content standards consisted of 'declarative knowledge, as opposed to necessary strategic and creative thinking.'"

So when we were doing all that to switch over to Common Core -- so that we could be more critical thinkers -- this study that I provide actually indicated that our standards we had before we converted over to Common Core actually had more higher order thinking skills than the new Common Core standards.

So I provide-- And I strongly urge the people-- Because I do have access to people who work for the DOE, and I was like really pushing this study on them because it just always seems like there were certain groups or corporations that were pushing it. And it didn't feel like politicians in this state were listening all the time to the parents who were bringing forth their experiences and their information. So I wanted to provide that for you.

All right; and then that last part, with the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association Board -- there was an incident with my

son in wrestling. I'm pretty sure you all are aware of the incident that happened last year, with the wrestler whose *locs* were cut off. So I was already exposed to some of the culture within that sport; and I had addressed it in a letter. I'll actually -- I'm not going to have time to read it now to you all, but I probably will create a written -- a small written testimony just to add a couple stories I don't have time to provide to you verbally today.

But basically it had to do with the mannequin that was being hung in Phillipsburg, in the locker room -- the visiting team's locker room that had African American students on it. And I was fearful for my son to compete at Districts there. And I just wanted to show how, oftentimes, parents can change venues; like, I know in Paterson, we always have to -- sometimes have to switch from Paterson to Clifton, because Clifton parents complained. But I wanted to let you all know that I did complain, because I was fearful of going to Phillipsburg; I was. It's a huge wrestling town; I don't know if you show up for their things -- like, it's a pit and it's, like, hundreds and hundreds of people.

And so I'm thinking about going to this thing; all these hundreds of people -- they're hanging up black mannequins in their locker rooms. Like, it was scary. So I brought that, and I just want you to know that it really didn't have the same impact as the parents of white children had when they expressed concerns about going into different districts, like Paterson. So I just wanted to also bring that to the floor here as well.

And a lot of it has -- my testimony is going to be from the perspective of a parent of a black child; because that's what I did really want to focus on -- was the equity and access piece -- when I was approaching Director Sapp. I know this is about parental input, but equity is about

spreading according to need. So it's not about equal allocation; it's about seeing who has the greatest need and analyzing it and understanding why. And through my experiences as a teacher and a parent of black children, I really feel like black children are the most in need in the State of New Jersey. You know, I sat here and I listened to everybody; you know, we had the judge come, we talked about how it's the most segregated school in the state -- one of the most segregated school systems in the nation, as a state. So that's the angle I'm coming from.

So yes, those are my efforts at engagement; and these are my efforts at action. I'm a member of People's Organization for Progress; the great Chairman -- my great Chairman, Lawrence Hamm; he founded it in the 1980s. I am a member of Montclair Cares About Schools; and I just want to give you a little thing about that.

Am I running out of time?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Well, no; yes and no. We did start late; I recognize that. But I'm going to ask you to try to move through this--

MS. SIMADIRIS: I know.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: --because we have one more speaker after you.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Okay, I just want to jump-- Because this is where-- This piece right here is important, because this demonstrates when-- Because this was an experience that I had where parents came together; we fought against testing. We were successful in keeping a charter school out of Montclair. We were successful in stopping some of the practices, as a parent, that I saw -- while I was a teacher, that I saw in Paterson

coming over to Montclair that I knew weren't good. We were successful in stopping some of those practices. So that organization helped me a lot.

But when it came specifically to dealing with issues I was having as a parent of black students, it didn't-- I mean, everybody got quiet. Like, the things I was bringing forward were making people feel uncomfortable. I think they might have felt threatened on what it might have done to their children's opportunity. So it just became a little bit more complex.

And I'm not going to get into all those battles. I've been very active on NJEA; I've been very active all over.

But we're running out of time, so let me go to the next slide.

So Senator Rice, one of the meetings we had last year -- you talked about fortitude, okay? So Senator Rice made comments on the need for fortitude in addressing issues at work sites, on all levels, to aid equity and access. At a Committee meeting last spring, I sat here, not only as an educator who showed fortitude and suffered when speaking up, but as a parent. Just like teachers face termination, parents face criminalization.

The role of student equity advocate positions, secured by the Montclair Chapter of the Independent Black Parent Association, has made all the difference in the level of input, as a parent, I have been able to contribute on behalf of my black children. And that's not because I'm a member; because I'm not a member, because you have to be black to be a member. So I'm not a member, but they come up and they represent for my child, and they show up at meetings, and they help me advocate for my child like no-- Like, PTA couldn't do it, SPAN couldn't do it, SEPAC couldn't do it. Montclair NIBPA are the ones. If it wasn't for them, I'd have a lot of problems right now.

The Independent Black Parent Association has made all the difference in the level of input, as a parent, I have been able to contribute on behalf of my black children. It is a grassroots organization that is pivotal in securing access. I attribute the first black Superintendent and the multiple equity positions that have been created for the Montclair Public Schools to this organization's work.

I actually updated it; I'm going to update it. I guess it didn't transfer over when I updated it. I put the contact information up there. But I would like for you all to have it, because if we're really true about equity, then we really have to focus on those most in need. And with regards to black children, I don't know any other organization that has stepped up and helped. And I would like to see what they created in Montclair, I would like to see that transform onto a State and county level.

So I know, Assemblywoman DeCroke -- you were mentioning it. We were thinking about -- not so much along the lines of mediation, but along the lines of that student equity advocate piece. Because, you know, I've had issues with my daughter last year, where we begged for a Restorative Circle; and we didn't get one. So there are things in place that say mediation, Restorative Circles, you know, restorative justice; and a lot of times it's just commercializing to say you're doing something about a situation, but you're not really doing it. And that sometimes hurts even more. Yes, we want restorative justice, but we want it done right. And I think sometimes that's not always the case, especially -- that wasn't the case for my daughter.

All right; this parent's conclusion: Having your voice heard for anyone can be difficult. But for parents advocating for their black children it can be doubly difficult. There are years of unlearning that are required to

truly provide a free and equitable education for all children. Working with and within a system that depends on a specific power structure can prevent progress. For that reason alone, I believe the following is necessary.

So I believe there needs to be a Department of Equity; not just a Department -- you know, curriculum-- In Montclair, they attached equity to the curriculum instruction. But I don't even agree with that; I think equity needs a department all itself.

County and State equity advocates; a shift in accountability systems. So we have all this push on testing to hold teachers accountable. But in Montclair, we have a teacher who said, because she was feeling overwhelmed, in a roomful of black children, that she needs a slate (*sic*). And that teacher, to this day, has not really been held accountable.

So I do think we need to take a shift from the testing, and focus more on the relationships and building those relationships, like was spoken of earlier. But I know if we keep on coming with this testing, as an educator I see what it does to teachers. It overloads them, they're not at their desks, they're not their nicest. So yes, I think that shift really is important.

A receiving and reporting system for equity positions. And just real quick, because I just want you to know what that means -- I know I'm running late -- that means define acts of abuse, of education authority so that incidents can be determined and documented as they occur, according to whatever recording system is put into place. Create a tool guide to tell the difference between *abusive* and *permissible* conduct, along with resources and supports developed or mediate; and a log of all complaints, no matter what the findings. Because, like I said, there are multiple incidents that I know

have happened in all districts, all over the state, to my children; and resolve is hard to get.

And heavier reliance on unbought grassroots organizations. So a lot of times, our organizations are connected to funding; and sometimes that puts a little bit of a wrench in the advocacy piece -- the piece when we're really trying to dismantle and eradicate racism in education, and protect black children.

And those are my references.

So I tried to, like, condense it down to 15 minutes, because I thought it was going to be 30 minutes; sorry.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Do we have a copy of this?

MS. SIMADIRIS: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, good.

MS. SIMADIRIS: But I'm going to, probably, write up some of my stuff too, because I didn't get to say it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, all right; I appreciate that. And, you know, in a perfect world we'd give you the 30 minutes. But it's 12:30, and I know that my members have to be other places, and we do want to hear from Julie Borst.

But I very much appreciate your testimony, and I appreciate your perspective. It's a unique perspective, but I know that you're touching on a number of issues that exist and that have persisted for a long time. And I think the goal here, really, is we want our schools and our society to not just respect and value each member, but understand how and why we got to this place -- where people are not respected and valued, whether they're students, teachers, parents, administrators.

I honestly believe that no one sets out to do the wrong thing. But many of the actions that we deem as inappropriate, wrong, unjust happen because we're not having these conversations, and because we're not holding people accountable.

So I appreciate your bringing this to our attention, and I hope that you'll continue to make us aware and continue to be an advocate.

And I'm assuming that you're an advocate, not just for your children, but for all kids and the-- Because all of them -- when one child is treated unfairly, all children are being treated unfairly, okay?

MS. SIMADIRIS: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: So I thank you for that.

Senator Rice.

SENATOR RICE: Yes, so let me thank you for coming down.

It is a good perspective, and you did a great job putting together your presentation.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Thank you.

SENATOR RICE: Yes, fortitude is important. And I think to have you come before us to talk about your black children-- Sometimes folks of color are ashamed to say *black*. And there are differences in terms of treatment, particularly in urban districts, as it relates to those with disabilities and IEPs, whether they're black, white, or Latino; it doesn't make a difference. There are differences in terms of treatment, etc. So it's important.

I know that I talk about fortitude, but I also speak reality; the power of truth. All too often, people in your position and people in our position -- we're patronized by folks in the system. We have a lot of bullets

go up, a lot of conversations about the thesis or the subject. But there's no real substance in terms of what's taking place, or action.

So I think this is important, for the record, because it puts it in a different perspective than school boards, and NJEAs, and AFTs, etc. It's a real mother who is an educator, ethnically "Caucasian," with black children, who is actually going into the system, throughout the state. And you recognize those differences; rather than a black mother trying to explain the same thing you're explaining about black children; or a parent with kids with IEP problems, regardless of what the ethnic group is, trying to explain it.

Just to have that difference there -- the diversity in your family -- I think makes a world of difference in terms of conversation.

And I would hope with all this stuff that we're talking about in Maplewood, and Montclair, and throughout the country -- how to come together and address things; that other parents, particularly from a biracial perspective -- okay? -- of children, would come and give testimony as to the realities taking place, and not hide it.

So I want to commend you for coming in. I know it took a little while to get you before us, but I told you we'd get you here.

MS. SIMADIRIS: I appreciate it; thank you, Senator.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And I want to thank you for being the impetus for this hearing this morning.

MS. SIMADIRIS: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Julie.

JULIE BORST: Good morning.

My name is Julie Borst; I am the Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey Community Organizing.

I am President of the Board of the New Jersey Community Schools Coalition, so I'm happy to walk in the door hearing people mentioning *community schools*; yay. We actually have -- our fourth convening is this Friday at Rutgers Bloustein; if anybody would like to join us, we're there all day.

So when Becky called me to come speak with you all today-- As somebody who professionally organizes parents, Save Our Schools New Jersey is an all-volunteer parent organization; grassroots. We have over 34,000 members; we're in every legislative district in the state. And we organize around pro-public education issues.

We help parents navigate the system, both for general education students and for special education students; and that's partly because of me. In a previous life, I was a parent advocate for special education, because I have a daughter, who is now 20 years old, who has brain injury. And I have my own story to tell about her trajectory in the State, and it is not a good one.

But I thought I would spend today talking about some really basic things. I know we already heard some of these things, because Rosie is absolutely brilliant when she talks about these things.

So things like -- so what is parent engagement; what does that mean? Where I live, in the district I'm in, most of the time that means an e-mail; something's posted on a website; districts get credit for that in QSAC for having done that. It's not actual, meaningful, sitting-down-having-conversations, meeting-people-where-they-are kind of discussions. Sometimes it is, but most of the time it probably isn't.

I think school culture and climate -- and we talk about that a lot, in terms of the mental health of our students and, by extension, our teachers -- plays a very large role in how parent input is either sought or utilized once that's achieved. You know, I think those things need to be very specific, intentional, concerted efforts. You have to meet parents where they are. You know, you very often hear, "Oh, well, you know, we had a meeting and nobody showed up." So they tried once, without really considering whatever those barriers to having that conversation might be; whether that's language, whether that's parents who are working two and three jobs and simply don't have that extra couple of hours at five o'clock on a Tuesday, right?

So you have to be very intentional about how you do that. And as a professional organizer of parents I will tell you, you have to go where they are. So whether that's a conversation on a Saturday morning -- because that's when people can get there -- or a Sunday afternoon, or in the local coffee shop, or whatever -- that's where you go and you have those conversations. You know, not every school district is equipped to be able to do that. I think some superintendents are much better at it, for a variety of reasons. Some of them have training that kind of put them in the frame of mind for that; certainly, community schools provide the framework because parent engagement is a very specific part of how a community school works. So those things are very important.

But what I wanted to talk about -- and I'm kind of glad that the students have been the topic of the day, and I apologize for being late--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Don't apologize; it wasn't your fault.

MS. BORST: --was actually to talk about one piece of policy related to special education that I think we can probably improve. And that is Special Education Parent Advisory Groups, SEPAG.

So you'll see in my testimony I forwarded -- it's literally one sentence long in the statute, and it's, "Each District Board of Education shall ensure that a Special Education Parent Advisory Group is in place in the district to provide input to the district on issues concerning students with disabilities."

Now, my understanding of this is that when that one sentence was placed in there, it was left specifically vague and broad because districts -- our 600 districts in this state look very, very different from each other.

So where I live, I have a local district and a regional high school. The K-8 district is very small; it's under 1,000 students. That looks really different than organizing parents together in a city like Newark, right? Although we have people like Kaleena Berryman who do a beautiful job of that; but the mechanics of that are different, so the law was left very vague.

About seven years ago a special ed Dad and I realized that this law had come online, and that our district had not done anything about it. So I offered to start Allendale's Special Education Parent Group.

And I did, with some help from the Superintendent. And what we quickly realized was we were being kind of used like a front; so they were kind of checking a box. It wasn't really -- nobody was really interested in what we had to say; and unfortunately, a lot of it was negative. There were positives; I mean, we always want to make sure that when we're having these discussions, it's not all bad. There are good things, and you want to make sure that those things are highlighted and continue.

But we wanted to see what other SEPAGs were doing; like, how did they organize? How were parents having these conversations and getting anything meaningful out of it? And the same thing, in reverse, for the district.

And that led us to do a scan of the state to find out what the condition of SEPAGs were in the State of New Jersey at the time. And with some help from SPAN we were able to identify that maybe a third of school districts in New Jersey even had a SEPAG; and then of those, less than half of them were actually run by parents. And the feedback that we got from parents -- who we were able to, kind of, track down through websites, and PTO sites, and things like that -- was that the SEPAG was -- the district would hire somebody or invite somebody to come speak to parents on a specific topic, and that counted as a SEPAG.

Well, that currently is what is happening in my regional high school; that is their SEPAG. It is not an organization of parents, sitting down and talking about the things that are working or not working in that school building.

So I think, as a matter of policy, that it would certainly help to have, perhaps, a better defined vision of what a SEPAG is. Also, I will say at the time we had some discussions with DOE, asking for, like, who is making sure that anybody is even compliant here. And the answer that we got was that they clearly were not, because there were so many districts without. I don't know what the condition of that is these days; I mean, we're talking a lot of years ago.

But that was kind of disheartening, because we do not know, as a matter of course-- And Michael Cohan was very nice to give you very specific research that demonstrates how important it is to have parent input

in their school districts -- right? -- and certainly for special education, that's probably even more so.

So SPAN has a mandate to help create these SEPAGs. They receive some money from the U.S. Department of Education and from the New Jersey Department of Education. The program is called *START*; they do a brilliant job where they're invited to come in to do these things. In 2017, they sat down with DOE and they created a very pretty handbook; kind of the pitfalls -- what to watch out for, what it should look like, how you facilitate things, how you find parents, how you get people talking, how you get meaningful discussions out of these things.

There was a blast -- it did go to districts in June of 2017 -- about that, and offering some technical assistance to do that. You can still find that broadcast on DOE's site, but the link to the document is actually broken. You can Google for it, though, and find it; so it is out there.

The other thing that SPAN does is they have a list of SEPAGs by county. So I just -- I took a peek at my own, just to kind of see where we are on this. And what I saw, though, was a list of the school districts; the majority of those, again, are still administrators, so it's either the Director of Special Ed or somebody on the Child Study Team who's leading it. There were very few parent leaders who were leading this. They also kept a list of parent groups, where they were there as support groups. So one that I had started is still listed, even though it has been defunct for several years.

And I went ahead and I clicked on Allendale's site just to see where-- Because it was one of the few that actually had a link directly to a school website about the SEPAG. Well, that was last updated in the 2015-16 school year.

So as we talk about policy and how do we start to improve things-- Okay? Because I never want to get up here and talk about things where things are not going very well, and not offer you something in return for that.

So my suggestion would be to take a look at that law, and see whether or not there are ways to beef that up. If there's not a way to get SPAN a little bit more money so they have more capacity to do this-- Because I will tell you, as an organization, SPAN is brilliant and they are tiny, especially when there are 600 districts in the State of New Jersey to deal with.

It would be great if DOE would take a compliance stance on this; not necessarily a *gotcha* but a, "Hey, you haven't been doing this, and it's time to do it, and we're going to help you do that." That would be a good thing, too.

And I would say that probably in the places where you have a SEPAG that's actually working, you probably have less instances of parents either needing to utilize mediation services-- And by the way, mediation is the first step before you go to due process. So anybody who's at the point of actually suing a school district, they've already been through mediation. That is-- Most people don't skip that, unless you happen to have deep pockets. Because, in my estimation, you probably need anywhere between \$50,000 to \$100,000 in order to do that.

So mediation is there; school districts should be informing parents of what that process is. DOE instituted -- facilitated IEPs so there's somebody who's a neutral party in a room during the creation of an IEP, if somebody thinks that there might be trouble -- to, kind of, head that off.

And if not, and you need some kind of conflict resolution, then mediation is the next step.

But mediation is also not a barrier to due process. So you can be a couple hours into this, and both sides could say, "You know what? We're not getting there; never mind," and move on. I know some parents get frustrated with the mediation process because whatever happens during that time, you can't use outside of that process, because that's all private.

So the other thing I'll say, too -- having helped some parents get through the process of having to sue a school district -- is there are not enough judges. And that means that you're looking at nearly a full school year to get to the point where you're actually in front of a judge. And during that time, your student is probably not getting what they need.

So there are definitely places -- there are different places along the line, along that spectrum, where things could certainly be better. I will also just say that it is my firm belief that the reason why we are in this spot is because our schools have been so grossly underfunded; and special ed has become like the redheaded stepchild, as they say. And those parents are the most marginalized; because of privacy rules we don't know who you are -- right? -- or we don't know who each other are inside of a district, unless you create something like a SEPAG, right?

And I'll bring this back to community schools. When you have a community school model, and there are two school districts-- We did a scan of the state three years ago, and two districts self-identified as using a community school model to help bring extra services to students with disabilities. That is absolutely what everybody should be doing, right?

So there are ways to mitigate, and communicate, and provide help, and provide resources that we probably are not necessarily doing at this point, but certainly could. I think having SEPAGs is an important part of the process. Whenever you're involving parents and you're teaching them how to speak and how to advocate, that does nothing but make everything -- it makes everything stronger. And from the district side, for administrators, I would hope that they would be doing that.

And I'll tell you, I've spent a lot of time talking to a lot of superintendents around the state. And the ones who are doing really good work, regardless of the money that they have in their districts, are the ones who really believe in special education; they believe in their students. And so they have made it their business to know what good special education looks like for their students. And they also recognize that from year to year that could look very, very different, depending upon the students they have in their building.

And so probably the one thing that all of those superintendents have is no fear of change; that's really key. They're not afraid to create something, knowing that it's going to be evolving over time.

And that's something I think can be taught. If that's supported, that is something that we can definitely do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I think that's an excellent close to our meeting: no fear of change. Because people do fear what they don't know or they think is going to happen.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: So I very much appreciate that, Julie.

And it looks like we have a lot of work to do; but I also appreciate the fact that there's a lot of support out there for the work. Because in my mind, the most important people who we're talking about is our children, because our children truly are our future.

MS. BORST: Absolutely.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: And if we don't take care of that, then our future -- their future does not look bright.

So I want to thank everyone who came to speak today.

And I'm going to give Senator Thompson the last word.

SENATOR THOMPSON: Thank you.

We had lots of great testimony today related to the importance of parents being involved; and how they can be involved with the teachers, with the school boards, and perhaps the State.

But I'm disappointed that there's one other thing with regards to parent involvement that was not mentioned today; and to me, I think it is one of the most significant things. The parents' involvement with their child; their responsibility of assisting in certain parts of the education of the child.

Thus, I think a lot of parents today do not want their child to ever face any stress or any problem. They want to resolve their problem for them. This is doing a disservice to the child. Yes, you help your child to resolve their problems; you give them guidance and so on. But if they never face any stress or any adversity, when the parents are not there and they face it, they'll have no idea how to resolve it.

So I would like to hear a little more of suggestions that the school boards, or the teachers, or so on pass along to the parents that, "Yes, help Johnny, help Mary when they have problem. Don't solve the problem for

them totally, all the time. Teach them how to solve problems, and then they'll be so much better prepared for life, and handling everything in the school and otherwise."

Thank you.

MS. BORST: If I may respond to that.

So I will use my daughter as an example; and she allows me to do this, by the way. I've had people go, "Oh, my God, you're talking about your daughter." (laughter)

So actually, part of her schooling has been self-advocacy; for special education students, in particular, that's incredibly important. You have to be able to know how to--

SENATOR THOMPSON: You said at the school; I'm suggesting the parent be--

MS. BORST: I understand. But that happens because parents are part of the facilitation of that, right? So my daughter can do things that she couldn't do even just a couple of years ago, because I'm here at home showing her how to do those things and helping her do those things. And those things are reinforced in school, and vice versa.

SENATOR THOMPSON: That's what I'm asking; you're doing the job--

MS. BORST: So yes, I absolutely agree with you. Parent involvement with your child is very important. And I will tell you that for the parents who do show up -- and who want to and can't, for whatever reason -- we care about our kids, and that's why we're here. I mean, I'm probably the uber example of that; as the head of this grassroots organization of nearly 35,000 parents -- I can tell you, we care. I'm sure PTA would tell you the

same thing, if they were still in the room too; and they have about 100,000 folks here who are deeply involved with their children and their schools, because they do care about what those outcomes are.

So I thank you very much for your comment.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Assemblywoman DeCroce is going to have the second-last-- (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes, because--

MS. BORST: It's the penultimate ultimate; okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So you touched upon the cost of legal, when it gets to that level.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And let me say this to you. The call that I had received was somebody from Toms River; and I'm up in Morris County.

MS. BORST: Oh, my goodness.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Because somebody knew how I felt about things.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So they recommended them to call, and it was the grandparents. The daughter was a single parent and had totally given up; she was fighting, she couldn't take it anymore.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So the grandparents started trying to help; and literally were crying on the phone to me.

And this is what blew my mind, because they went and they wanted to hire an attorney to represent their grandson, and they needed to

give a deposit of \$20,000 in order to start representation. And to me that's atrocious; that means we need to do better here, and I think we need to step up mediation or whatever we need to do.

But for a parent to become -- and a family to become that involved, and in such despair, is a disgrace--

MS. BORST: Yes, I agree.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: --to our education system here in New Jersey. And we -- and I know we all feel this way -- want to do the right thing.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So we need to do better.

MS. BORST: Right; I appreciate that very much.

And if I may, just very quickly--

So there are some attorneys who will take on cases pro bono. Not everybody requires a \$20,000 deposit. Save Our Schools New Jersey does end up fielding a lot of parents who are in that position, so we do have a very tiny network of attorneys who we've gotten to know who we can then send to, and whether or not they're able to--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And I don't think the information is out there enough for people.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: So that is stuff we have to work on.

MS. BORST: Right; I agree.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: We do it. I sit as a Trustee on the New Jersey Crime Victims Law Center, and we do pro bono work for victims of crime.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: And I think the same thing needs to be set up to help represent children; the same kind of philosophy.

MS. BORST: Right; Rutgers was doing that -- Rutgers Law Center was doing some of that work; DRNJ does some of that work.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Yes.

MS. BORST: But again, too, if you have-- Also there are situations where people may live in a tonier zip code, but not necessarily have the relative wealth of that; and they get dinged because of the zip code that they're in.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DeCROCE: Right.

MS. BORST: I mean, there are a million stories out there. So anything to help is appreciated.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: If money was easier found, we wouldn't be having such an adversarial environment.

MS. BORST: That's exactly right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: It's just -- it's a shame that that's really the cause of most of it.

MS. BORST: This is why we're here, right? And for special ed students, it's been a generation of us.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN EGAN JONES: The fighting; yes. We know what we need to do for our special needs kids.

MS. BORST: Right.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: I want to thank everyone who has persevered to this moment. (laughter)

I want to thank Senator Thompson, Senator Rice, Assemblywoman DeCroce, Assemblywoman Egan Jones, and staff for-- And the staff, especially, for putting this program together; I know it wasn't easy.

And, you know, our work obviously is not done, but I think we have some directives from today's hearing. And I look forward to continuing to work on behalf of all of our children, because I believe that that is our role -- as parents, as adults, as legislators. As I said earlier, our children are our future and, therefore, it's up to us to make sure that that future is bright.

So I want to thank you, and I hope you'll all be very careful getting home today. Take your time, don't rush it, and I will see you next time.

Thank you.

MS. BORST: Thank you.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)