



# OUR CHILDREN/OUR SCHOOLS

## EDUCATION POLICY BRIEF

Spring 2026



[www.ourchildrenourschools.org](http://www.ourchildrenourschools.org)



**Our Children/Our Schools Education Policy Brief**  
Spring 2026

**Executive Summary**

[Our Children/Our Schools](#) (OC/OS) is a statewide network of New Jersey education, children’s rights and civil rights organizations that share a commitment to supporting students and their public schools. This policy brief outlines the coalition’s education policy priorities for 2026 and beyond and presents recommendations to inform state policymakers as they consider these important issues and work to protect public education in New Jersey.

**I. Protect the Civil Rights of All Students**

All students in New Jersey must be educated in safe and welcoming schools. Yet there has been a growing movement in New Jersey and across the nation to erode the civil rights of students based on race, immigration status, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other protected characteristics. We recommend the following:

1. New Jersey must establish and strengthen clear legal protections for immigrant students and their families and ensure that public schools are inclusive environments where every child is protected, respected, and able to learn without fear.
2. The state should reaffirm that civil rights protections guaranteed under the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination and state regulations apply fully in all PK–12 settings, including protections based on race, national origin, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, and language status. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) should also issue updated guidance clarifying district obligations and enforcement mechanisms.
3. For students with disabilities, the NJDOE must strengthen enforcement of existing protections under state and federal law that enhance monitoring, require public reporting on compliance and outcomes, and mandate corrective action plans for districts that fail to meet their obligations.

**II. Desegregate New Jersey’s Public Schools**

New Jersey’s public school system is among the most segregated in the country, largely due to residential segregation and the requirement that most students attend schools within the municipalities where they reside. We recommend the following:

1. The state should use research findings for the planning and implementation of integration policies and provide districts and localities with the support and technical assistance needed to carry out integration efforts.
2. The state must engage diverse stakeholder groups (parents, teachers, advocates, community members, etc.) in public discussions about the benefits of school integration and the range of policy approaches that can achieve this goal.

### **III. Reform School Funding**

After 17 years, the FY25 State Budget was the first to fully fund the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), the state's school funding formula. The FY26 State Budget included important, long-overdue fixes to school funding, including allowing below adequacy districts to raise taxes beyond the 2% property tax cap, placing limits on annual state aid reductions, and funding districts based on actual enrollments of special education students rather than the statewide average classification rate. But because these changes were implemented through temporary budget language rather than legislation, they must be reintroduced with each state budget. Governor Sherrill's proposed state budget for FY27 includes some of these formula modifications, while also partially funding required state aid increases. We recommend the following:

1. The Legislature must make the temporary fixes included in the FY26 State Budget and Governor Sherrill's FY27 proposed budget permanent and reinstate the municipal overburden protections that expired under the S2 amendments to the SFRA.
2. The school funding formula's calculations of local and state share should be revised to improve equity and lessen the property tax burden on over-taxed communities.
3. The Administration must engage stakeholders in a comprehensive review of the SFRA to ensure that it reflects the true cost of educating and meeting the needs of current students, since it is now two decades old.

### **IV. Reject Private Education Vouchers**

The budget reconciliation bill passed by Congress and signed by President Trump in July 2025 established the nation's first federal voucher program, a tax credit scheme that has the potential to divert billions of dollars a year from public education. Governors must annually opt in to this harmful program, and doing so will likely open the door to even more voucher programs in states. We recommend the following:

1. The Governor must annually opt New Jersey out of the federal voucher program with the Legislature's support.
2. The Governor and Legislature must continue opposing any proposals that would establish a voucher program in New Jersey, to ensure state resources continue to focus on supporting our public schools.

### **V. Fund School Construction**

New Jersey has a constitutional obligation to fund capital and emergent projects in the 31 SDA districts. The FY26 State Budget included \$50 million for capital projects, but many billions more are needed to alleviate overcrowding and replace aging buildings. We recommend the following:

1. The state must fully fund the SDA capital program at a level commensurate with documented need and sufficient to address the backlog in school construction, modernization, and emergent repair projects in SDA districts.
2. The Legislature should establish a predictable, recurring capital funding stream for school construction to prevent future backlogs and ensure that facilities meet health, safety, accessibility, and educational adequacy standards consistent with state law.

3. The state should prioritize projects that address overcrowding, environmental health hazards, accessibility upgrades required under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and facilities improvements necessary to support modern instructional programming.
4. The NJDOE and the SDA should provide transparent public reporting on project timelines, approval processes, and funding allocations, ensuring equitable distribution of resources and timely completion of projects in high-need communities.

#### **VI. Eliminate High School Exit Testing**

New Jersey is one of just six states that still requires students to pass a high school exit exam in order to graduate, in addition to meeting all credit, coursework, and attendance requirements. Research shows exit exams do not improve academic achievement or economic outcomes for graduates and negatively harm certain student groups, including low-income students and students with disabilities. We recommend the following:

1. The Legislature must eliminate exit testing as a high school graduation requirement to ensure all New Jersey students receive the diploma they earned.

#### **VII. Expand the Number of Community Schools**

The community schools model allows districts to work collaboratively with students, parents, and teachers to strengthen and expand the services provided by public schools so they can better serve the unique needs of their communities. Community schools are a proven and effective strategy for addressing students' needs, but cuts to federal funding for full-service community schools put them at risk. We recommend the following:

1. The Governor and Legislature should identify ways to expand community schools in New Jersey, including by partnering with already-established nonprofit entities, such as the New Jersey Institute for Community Schools at Saint Elizabeth University.
2. The state should establish an Office of Community Schools in the NJDOE, fund a pilot expansion initiative, and provide additional support to technical assistance centers.
3. The Governor and Legislature should establish a direct appropriation for community schools in all future state budgets to fill the gap created by reduced federal funding, and increase investment over time to allow all public schools to become community schools.

#### **VIII. Fund Afterschool and Out-of-School-Time Programs**

Afterschool and Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs have many proven benefits, including providing students with academic support, mentoring, and other enrichment opportunities to help them be successful in school. Yet these programs remain underfunded, fragmented across agencies, and treated as optional rather than essential. We recommend the following:

1. The Legislature must pass legislation to establish the New Jersey Out-of-School-Time Advisory Commission to improve coordination across state agencies; elevate the voices of providers, parents, and youth; and develop a coherent statewide strategy.
2. The state must establish a sustainable, recurring funding stream for afterschool and summer programs; invest in the OST workforce, offering competitive wages and professional

development; and reduce the administrative burdens that pull providers away from serving students.

#### **IX. Fund Healing Centered Engagement**

In New Jersey and across the nation, students, families, and educators are navigating compounding social, economic, and political stressors that have significantly impacted learning environments and overall well-being. Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a model for improving the well-being of students and the adults who serve them in schools. We recommend the following:

1. Healing Centered Engagement implementation in New Jersey has relied primarily on private funding. The state should invest in expanding HCE statewide, so all schools are equipped to support students' academic success, social-emotional development, and mental health in holistic and culturally responsive ways.
2. Future state budgets should include a dedicated appropriation to expand and sustain HCE across New Jersey public schools.

#### **X. Fill Expired Seats on the State Board of Education**

The State Board of Education plays a vital role in education policy decisions that impact New Jersey schoolchildren, their families, and educators across the state. While progress has been made to fill expired seats on the Board, there is still work to be done. We recommend the following:

1. The Governor should submit nominations for all remaining expired seats without delay, and the Senate Judiciary Committee, followed by the full Senate, should prioritize timely hearings and confirmations to fully seat the State Board. This can include extending the terms of members in currently expired seats.
2. The Governor and Legislature should establish clear timelines and expectations for appointing new members to the Board to prevent long-term seat expirations and vacancies.



## Our Children/Our Schools Education Policy Brief Spring 2026

### Introduction

[Our Children/Our Schools](#) (OC/OS) is a statewide network of New Jersey education, children’s rights and civil rights organizations that share a commitment to supporting our state’s students and their public schools. We are united in the goal of ensuring all 1.4 million New Jersey schoolchildren have access to the resources and supports they need to ensure academic and life success.

This updated policy brief outlines the coalition’s education priorities for 2026 and beyond and offers recommendations for New Jersey policymakers. Its release comes at a pivotal moment, as a new gubernatorial administration and Legislature have recently taken office, and while the current federal administration makes sweeping policy decisions that pose a threat to public education.

#### I. Protect the Civil Rights of All Students

All New Jersey students are constitutionally guaranteed the right to a “thorough and efficient education” under the state constitution, and that guarantee must include the explicit protection of their civil rights. Ensuring that all children are protected from discrimination and harassment is fundamental to educational equity and creating safe and welcoming schools. Yet in New Jersey and states across the country, there has been an effort by some to erode the civil rights of students based on race, immigration status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other protected characteristics.

Furthermore, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in neighborhoods and communities have made schools dangerous for all students, but much more so for those lacking documentation, with many parents opting to keep their children home from school to avoid the risk of capture and deportation. New Jersey must respond by strengthening and enforcing clear legal protections for immigrant students and their families and ensuring that schools and other educational institutions are inclusive environments where every child is protected, respected, and able to learn without fear.

For students with disabilities and their families, these civil rights concerns are compounded by longstanding gaps in access, equity, and implementation. Across New Jersey, families report delays in evaluations, inconsistent implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), limited access to inclusive classrooms, and inadequate behavioral and mental health supports.<sup>1</sup> Students with disabilities—particularly Black and Latino students—are disproportionately subjected to suspension, removal from class, and placement in more restrictive settings, limiting access to rigorous instruction and peer interaction. Transition planning is often compliance-driven rather than student-centered, leaving too many young people underprepared for postsecondary education, employment, and independent

---

<sup>1</sup> Jackie Roman. *One of N.J.’s largest school districts kept kids with disabilities out of the classroom, state says*. NJ.com. July 25, 2024. <https://www.nj.com/education/2024/07/one-of-njs-largest-school-districts-kept-kids-with-disabilities-out-of-the-classroom-state-says.html>; Rebecca K. Spar & Elizabeth Athos. *How New Jersey’s Special Education Complaint Resolution System Fails Students*. New Jersey Lawyer. Apr. 2022. <https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/spar%20athos%20NJ%20Lawyer%20article%20on%20C.I..pdf>.

living.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, while progress has been made, more can be done to address the use of seclusion and restraints in New Jersey schools.<sup>3</sup>

When districts fail to meet timelines, deliver mandated services, or provide appropriate support, students lose critical instructional time that cannot be easily recovered. For many families, navigating the special education system requires legal advocacy simply to secure services guaranteed under state and federal law.<sup>4</sup> A 2022 study found that the NJ Department of Education’s (NJDOE) Office of Special Education Policy and Dispute Resolution (SPDR) discovered that “in 11 cases that the districts did not fully implement the student IEPs, thereby violating IDEA requirements. Despite telling districts that they must implement student IEPs during COVID, however, SPDR provided relief to only one student, requiring that district to offer the student a specific amount of compensatory services.”<sup>5</sup>

These persistent disparities demonstrate that the promise of a “thorough and efficient education” is not yet fully realized for students with disabilities, and stronger enforcement, accountability, and equity-focused oversight are necessary to ensure their rights are meaningfully protected.<sup>6</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

1. New Jersey must establish and strengthen clear legal protections for immigrant students and their families and ensure that public schools are inclusive environments where every child is protected, respected, and able to learn without fear.
2. The state should reaffirm that civil rights protections guaranteed under the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination and state regulations apply fully in all PK–12 settings, including protections based on race, national origin, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, religion, and language status. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) should also issue updated guidance clarifying district obligations and enforcement mechanisms.
3. For students with disabilities, the NJDOE must strengthen enforcement of existing protections under state and federal law that enhance monitoring, require public reporting on compliance and outcomes, and mandate corrective action plans for districts that fail to meet their obligations.

## **II. Desegregate New Jersey’s Public Schools**

New Jersey’s public school system is among the most segregated by race and socioeconomic status in the country, largely due to residential segregation and the requirement that most students attend schools within the districts where they reside.<sup>7</sup> A 2023 study by the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for

---

<sup>2</sup> Brenda Considine. *Transition Planning for Students with Complex Disabilities*. National Council on Developmental Disabilities. People & Families. Volume 2025, No 1. <https://njcdd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/PF.Volume.2025.No.1.pdf#:~:text=Transition%20Planning%20for%20Students%20with,Teaching%20Independence%2C%20Not%20Reliance&text=Peg%20Kinsell%20is%20the%20chair,which%20is%20comprised%20of%20more>.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Heyboer. *Inside the quiet rooms*. NJ.com. June 19, 2022. <https://www.nj.com/education/2022/06/inside-the-quiet-rooms.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca K. Spar & Elizabeth Athos. *How New Jersey’s Special Education Complaint Resolution System Fails Students*. New Jersey Lawyer. April 2022. <https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/publications/spar%20athos%20NJ%20Lawyer%20article%20on%20C.I..pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Id.

<sup>6</sup> IEP Working Group. *Recommendations for Individualized Education Program (IEP) Improvements*. Jan. 2026. [https://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/policy/iep/IEPWorkingGroup\\_FinalReport2026.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/education/specialed/policy/iep/IEPWorkingGroup_FinalReport2026.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Under State law, New Jersey students can attend schools located in other school districts under a limited number of circumstances, such as if a student is accepted to a specific charter school whose State charter allows it to draw students from a larger region; if a

Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers University Newark found that Black and Latino students in racially segregated schools have less access to rigorous educational experiences; a more negative school climate, resulting in higher absences and suspensions; and fewer opportunities to take higher-level courses.<sup>8</sup>

In 2018, plaintiffs in *Latino Action Network, et al. v. State of New Jersey* filed a lawsuit calling for an end to New Jersey's segregated school system. Over seven years later, the case remains pending and settlement and mediation talks have failed. It is time for the state to take decisive action to address school segregation in New Jersey.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The state should collaborate with researchers to analyze existing state data on school segregation and identify priorities for further research on integration policies and their planning and implementation.<sup>9</sup> Districts and localities must be provided with the support and technical assistance they need to carry out integration efforts.
2. The state must engage diverse stakeholder groups (parents, teachers, advocates, community members, etc.) in public discussions about the benefits of school integration and the range of policy approaches that can achieve this goal.

### **III. Reform School Funding**

After 17 years, the FY25 State Budget was the first to fully fund the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), the state's school funding formula. In the FY26 Educational Adequacy Report (EAR), the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) made important recommendations that acknowledged increasing costs for school security and mental health.<sup>10</sup> While these recommendations were included in the formula calculations under the SFRA for FY26, the state budget did not fully fund the required increases for all school districts.

The FY26 State Budget did, however, include important, long-overdue fixes to school funding, including allowing below adequacy districts to raise taxes beyond the 2% property tax cap, placing limits on annual state aid reductions, and funding districts based on their actual enrollments of special education students rather than the statewide average classification rate.<sup>11,12</sup> Because these changes were

---

student resides in a school district participating in the Interdistrict Public School Choice program; or if a student's family enrolls the student in a specialized school, such as county vocational-technical schools.

<sup>8</sup> Vandeen A. Campbell & Charles M. Payne. *Segregated Schooling in New Jersey: The Distribution of Opportunities to Learn by Race, Ethnicity and Class*. Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies. Rutgers University. Feb. 2023. <https://rutgers.app.box.com/s/wyzbzyrt42jabifa0fp7vqw9fg0rpmjb>.

<sup>9</sup> For a summary of the academic research highlighting the benefits of integrated schools for all school children, see: Roslyn A. Mickelson. *School Integration and K-12 Outcomes: An Updated Quick Synthesis of the Social Science Evidence*. Research Brief No. 5. Updated. The National Coalition on School Diversity. Oct. 2016. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED571629.pdf>. See also Rucker C. Johnson & Alexander Nazarya. *Children of the Dream: Why School Integration Works*. New York: Basic Books and Russell Sage Foundation. Apr. 16, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. *2026 Educational Adequacy Report*. <https://www.nj.gov/education/stateaid/docs/ear/EAR2026.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Education Law Center. *This is What the Next NJ Governor Needs to Do to Support Public Education*. Oct. 9, 2025. <https://edlawcenter.org/this-is-what-the-next-nj-governor-needs-to-do-to-support-public-education/>.

<sup>12</sup> The School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) funds special education using a census-based approach that distributes aid based on the statewide average classification rate, regardless of whether districts' actual special education rate is higher or lower. This has caused severe inequities in state funding for special education. See Danielle Farrie, Ph.D. & Nicole Ciullo. *A Roadmap for Improving New Jersey's School Funding Formula: The Impact of Census-Based Funding for Special Education*. Education Law Center. April 2024. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Impact-of-CensusBased-Funding-for-Special-Education.pdf>.

implemented through temporary budget language rather than legislation, they must be reintroduced with each state budget. Governor Sherrill's proposed state budget for FY27 does include some of these formula modifications, while also partially funding required state aid increases.

Significant work remains to ensure that all New Jersey public schools have the resources they need to provide a constitutionally mandated "thorough and efficient" education for their students. This need is even more urgent given the potential loss of crucial federal education funding for school districts.<sup>13</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

1. The Legislature must pass legislation to make the temporary fixes included in the FY26 State Budget and Governor Sherrill's proposed FY27 State Budget permanent and reinstate the municipal overburden protections that expired under the 2018 S2 amendments to the SFRA.
2. The school funding formula's calculations of local and state share should be revised to improve equity and lessen the property tax burden on over-taxed communities.
3. The Administration must conduct a comprehensive review of the SFRA to ensure that it reflects the true cost of educating and meeting the needs of students today, not those of students over two decades ago. Experts and stakeholders should be engaged in this process.

### **IV. Reject Private School Vouchers**

Congress passed and President Trump signed the nation's first federal voucher program through the budget reconciliation bill in July 2025. The program redirects federal tax dollars from the U.S. Treasury by providing a one-to-one tax credit to individuals who donate up to \$1,700 to organizations that distribute vouchers for use at private and religious schools and for other education expenses.<sup>14</sup> An initial estimate suggests that the program could cost anywhere from \$8 to \$51 billion per year.<sup>15</sup>

States must annually opt in to the federal voucher program, but there are many reasons why they, and specifically New Jersey, should not.<sup>16</sup> Participating in the federal voucher program would pave the way for more vouchers, funneling taxpayer dollars to private and religious schools that can discriminate against students and families and decimate state budgets.<sup>17</sup> For example, the cost of Arizona's voucher programs grew from \$68 million in fiscal year 2008, to over \$250 million per year in fiscal year 2019,<sup>18</sup> and is projected to hit \$1 billion in fiscal year 2026.<sup>19</sup> In Florida, the state's voucher program grew from

---

<sup>13</sup> Education Law Center. *Trump 2.0: How Much Federal Education Aid Does Your School or Congressional District Receive?* May 14, 2025. <https://edlawcenter.org/trump-2-0-how-much-federal-education-aid-does-your-school-or-congressional-district-receive/>.

<sup>14</sup> Education Law Center & Public Funds Public Schools. *Federal Vouchers – FAQ*. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Federal-Vouchers-FAQ-9-15-2025.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Carl David. *Megabill Takes Cap Off Unprecedented Private School Voucher Tax Credit, Potentially Raising Cost by Tens of Billions Relative to Earlier Version*. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. July 2, 2025. <https://itep.org/trump-megabill-expensive-private-school-vouchers/>.

<sup>16</sup> Education Law Center & Public Funds Public Schools. *States Must Reject Harmful Federal Voucher Program*. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Federal-Vouchers-Fact-Sheet-9-15-2025.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Public Funds Public Schools. *Research Shows Private School Vouchers Don't Work for Students and Harm Public Schools*. [https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/CR\\_PFPS\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_MAR\\_2020-final.pdf](https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/CR_PFPS_Fact_Sheet_MAR_2020-final.pdf); Public Funds Public Schools. *The Myth of Cost Savings from Private School Vouchers*. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Myth-of-Cost-Savings-from-Private-School-Vouchers-Update-1.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Samuel E. Abrams and Steven J. Koutsavlis. *The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers*. Public Funds Public Schools. Mar. 2023. [https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC\\_ELC\\_PFPS\\_2023Report\\_Final.pdf](https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Valencia. *Arizona Governor releases budget update amid 'dramatic spike' in ESA spending*, AZ Family. Mar. 5, 2025. <https://www.azfamily.com/2025/03/05/arizona-governor-releases-budget-update-amid-dramatic-spike-esa-spending/>.

\$241 million in fiscal year 2008 to almost \$1 billion in fiscal year 2019.<sup>20</sup> During the 2024-25 school year, the total estimated cost to the state for private education vouchers was just under \$4 billion.<sup>21</sup> These programs often pay for private education costs for students who were already attending private schools. In effect, vouchers in these cases are a direct subsidy to often affluent private school families.<sup>22</sup> If New Jersey were to adopt vouchers, either by opting in to the federal program or passing a state voucher program, it would mark a dramatic shift in education policy in the state. Voucher programs are hugely unpopular; legislators have not advanced voucher bills any time they have been proposed; and Governor Sherrill has said she opposes vouchers. Moreover, any need for vouchers in our state is further obviated by the fact New Jersey already spends tens of millions of public dollars each year on transportation, textbooks, nurses, security, and technology for private school students.<sup>23</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

1. New Jersey has one of the strongest public school systems in the country and has successfully resisted earlier attempts to enact any type of voucher system. There is broad consensus among state and national organizations, families, students, education advocates, and taxpayers that vouchers have no place in New Jersey.<sup>24</sup> The Governor must annually opt New Jersey out of the federal voucher program with the Legislature's support.
2. The Governor and Legislature must continue opposing any proposals that would establish a voucher program in the state to ensure state resources continue to focus on supporting our public schools.

## **V. Fund School Construction**

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the state must provide 100% funding for all school renovation and construction projects in the thirty-one SDA districts. In the ruling, the Court stated that unsafe and overcrowded buildings prevented children from receiving a "thorough and efficient" education as required under the New Jersey Constitution.<sup>25</sup> The Schools Development Authority (SDA) was established to fund and manage new construction projects and the modernization of existing school facilities in the SDA districts.

Yet thousands of students in these districts and many others across the state attend school in overcrowded buildings with aging infrastructure, outdated HVAC systems, environmental health risks, and limited access to modern instructional spaces. Leaking roofs, unreliable heating and cooling, inaccessible facilities for students with disabilities, and insufficient space for science labs, arts

---

<sup>20</sup> Samuel E. Abrams & Steven J. Koutsavlis. *The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers*. Public Funds Public Schools. Mar. 2023. [https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC\\_ELC\\_PFPS\\_2023Report\\_Final.pdf](https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Education Law Center & Florida Policy Institute. *Florida Private Education Vouchers Cost \$4 Billion This Year*. Jan. 14, 2025. <https://edlawcenter.org/florida-private-education-vouchers-cost-4-billion-this-school-year/>.

<sup>22</sup> In states where this information is available, the data shows the vast majority never attended public schools, including: North Carolina (87%), Oklahoma (91%), Alabama (71%), Iowa (60%), Arizona (80%), New Hampshire (89%), Wisconsin (85%), Arkansas (83%), Florida (70%), and Indiana (70%). See Public Funds Public Schools' *The Myth of Cost Savings from Private School Vouchers* for more information. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Myth-of-Cost-Savings-from-Private-School-Vouchers-Update-1.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Education Law Center & Public Funds Public Schools. *NJ A4144/S3035 is a Private School Voucher Bill and it is Extremely Dangerous*. [https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/ELC-PFPS\\_2-Pageer\\_on\\_S3035-A4144.pdf](https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/ELC-PFPS_2-Pageer_on_S3035-A4144.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *The following is an open letter to Governor Phil Murphy, Senate President Nick Scutari, Assembly Speaker Coughlin and the entire state Legislature*. Insider NJ. Apr. 2, 2024. <https://www.insidernj.com/press-release/the-following-is-an-open-letter-to-governor-phil-murphy-senate-president-anthony-scutari-assembly-speaker-craig-coughlin-and-the-entire-state-legislature/>.

<sup>25</sup> *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480 (1998). [https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/abott-v-burke/Abbott\\_V.pdf](https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/abott-v-burke/Abbott_V.pdf).

programming, and career and technical education are not merely inconveniences; they are barriers to learning. Adequate school facilities are foundational to student achievement, health, attendance, and educator retention, and school infrastructure must be considered a core component of student civil rights.

While the state’s constitutional obligation to fund capital and emergent projects in the SDA districts is ongoing, all previously authorized school construction funds have now been spent or committed. Legislation enacted in 2000, 2008, and 2022 authorized more than \$10 billion for SDA districts and nearly \$4 billion for non-SDA districts, but the statewide need now exceeds \$7 billion in SDA districts alone. Many buildings, particularly in urban communities, are more than a century old and suffer from significant health, safety, accessibility, and structural deficiencies.

It should also be noted that school construction projects generate substantial economic benefits, including creating jobs for construction workers, architects and engineers, while contracts for materials and services stimulate broader economic activity in communities. Investing in school facilities therefore strengthens both educational outcomes and local economies.

In February 2026, legislation was introduced to authorize a statewide bond referendum permitting the issuance of up to \$7 billion for SDA districts and \$3.5 billion for non-SDA districts to support the state share of approved school facilities projects.<sup>26</sup> This proposal is a critical step toward addressing long-delayed projects and preventing further deterioration of school conditions.<sup>27</sup>

### **Recommendations:**

1. The state must fully fund the SDA capital program at a level commensurate with documented need and sufficient to address the backlog in school construction, modernization, and emergent repair projects in SDA districts.
2. The Legislature should establish a predictable, recurring capital funding stream for school construction to prevent future backlogs and ensure that facilities meet health, safety, accessibility, and educational adequacy standards consistent with state law.
3. The state should prioritize projects that address overcrowding, environmental health hazards, accessibility upgrades required under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and facilities improvements necessary to support modern instructional programming.
4. The NJDOE and the SDA should provide transparent public reporting on project timelines, approval processes, and funding allocations, ensuring equitable distribution of resources and timely completion of projects in high-need communities.

## **VI. Eliminate High School Exit Testing**

For decades, New Jersey has required students to pass a high school exit exam in order to graduate, in addition to meeting all credit, coursework, and attendance requirements. This practice has been

---

<sup>26</sup> Education Law Center. *Newly Introduced School Facilities Legislation Targets Urgent Infrastructure Needs*. Feb. 6, 2026. <https://edlawcenter.org/newly-introduced-school-facilities-bond-legislation-targets-urgent-infrastructure-needs/>.

<sup>27</sup> See State of New Jersey, Schools Development Authority. *2026 Statewide Strategic Plan for SDA Districts*. Dec. 3, 2025. [https://www.njsda.gov/Content/Projects/2026\\_Statewide\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_for\\_SDA\\_Districts\\_251107.pdf](https://www.njsda.gov/Content/Projects/2026_Statewide_Strategic_Plan_for_SDA_Districts_251107.pdf).

abandoned by the vast majority of states, most recently Massachusetts<sup>28</sup> and New York.<sup>29</sup> New Jersey is now one of just six states where exit testing remains.<sup>30</sup>

Research shows that exit testing does not improve academic achievement<sup>31</sup> or economic outcomes for graduates. But these tests have been linked to increased dropout rates for students of color and students from low-income families,<sup>32</sup> and they create barriers to graduation for students with disabilities.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, exit testing costs the state millions of dollars each year—funds that could be better spent on programs and services that boost student success, many of which are detailed in this brief.

Exit testing also creates barriers for students with disabilities. The U.S. Department of Education now requires that the thousands of students with disabilities who have not satisfied the exit testing requirement, but have otherwise met all requirements in accordance with their IEPs and received a state-endorsed diploma, be excluded from the state’s official, federal graduation rate.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, students with disabilities have been pressured to sit for multiple administrations of various graduation assessments and substitute assessments and/or to complete the portfolio appeals process.

### **Recommendation:**

1. There is consensus among state education groups that exit testing should end.<sup>35</sup> The Legislature must pass legislation that would eliminate exit testing as a high school graduation requirement. And, in fact, such legislation passed the full Assembly in 2025.<sup>36</sup> This change would not result in the reduction of school and district performance data since students would still be required to take federal, state, and district assessments and to meet all other state and district graduation requirements.

## **VII. Expand the Number of Community Schools**

Community schools, which restructure existing public schools so they more deliberately serve as community hubs, have been shown to be an extremely effective and cost-efficient strategy for

---

<sup>28</sup> Hadley Barndollar. *What happens now that Mass. voted to end MCAS as a grad requirement?* Mass Live. Nov. 6, 2024. <https://www.masslive.com/news/2024/11/what-happens-now-that-mass-voted-to-end-mcas-as-a-grad-requirement.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Alex Zimmerman. *New York to ditch Regents exam graduation requirement by fall 2027.* Chalkbeat. Nov. 4, 2025. <https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2024/11/04/new-york-plans-to-end-regents-exam-requirement-by-2027-2028-school-year/>.

<sup>30</sup> Harry Feder. *Press Release: Massachusetts & New York Reject Graduation Exam Requirements. Only Six States Maintain Mandatory Exit Tests For Diploma.* FairTest. Nov. 13, 2024. <https://fairtest.org/massachusetts-only-six-states-maintain-mandatory-exit-tests-for-diploma-voters-and-policy-makers-see-education-and-equity-benefits-from-multiple-measur/>. The six remaining states with mandatory exit exams are: Florida, Ohio, Louisiana, New Jersey, Texas, and Virginia.

<sup>31</sup> Sean F. Reardon & Michal Kurlaender. *Effects of the California High School Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement, and Graduation*, Policy Brief 09-3. Aug. 2009. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED510168>.

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Jellison Holme, Meredith P. Richards, Jo Beth Jimerson, & Rebecca W. Cohen. *Assessing the Effects of High School Exit Examinations.* Review of Educational Research, Volume 80, Issue 4. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0034654310383147>.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, ELC Testimony on A4121, <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/ELC-Testimony-on-A4121.pdf>; See ELC’s January 14, 2025 letter to Acting Commissioner Dehmer, *Addressing the Impact of NJ’s High School Exit Testing Requirement on Students with Disabilities*, <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ELC-Ltr-to-Acting-Commissioner-Dehmer.1.14.25.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> New Jersey Department of Education, *New Jersey FY2019 Federal Performance Review Report*, Apr. 28, 2021, <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/april/NewJerseyFY2019FederalPerformanceReviewReport.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> See ELC’s January 14, 2025 letter to Acting Commissioner Dehmer. *Addressing the Impact of NJ’s High School Exit Testing Requirement on Students with Disabilities.* <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ELC-Ltr-to-Acting-Commissioner-Dehmer.1.14.25.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> See A4121, <https://nileg.gov/bill-search/2024/A4121>.

addressing students' academic and non-academic needs.<sup>37</sup> The community schools framework uses a “whole-child” approach that draws on six aligned key practices: rigorous community-connected classroom instruction; a culture of belonging, safety, and care; the use of integrated student supports; expanded learning time and opportunities; active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership.<sup>38</sup>

The community schools model allows schools to work collaboratively with students, parents, and teachers to identify the needs of each specific school and its surrounding community. It then develops a unique plan to strengthen the academic and non-academic services in that school and neighborhood. Each school hires an on-site community school coordinator whose task is to oversee this plan while partnering with outside nonprofit organizations to provide additional services to students and families, such as physical and mental health supports, extended school days and summer school, and food assistance.

Support for community schools is growing. Eight states<sup>39</sup> recently undertook state-funded initiatives to support the expansion of community schools, with the largest effort in California. That state has invested \$4.1 billion through 2031, with the ambitious and visionary goal of transforming every high-poverty public school into a community school.<sup>40</sup>

New Jersey has extremely successful community schools, including in large urban cities such as Paterson, Trenton, and Jersey City, and in smaller suburban districts such as Newton. But these programs are at risk due to the cutting of federal grants to the state for full-service community schools. Increasing state support for community schools is more important than ever to make up for the gaps in federal funding and allow more districts to transform their public schools into community schools to help students and their families overcome in-school and out-of-school barriers.

### **Recommendations:**

1. The Governor and Legislature should identify ways to expand community schools in New Jersey, including by partnering with already-established nonprofit entities, such as the New Jersey Institute for Community Schools at Saint Elizabeth University.
2. The state should establish an Office of Community Schools in the NJDOE, fund a pilot expansion initiative, and provide additional support to technical assistance centers.

---

<sup>37</sup> See Walker Swain, Melanie Leung-Gagne, Anna Maier, & Cassandra Rubinstein. *Community Schools Impact on Student Outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute. Sept. 16, 2025. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/ca-community-schools-impact-student-outcomes-report>; William R. Johnston, John Engberg, Isaac M. Opper, Lisa Sontag-Patilla & Lea Xenakis. *Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools: An Assessment of the New York City Community Schools Initiative*. Rand Corporation. Jan. 28, 2020. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3245.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3245.html); Michelle R. Bloodworth & Anna C. Horner. *Return on Investment of a Community School Coordinator: A Case Study*. Apex and ABC Community School Partnership. May 2019. [https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI\\_Coordinator.pdf](https://www.communityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/ROI_Coordinator.pdf); Anna Maier, Julia Daniel, Jeannie Oakes & Livia Lam. *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute. Dec. 2017. [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community\\_Schools\\_Effective\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Community_Schools_Effective_REPORT.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> Learning Policy Institute. *Key Practices of Community Schools*. Nov. 2024. [https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4489/download?inline&file=Comm\\_Schools\\_6\\_Pillars\\_FACTSHEET.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4489/download?inline&file=Comm_Schools_6_Pillars_FACTSHEET.pdf). Other organizations have published similar models of the key components of community schools, including the National Education Association and the Journey for Justice Alliance.

<sup>39</sup> These states are Maryland, New York, California, Illinois, New Mexico, Vermont, Florida, and Georgia.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Maier & Adrian Rivera-Rodriguez. *State Strategies for Investing in Community Schools*. Learning Policy Institute. Apr. 18, 2023. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/state-strategies-investing-in-community-schools-report>.

3. The Governor and Legislature should establish a direct appropriation for community schools in all future state budgets to fill the gap created by reduced federal funding, and increase investment over time to allow all public schools to become community schools.

### **VIII. Expand Afterschool and Out-of-School-Time Programs**

Afterschool and Out-of-School-Time (OST) programs are essential for New Jersey’s children, families, and the economy. These programs keep young people safe during the hours when they are most vulnerable, allow parents to remain employed, and offer students—especially middle and high school youth—academic support, mentoring, enrichment, college readiness, leadership building opportunities, and exposure to future careers. In 2024, an NJDOE report on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Community programs, which provide funding for afterschool programs nationwide, found that New Jersey students attending afterschool programs in 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades demonstrated improvement on state tests (58% in language arts and 54% in math).<sup>41</sup> Afterschool also improves attendance; two-thirds of chronically absent students improve their attendance because of additional afterschool opportunities.

For older students, afterschool and OST programs are often the bridge between school and opportunity, supporting on-time graduation, workforce readiness, connection to caring adults, and preparation to be engaged citizens. But despite their proven impact, these programs remain underfunded, fragmented across agencies, and treated as optional rather than essential. They are also the first to go, along with clubs, sports, and other extracurriculars, when there are budget cuts.

The lack of a coordinated statewide strategy has left afterschool and OST programs behind. Providers are navigating rising costs, staffing shortages, short-term grants, and inconsistent reimbursement rates while demand for these programs continues to grow. Recent data show that more than 150,000 New Jersey children are enrolled in afterschool programs, but over 589,000 children—roughly four out of five—are waiting for a spot because current capacity cannot meet demand.<sup>42</sup> In New Jersey, instability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers grant continues to threaten program continuity and access for students who depend on afterschool services. Families are left with limited options, and students, particularly those in under-resourced communities, miss out on programs that could change their lives.

Afterschool and OST programs are not a “nice to have.” Rather, they are a proven, cost-effective investment in student success and family stability.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. The Legislature must pass S2847 to establish the New Jersey Out-of-School Time Advisory Commission.<sup>43</sup> The Commission is a long-overdue structural solution that would improve coordination across state agencies; elevate the voices of providers, parents, and youth; and develop a coherent statewide OST strategy, including intentional support for middle and high school programming.

---

<sup>41</sup> Afterschool Alliance. *This is Afterschool in New Jersey*. Feb. 2026. <https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/NJ-Afterschool-Fact-Sheet-2026.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Afterschool Alliance. New Jersey After 3PM. *The demand for afterschool programs is incredibly high, but just a fraction of families who want afterschool programs have them*. <https://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/data/new-jersey/demand>. Jersey After 3PM.

<sup>43</sup> See S2847, [https://pub.njleg.gov/Bills/2026/S3000/2847\\_I1.HTM](https://pub.njleg.gov/Bills/2026/S3000/2847_I1.HTM).

2. The state must establish a sustainable, recurring funding stream for afterschool and summer programs; invest in the OST workforce by providing competitive wages and professional development; and reduce administrative burdens that pull providers away from serving students.

## **IX. Fund Healing Centered Engagement**

In New Jersey and across the nation, students, families, and educators are navigating compounding social, economic, and political stressors that have significantly impacted learning environments and overall well-being. Rising mental health needs, community violence, economic instability, and heightened polarization have placed new demands on schools, with educators increasingly expected to respond to students' social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs alongside academic instruction. These realities underscore the need for systemic, universal approaches that are culturally affirming, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in equity.

Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a strengths-based framework designed to support the well-being of both students and the adults who serve them. The Flourish Agenda defines HCE as "an asset-based and culturally rooted approach to healing and well-being for young people of color and their adult allies."<sup>44</sup> Unlike traditional trauma-informed models, HCE emphasizes collective healing, identity development, and community connection. Healing-centered community schools are guided by four foundational practices: justice (centering racial equity and repairing trust), learning (student-centered opportunities to explore, lead, and thrive), capacity (building coherent systems of support and collaboration), and accountability (shared responsibility for student success).<sup>45</sup>

In New Jersey, the Foundation for Educational Administration, the professional learning arm of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, has led statewide HCE implementation since 2020.<sup>46</sup> More than 4,000 educators and school staff across 80 schools have participated in professional learning focused on adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed care, and healing-centered practices, with over 90 percent reporting the training as valuable.<sup>47</sup> Ongoing learning is further supported through practitioner-centered resources, including the Healing Centered Schools Podcast produced by Healing Centered Schools, which elevates research, school-based practice, and educator voice.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Healing Centered Engagement implementation in New Jersey has relied primarily on private funding. The state should invest in expanding HCE statewide, so all schools are equipped to support students' academic success, social-emotional development, and mental health in holistic and culturally responsive ways.
2. Future state budgets should include a dedicated appropriation to expand and sustain HCE across New Jersey's public schools.

---

<sup>44</sup> Flourish Agenda. *What is Healing Centered Engagement?* <https://flourishagenda.com/hce-certification/>.

<sup>45</sup> Stanford School of Graduate Education. *Foundational Practices of Healing-Centered Community Schools*. [https://edpolicynca.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/jg\\_kimner\\_aug21.pdf](https://edpolicynca.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/jg_kimner_aug21.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Dan Higgins. *FEA Announces 26 Schools to Take Part in Healing-Centered Engagement to Address ACEs and Trauma*. New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. Mar. 24, 2021. <https://njpsa.org/fea-announces-26-schools-to-take-part-in-healing-centered-engagement-to-address-aces-and-trauma/>.

<sup>47</sup> Jessica Nugent & Mary M. Reece. *Op-Ed: Healing initiative for schools needs help to keep going*. NJ Spotlight. Oct. 2, 2023. <https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2023/10/op-ed-nj-healing-centered-engagement-project-for-schools-needs-more-support/>.

## X. Fill Expired Seats on the State Board of Education

A fully seated and functioning State Board of Education is essential to strong public education governance in New Jersey. The State Board plays a critical role in setting statewide education policy, adopting regulations, and ensuring accountability for students, families, and taxpayers.<sup>48</sup> While progress has been made to fill expired seats on the State Board, the issue has not been fully resolved.

Over the past two years, former Governor Murphy nominated, and the Senate confirmed, five new members to the State Board, reducing the number of long expired terms that previously dominated the Board. However, several seats remain expired; one seat is vacant; and additional nominations have stalled in the confirmation process, leaving the Board operating with members who have significantly expired terms. This partial progress has not yet delivered the stable, fully empowered, governing body New Jersey's education system requires.

### *Recommendations:*

1. The Governor should submit nominations for all remaining expired seats without delay, and the Senate Judiciary Committee, followed by the full Senate, should prioritize timely hearings and confirmations to fully seat the State Board. This can include extending the terms of members in currently expired seats.
2. The Governor and Legislature should establish clear timelines and expectations for appointing new members to the Board to prevent long-term seat expirations and vacancies. New Jersey's students and families deserve a State Board that is fully constituted, accountable, and equipped to lead.

*For more information about OC/OS, visit <https://www.ourchildrenourschools.org/>. To speak to an OC/OS representative, email [info@ourchildrenourschools.org](mailto:info@ourchildrenourschools.org).*

---

<sup>48</sup> State of New Jersey. Department of Education. *State Board of Education*. <https://www.nj.gov/education/sboe/>.