



New Jersey School Boards Association

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Rebuilding Opportunities for Students



**Fifth in a Series of NJSBA Reports
on Education During the Pandemic**

September 2021

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www.njsba.org/RebuildingOpportunities

The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of the state's local boards of education and includes the majority of New Jersey's charter schools as associate members. NJSBA provides training, advocacy and support to advance public education and promote the achievement of all students through effective governance.

Rebuilding Opportunities for Students

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Dear Member of the New Jersey Education Community,

The New Jersey School Boards Association is proud to share “Rebuilding Opportunities for Students,” the fifth in its series of reports on the issues facing school leaders, educators, students and their families since the pandemic began some 18 months ago.

Today’s report represents the work of the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning, which convened this spring in anticipation of the resumption of full-time, in-person instruction in 2021-2022. The study group explored challenges facing school districts and students, state and federal policy and financial support, and strategies at the local level, a number of which were put in place during the past year.

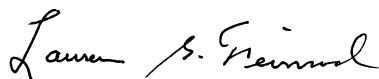
As the pandemic gripped our state, nation and world, New Jersey’s school leaders and educators did an exemplary job guiding the education program, balancing periods of virtual and in-person instruction with unprecedented safeguards for the health of students, staff and families. They deserve the highest commendations for providing our children with the best instruction possible under extraordinary circumstances.

As the 2021-2022 school year begins, the COVID-19 pandemic has not receded, as it appeared it might last spring, and educators, students and families are still facing significant uncertainty. Our responsibility now is to continue assessing the impact of the pandemic on our local school communities, to develop effective programs to overcome any gaps in learning, and to use this period of planning and adjustment as an opportunity to ensure the academic progress and social-emotional growth of all of New Jersey’s 1.4 million students.

The New Jersey School Boards Association intends for this report to provide information and guidance to local board of education members and administrators as they implement plans and strategies designed to meet their students’ academic and social-emotional needs in 2021-2022 and beyond.

It is our hope that this report will assist school districts as they rebuild opportunities for students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Lawrence S. Feinsod". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Lawrence" being more prominent than the last name "Feinsod".

Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod
Executive Director, NJSBA

THE NJSBA COMMITTEE ON POST-PANDEMIC GAPS IN ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“We owe it to our students to safely reopen schools and make sure they have the best opportunity for learning, which we know as educators is in person.”

“...having our students come into the classroom where they learn by doing, learn social-emotional skills by doing...is critically important.”¹

— Miguel Cardona
U.S. Secretary of Education

The direction from federal and state education officials is clear: After 18 months of extended school closings and periods of full or partial remote learning due to Covid-19, students should receive in-person instruction this fall. In May, New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy announced that, barring localized outbreaks of the disease or other emergencies, school districts must provide full-day in-person instruction exclusively in 2021-2022, with no option for remote learning.² He reiterated that position on Aug. 24.³

Even if circumstances compel the state to change course and require school districts to pivot to hybrid or full remote learning (as they have done in the past), educators will still face the same challenge: Adequately assessing the academic and emotional impact of the pandemic on their students and developing strategies to address individual needs.

To help the state’s education community meet this goal, the New Jersey School Boards Association convened the Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning to provide information on effective practices and programs, guidance and support. The committee consists of local school board leaders, state and local education officials, educators and NJSBA staff. It has drawn upon the knowledge of experts in various fields and reviewed literature and research, including the Association’s previous work on education during the pandemic, student achievement, the career-focused learner, student mental health, and other subjects.

The committee’s final report provides insights, findings and recommendations on the following topics:

- ¹ Dr. Miguel Cardona, interview by John Dickerson, “Face the Nation,” CBS News, Aug. 8, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/education-secretary-miguel-cardona-details-all-hands-on-deck-approach-to-reopen-schools/#x> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).
- ² “Governor Murphy Announces That Schools Will Be Required to Provide Full-Time, In-Person Instruction Beginning Fall 2021.” Office of the Governor, State of New Jersey, May 17, 2021. <https://www.nj.gov/governor/news/news/562021/20210517a.shtml> (accessed Aug. 9, 2021).
- ³ Mary Ann Koruth, “Remote Learning: Murphy Reiterates No Virtual School Other than Contingency Plan for Outbreaks,” NorthJersey.com (North Jersey Media Group, Aug. 25, 2021), <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/education/2021/08/24/governor-phil-murphy-no-virtual-school-contingency-plan-covid/8247526002/> (accessed Aug. 25, 2021).

- **Identifying gaps in academic learning** through formative assessment and other methods, and **addressing academic learning gaps** caused by the pandemic, using approaches such as accelerated learning and “Just-in-Time Teaching,” while providing meaningful instructional opportunities across all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.
- **Embedding social-emotional learning** into the entire curricular and co-curricular program.
- **Recognizing the role of arts education** in social-emotional learning.
- **Meeting the needs of special populations**, including students with disabilities and English language learners.
- **Promoting healthy organizational structures and cultures**, designed to enable educators to close academic learning gaps and meet students’ social-emotional needs, through methods such as strategic planning and collaboration between labor and management.
- **Directing coronavirus relief funding** provided to school districts through the federal Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund, so that it has the optimal impact on growth and learning for all students.
- **Ensuring adequate transportation** for students when they return for full-time in-person instruction.

KEY FINDINGS

By March 2021, each New Jersey LEA reported zero students currently needing a device and/or internet connection. Thus, the State was able to effectively use ESSER and CRF funds and close the digital divide for New Jersey’s students.

—State Plan for the American Rescue Plan and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund

- Nationwide and statewide data on student learning during the pandemic are valuable in informing federal and state education policy. However, the experience of each local school district and each student has varied widely over the past 18 months. Consequently, local school districts and educators should rely on formative assessment⁴ and other ongoing measures of the progress of individual students in grade-level work when developing strategies to overcome any academic and social-emotional learning loss.
- Efforts to address gaps in social-emotional learning must precede or be simultaneous with efforts to accelerate academic learning.
- New Jersey’s local school districts did an exemplary job in delivering an education program to students during 2020-2021, pivoting between virtual and in-person. School districts developed plans to ensure that every child had nutritious meals, either tech-based or hard copy instructional materials, and social-emotional support. However, numerous factors beyond the control of educators and families caused learning disruptions, the impact of which needs to be addressed through local school district post-pandemic learning plans and the use of federal emergency funding.
- New Jersey Department of Education data based on locally administered

⁴ “Formative Assessment Definition,” The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, April 29, 2014), <https://www.edglossary.org/formative-assessment/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

summative⁵ assessments show that the majority of New Jersey students met grade-level standards in English language arts and mathematics over the past year. However, progress for students with disabilities, English learners and economically disadvantaged students was significantly lower than that for the total student population. Progress for Black and Hispanic students was lower than that for their white and Asian counterparts. The state data underscore the importance of ensuring that, as appropriate, local school districts address the needs of vulnerable populations in post-pandemic education plans and the use of federal emergency funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School districts and educators should rely upon formative assessments, which are ongoing and diagnostic, to identify post-pandemic student learning needs and develop individual instructional improvement plans.
2. To address academic learning gaps, school districts should implement acceleration⁶ and just-in-time teaching⁷ while also considering implementing a spiral curriculum.⁸
3. Efforts to close learning gaps should be applied with equal vigor in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those not subject to state assessment.
4. To effectively address the pandemic's impact on learning, educators should adopt an "asset-based" mindset, which places a positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.
5. District action plans to address the impact of the pandemic on education should have a dual focus, addressing both social-emotional and academic learning challenges.
6. Social-emotional learning practices should be ongoing, embedded in every lesson and activity, including co-curricular programs, and facilitated throughout the school year and beyond the school day.
7. School leaders should be cognizant of staff members' emotional health, which affects the ability of students to process trauma resulting from the pandemic, and should provide appropriate services through employee assistance programs, professional development and other activities.

⁵ "Summative Assessment Definition," The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, Aug. 29, 2013), <https://www.edglossary.org/summative-assessment/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

⁶ "Acceleration Definition," The Glossary of Education Reform (Great Schools Partnership and Education Writers Association, Aug. 13, 2013), <https://www.edglossary.org/acceleration/> (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

⁷ "Just-in-Time Teaching," Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign), <https://citl.illinois.edu/citl-101/teaching-learning/resources/teaching-strategies/just-in-time-teaching> (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

⁸ Howard Johnston, "The Spiral Curriculum," Research into Practice (Education Partnerships, Inc., Feb. 29, 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538282.pdf> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

8. Boards of education policy should express a belief that social-emotional learning/character development strengthens social competencies, provides for the well-being of students and staff, and facilitates academic achievement.
9. As school districts revise their curricula to align with the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, they should consider using the *Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework*, which connects the artistic processes with social-emotional learning competencies.
10. To meet the needs of the students most severely affected by the pandemic, educators should consider effective practices being implemented in New Jersey school districts, as well as guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education. Strategies may include accelerated learning, extended learning time and one-to-one tutoring, as well as enrichment in STEAM education and access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs and career-technical education pathways.
11. School districts should consider developing multi-year financial plans that extend beyond the expiration of federal American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding to ensure continuation of effective programs to meet students' post-pandemic learning needs.
12. The planning, implementation and evaluation of district plans to address social-emotional and academic learning gaps should be based on proven practices that are inclusive and collaborative, enhance effective organizational structures and promote healthy school climate and culture.
13. School districts should use the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding and related planning to ensure a continued focus on equity throughout the pre-K-12 education system.
14. To ensure adequate transportation services when students return to school full-time, the federal and state governments should address the shortage of school bus drivers by revising requirements for the commercial drivers' license-acquisition process, removing requirements that are unnecessary for school bus drivers.
15. In developing programs to address post-pandemic education, local boards of education should review recommendations and suggestions contained in the New Jersey School Boards Association's research reports on school safety, special education, student achievement, mental health and the career-focused learner, as well as the five reports on education during the pandemic that have been issued since May 2020.

Research and information that the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning Loss used in developing its recommendations, as well as definitions of key concepts, are referenced in subsequent sections of this report. Reports, articles and studies cited can be accessed through the links contained in footnotes.

IDENTIFYING ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS

RECOMMENDATION

School districts and educators should rely upon formative assessments, which are ongoing and diagnostic, to identify post-pandemic student learning needs and develop individual instructional improvement plans.

Nationwide and statewide data on student performance are critical to informing federal and state policy to address pandemic-related learning gaps. Nonetheless, the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (NJSBA Committee) believes that local school district strategy should focus on the experience of the district's student population and, especially, individual student needs.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The committee finds agreement among educators that ongoing formative assessment is a valuable tool in providing a comprehensive analysis of each student's progress toward meeting learning standards. Formative assessment consists of a wide variety of methods that teachers use to conduct evaluations of student comprehension, learning needs, and academic progress during a lesson, unit, or course.⁹ This type of assessment guides the creation of individual learning plans, while providing information to students, their families, and educators with whom they work.

During its deliberations, the NJSBA Committee reviewed information and data related to the pandemic's impact on student growth and learning. Sources include the Stanford University Center for Research on Education Outcomes,¹⁰ two organizations involved in student assessment—NWEA (the Northwest Evaluation Association),¹¹ and Renaissance¹²—McKinsey & Company,¹³ an international

⁹ “Formative Assessment Definition.”

¹⁰ “Estimates of Learning Loss in the 2019-2020 School Year” (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, October 2020), https://credo.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj6481/f/short_brief_on_learning_loss_final_v.3.pdf (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹¹ Lewis, Karyn, Megan Kuhfeld, Erik Ruzek, and Andrew McEachin. “Learning during COVID-19: Reading and Math Achievement in the 2020-21 School Year” (NWEA Center for School and Student Progress, July 2021), <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2021/07/Learning-during-COVID-19-Reading-and-math-achievement-in-the-2020-2021-school-year-research-brief-1.pdf> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹² “How Kids Are Performing: Tracking the School-Year Impact of COVID-19 on Reading and Mathematics Achievement” (Renaissance Learning, Inc., Spring 2021), <https://renaissance.widen.net/s/t8trbrt2tc/r63444> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹³ Dorn, Emma, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg. “COVID-19 and Education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning” (McKinsey & Company, July 27, 2021), <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning> (accessed August 18, 2021).

management consulting firm, and JerseyCAN,¹⁴ a non-profit education advocacy group.

The work of these and other organizations shows that, to varying degrees, the pandemic has affected learning among students across the entire demographic spectrum. However, there are differences among the reports concerning the severity of learning gaps and the amount of time students and teachers will need to close them.

VULNERABLE STUDENT POPULATIONS

In spite of these differences, one observation has emerged from nearly all of the reports: The pandemic's negative impact on academic growth has been most severe among economically disadvantaged students, many of whom are students of color and less likely to have experienced in-person instruction than higher-income and non-minority students. The data from these organizations also illustrate the pandemic's negative effect on the education of special populations, such as English language learners and students with disabilities.

In a July 2021 report, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that, "Reduced access to in-person learning is associated with poorer learning outcomes and adverse mental health and behavioral effects in children."¹⁵ The CDC report indicated the following:

- During January-April 2021, access to full-time learning increased for all-K-12 students nationwide.
- However, disparities in access to full-time in-person learning were apparent by race/ethnicity, geography and school level, with minority students having less opportunity for in-person instruction.
- In New Jersey, minority students were more likely to be limited to virtual-only instruction than other students.

In June, the New Jersey Department of Education released the Local Education Agencies Interim Assessment Data Collection, Summary Report 2021,¹⁶ a compilation of results of various summative¹⁷ assessments administered by local school districts between November 2020 and February 2021. The summative assessments measure student understanding or performance against uniform grade-level standards in English language arts, mathematics and science.

¹⁴ "A Time to Act: COVID-19 Academic Slide in New Jersey (Fall 2020-Winter 2021)" (JerseyCAN, March 25, 2021), https://jerseycan.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/03/03-25-21_JerseyCAN_ATimeToAct_Report_V1.pdf (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

¹⁵ Emily Oster, *et al.*, "Disparities in Learning Mode Access Among K-12 Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic, by Race/Ethnicity, Geography, and Grade Level - United States, September 2020-April 2021," (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 2, 2021), https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7026e2.htm?s_cid=mm7026e2_w#T1_down (accessed July 30, 2021).

¹⁶ "Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) Interim Assessment Data Collection Summary Report 2021," New Jersey Department of Education, June 16, 2021, <https://nj.gov/education/sboe/meetings/agenda/2021/June/public/4b%20New%20Jersey%20Interim%20Assessment%20Data%20Collection%20presentation.pdf> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

¹⁷ "[Summative Assessment Definition](#)."

LEA Interim Assessment Data Collection			
Summary Report 2021			
Percentage of Students at or above Grade-Level Standards			
	ELA	Math	Science
All Students	63%	62%	78%
Economically Disadvantaged	46%	45%	62%
English Learners	34%	40%	57%
Students with Disabilities	44%	45%	67%
Asian	82%	84%	93%
White	73%	72%	87%
Black	49%	44%	63%
Hispanic	48%	48%	65%

The results show that a majority of the total student population performed at or above grade-level standards (63% in ELA, 62% in math, and 78% in science). However, in each subject area, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, English learners and students with disabilities meeting grade-level standards was significantly lower than that of the total population. Additionally, results for Black and Hispanic students lagged behind those of their white and Asian peers.

The grade-level data will be used to “target interventions to meet the needs of all students, especially vulnerable student groups,” according to a presentation made to the State Board of Education. At the same time, an NJDOE official cautioned that the information cannot be used for comparison to previous years’ state-administered assessment results.

“Statewide assessments serve a different purpose, and are administered under different conditions than local interim assessments,” explained Dr. Lisa Gleason, assistant commissioner of academics and performance, in a broadcast memo to local school officials. “Comparisons between these data sets would not yield meaningful takeaways regarding *trends in student learning over time*.”¹⁸ [Emphasis added.]

On one hand, these results show lower achievement among the same student groups that nationwide data indicate have been most negatively impacted by the pandemic. However, based on the caution issued by NJDOE, the statistics cannot be used to illustrate the extent of academic learning gaps among New Jersey students that might have resulted from school closings and remote instruction during the health emergency.

Therefore, the NJSBA Committee believes that it is critical for local education officials and teachers to base strategies on ongoing, formative assessment of the district’s student population, as well as the needs of individual students.

¹⁸ “Interim Data Shows Academic Performance Lagging; NJDOE Cautions against Comparisons to Previous Assessments,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, June 22, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-22-2021-vol-xliv-no-49/interim-data-shows-academic-performance-lagging-njdoe-cautions-against-comparisons-to-previous-assessments/> (accessed Aug. 13, 2021).

SOME THRIVED REMOTELY

There are indications that a subset of students thrived academically during periods of remote instruction. This group may include students with social anxiety or other emotional challenges, as well as those who may not feel safe in school.

In an Aug. 18 report in *Education Week*, an official from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), suggested that schools survey students or target those who thrived to obtain information on why they excelled during virtual instruction.

“You might find they really benefited from the freedom to use their time more flexibly or focus without interruption,” said Claire Schu, manager of implementation support at CASEL. “If that’s what you’re hearing, you might consider changing up the way that the in-person class period is structured, [or] giving options for how and even where students can learn within the school.”¹⁹

There may be numerous other reasons why these students excelled — and there may be other strategies to maintain their success when they return to in-person instruction.

The NJSBA Committee believes that school administrators and educators should take steps to determine why some students thrived through online learning and to ensure that those who excelled will have similar success when they return to in-person instruction.

¹⁹ Alyson Klein, “Virtual Learning Was Better for Some Kids. Here’s What Teachers Learned From Them,” *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., Aug. 18, 2021), https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/virtual-learning-was-better-for-some-kids-heres-what-teachers-learned-from-them/2021/08?utm_source=nl&utm_medium=eml&utm_campaign=eu&M=62825784&U=2447289&UUID=0e4ffab2513aab88896328f850fb3319 (accessed Aug. 24, 2021).

ADDRESSING ACADEMIC LEARNING GAPS

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To address academic learning gaps, school districts should implement acceleration and just-in-time teaching while also considering implementing a spiral curriculum.
- Efforts to close learning gaps should be applied with equal vigor in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those not subject to state assessment.
- To effectively address the pandemic's impact on learning, educators should adopt an "asset-based" mindset, which places a positive focus on the strengths that each student brings to the classroom and builds upon those strengths.

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Among education researchers and advocates, there is consensus that combining the instructional practices of "acceleration"²⁰ and "just-in-time teaching"²¹ presents the most effective means of addressing learning gaps, the NJSBA Committee finds.

"Accelerated Learning strategically prepares students for success in *current grade-level content*," according to David Steiner, executive director of the Institute for Education Policy at the Johns Hopkins University School of Education.²² "Acceleration readies students for new learning." [Emphasis added.]

In the forward to its June 2021 "Learning Acceleration Guide," the New Jersey Department of Education stresses the formative, individualized aspect of accelerated learning. "...once individual student learning needs are assessed, teachers provide targeted supports on the concepts needed to help the students engage with grade-level standards."²³

In essence, *accelerated learning* strategically prepares students for success in current grade-level content and readies students for new learning. Past concepts and skills

²⁰ "Acceleration Definition."

²¹ "Just-in-Time Teaching."

²² "Addressing Learning Loss through Acceleration: A Conversation with David Steiner." Webinar. (National Association of State Boards of Education, Feb. 11, 2021). https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/9azcK_tmXZFLoUnWPJxqo4bsfXy23_3UCEeGgGxq7xq8th-AEYsSXr2WNV9DGboZ3GnWGzL5Pfg3ZtVH.QWqFAthd5tb4jq9Z (accessed Aug. 14, 2021).

²³ "Learning Acceleration Guide: A Compilation of Learning Principles and Practices in New Jersey" (New Jersey Department of Education, June 2021), <https://nj.gov/education/acceleration/docs/SearningAccelerationGuide.pdf>. (Accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

are addressed, but always in the purposeful context of current learning.²⁴ *Just-in-time teaching* provides students with just the right amount of help to move forward in a subject where they have missed a pre-requisite skill.²⁵

ACCELERATION VERSUS REMEDIATION

Acceleration offers a vastly different approach to addressing learning gaps than “remediation.”

“Remediation often focuses on drilling students on isolated skills that bear little resemblance to current curriculum. Activities...aim to have students master content from past years,” according to Steiner of Johns Hopkins.²⁶

“Steiner argues that the solution is not to ‘teach again’ the material that students haven’t learned. Instead, he recommends looking forward to what those students will need to know to succeed the next day or the next week and focusing on those skills—a strategy known as acceleration.”²⁷

“Rather than concentrating on a litany of items that students have failed to master, acceleration readies students for new learning. Past concepts and skills are addressed, but always in the purposeful context of future learning,” wrote Suzy Rollins Pepper, education consultant and author, in a 2014 book on accelerated learning.²⁸

Another source, a December 2020 study by McKinsey & Company, asserts that, instead of remediation, the evidence-based approach of acceleration, in combination with just-in-time teaching, is highly effective in closing learning gaps.²⁹

EXPERIENCE AFTER KATRINA

The shortcomings of remediation were observed after the disruption to the education process caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Following the hurricane, schools in the New Orleans area were closed for a

²⁴ Suzy Pepper Rollins, “Acceleration: Jump-Starting Students Who Are Behind,” in *Learning in the Fast Lane: 8 Ways to Put All Students on the Road to Academic Success* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2014).

²⁵ Joy Resmovits, “How a Diverse School District Is Using a Strategy Usually Reserved for ‘Gifted’ Students to Boost Everyone,” *The Seattle Times* (The Seattle Times Company, Feb. 11, 2021), <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/how-highline-is-trying-to-avoid-learning-loss-by-boosting-students-ahead/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021.)

²⁶ Addressing Learning Loss through Acceleration. In the webinar, Steiner cites the work of Suzy Pepper Rollins.

²⁷ Andrew Myers, “To Catch Students Up, Don’t Remediate. Accelerate,” *Hub* (Johns Hopkins University, May 6, 2021), <https://hub.jhu.edu/2021/05/06/accelerate-learning-to-bridge-covid-19-education-gaps/> (accessed Aug. 11, 2021).

²⁸ Rollins.

²⁹ Dorn, Emma, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, “COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help,” (McKinsey & Company, December 2020), 9-12, <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/industries/public%20and%20social%20sector/our%20insights/covid%2019%20and%20learning%20loss%20disparities%20grow%20and%20students%20need%20help/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help-v3.pdf?shouldIndex=false> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

maximum of seven weeks. Educators reported that the average gap in learning was approximately two years, with the greatest shortfall in math. The average time it took to resolve the largest individual learning loss was two years.

A 2020 article published by the Center for Reinventing Public Education relates post-Katrina learning loss to the prospective impact of pandemic-caused school closings. In the article, the author cites the following conditions that faced educators after the hurricane:

- Students came back on average more than two years below grade level, some much more. Losses were most dramatic in mathematics.
- The degree of learning loss could not be predicted by family income, prior school, student age, or pre-Katrina grade level. Any school that opened in New Orleans had to assess individual readiness.
- Since students trickled back to New Orleans over a long period of time, schools could never stop assessing and adjusting to learning loss.
- It often took multiple years of individualized attention to resolve the largest learning losses.³⁰

In advocating for acceleration, TNTP, a non-profit organization dedicated to the improvement of urban education, cautioned against the temptation to address learning gaps through remediation. (TNTP was founded in 1997 as The New Teacher Project.)

“The natural inclination [in addressing pandemic-related learning loss] might be to make room for reteaching last year’s missed units by wholly eliminating any on-grade level units focused on ‘additional standards’ and then, once the ‘reteach’ portion of the year is complete, turning your attention to units focused on the ‘major work’ of the grade. *But we know this approach did not lead to student growth in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.* [Emphasis added.]

“Instead, you should identify the most important skills and concepts of each unit of study or standard.”³¹

More recently, TNTP issued a report³² that points to the success of accelerated learning during the current pandemic when compared to remediation.

“Our own pre-pandemic research showed that [remediation] can actually hurt students and exacerbate racial inequities,” states the TNTP report. “Over the past

³⁰ Paul Hill, “What Post-Katrina New Orleans Can Teach Schools about Addressing Covid Learning Losses,” The Lens (Center for Reinventing Public Education, April 20, 2020), <https://www.crpe.org/thelens/what-post-katrina-new-orleans-can-teach-schools-about-addressing-covid-learning-losses> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

³¹ “To Accelerate Learning, Focus on the Most Important Skills and Knowledge, TNTP Blog (TNTP, May 2020), <https://tntp.org/blog/post/to-accelerate-learning-figure-out-what-skills-and-knowledge-are-most-import> (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

³² “ACCELERATE, DON’T REMEDIATE: New Evidence from Elementary Math Classes” (TNTP, in partnership with ZEARN, May 2021), https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP_Accelerate_Dont_RemEDIATE_FINAL.pdf (accessed Aug. 12, 2021).

year, an alternative has gained traction across the country: *learning acceleration*. In this approach, the fourth-grade teacher starts with fourth-grade content, and strategically builds in key third-grade concepts when students might need them to master the grade-level work. This ‘just-in-time teaching’ ensures students spend more time on the work of their grade—the key to ultimately catching up.”

The TNTP report also cites data showing the following:

- Students who experienced learning acceleration struggled less and learned more than students who started at the same level but experienced remediation instead.
- Students of color and those from low-income backgrounds were more likely than their white, wealthier peers to experience remediation—even when they had already demonstrated success on grade-level content.
- Learning acceleration was particularly effective for students of color and those from low-income families.

An article in the Summer 2021 edition of NJSBA’s *School Leader*³³ magazine highlights various approaches to accelerated learning in the Kenilworth school district. In addition, the NJDOE “Learning Acceleration Guide”³⁴ offers several examples of effective local school district practices.

SPIRALING CURRICULUM

Following Katrina, the use of “spiraling” curriculum had a positive impact for secondary school students.³⁵ One of the benefits of this approach is that “Students are encouraged to apply the early knowledge to later course objectives.”³⁶

A 2012 article accessed through ERIC, the U.S. Department of Education’s Education Resource Information Center, describes the spiraling curriculum process. The article was published by Education Partnerships, Inc., a consulting firm.

- The student revisits a topic, theme or subject several times throughout their school career;
- The complexity of the topic or theme increases with each revisit; and
- New learning has a relationship with old learning and is put in context with the old information.³⁷

³³ Sheri Berkery, “‘Accelerated Learning’ Helps Students Catch Up and Look Ahead,” *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/accelerated-learning-helps-students-catch-up-and-look-ahead/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

³⁴ Learning Acceleration Guide.

³⁵ Hill.

³⁶ Howard Johnston, “The Spiral Curriculum,” Research into Practice (Education Partnerships, Inc., Feb. 29, 2012), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538282.pdf> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

³⁷ Johnston.

HIGH-DOSAGE TUTORING

Research indicates that one-to-one support for students, such as “high dosage” tutoring and monitoring, accelerates learning. For example, the July 2021 report by McKinsey describes these strategies as a “proven catalyst for accelerated learning.”

These programs were pioneered by Match Education in Boston and scaled by Saga Education in Chicago to provide students who are behind grade level in mathematics with an individualized 50-minute class period every school day. Tutors work with two students at a time in each session and cover content that not only meets students where they are but also links back to what is being taught in the regular math classroom.

The results are impressive: participating students learned one to two additional school years of mathematics in a single year.

These high-dosage programs are much more effective than low-dosage volunteer tutoring provided weekly or on an ad hoc basis...³⁸

In its March 2021 report, JerseyCan recommended “personalized, research-based solutions for accelerating student learning like high-dosage tutoring” as a strategy to address learning gaps.³⁹

New Jersey’s ARP ESSER State Plan includes tutoring among the initiatives to be funded through federal emergency aid. “Additionally, the State plans to establish a Comprehensive Beyond the School Day Activities formula grant which will support implementation of research-based programs such as tutoring and broader learning supports to families and educators,” according to a summary issued by the USDOE.⁴⁰

The NJSBA Committee suggests that school districts include “high dosage” tutoring when they are considering strategies to address student needs in post-pandemic education.

AN ASSET-BASED MINDSET

A critical component to narrowing learning gaps is adopting an asset-based mindset and rejecting approaches that are deficit-based, the NJSBA Committee finds.

“Asset-based teaching seeks to unlock students’ potential by focusing on their talents,” according to an article published by the Association of College and Research Libraries. “Also known as strengths-based teaching, this approach contrasts with the more common deficit-based style of teaching which highlights students’ inadequacies. By building on strengths students already possess, asset-based teaching seeks to create lifelong learners who are confident in

³⁸ Dorn.

³⁹ A Time to Act: COVID-19 Academic Slide in New Jersey, 10.

⁴⁰ “New Jersey ARP ESSER State Plan Highlights” (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/arp-essser-nj-plan.pdf> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

their abilities to master new skills.⁴¹

By viewing diversity in thought, culture and traits in a positive light, “the asset-based approach is key in achieving equity in classrooms across the country,” according to an article by the NYU Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. “Teachers and students alike are valued for what they bring to the classroom rather than being characterized by what they may need to work on or lack.”⁴²

In comparison, a deficit-based mindset lowers expectation and diminishes learning.

“In education, a *deficit mindset* is when teachers or school leaders focus on problems rather than potential,” according to a blog⁴³ posted on EduSpeak, produced by ANet, an educational services organization. “Deficit thinking causes educators to lower their expectations based on what their students and schools lack, which leads to lower outcomes.”

“Students of color, students experiencing poverty, and students with learning and attention differences are disproportionately harmed when educators adopt a deficit mindset.”⁴⁴

“If students only hear of the gaps in their learning or that they have fallen behind, they will begin to act according to the low benchmark that has been set for their achievement,” writes Angela Di Michele Lalor, a national educational consultant, in *Edutopia*, an online publication of the George Lucas Educational Foundation. “An asset-based approach to teaching is one that is grounded in what students can do rather than what they cannot do or areas of weakness. It is an embodiment of growth mindset in instruction.”⁴⁵

The NJSBA Committee strongly suggests an asset-based approach as educators and students work to overcome any negative impact of the pandemic on learning.

FOCUS ON ALL LEARNING STANDARDS

“Accelerating learning involves examining and improving every component of the instructional cycle,” states the NJDOE Learning Acceleration Guide.⁴⁶ “Districts

⁴¹ “Five Things You Should Read About Asset-Based Teaching,” Association of College and Research Libraries (American Library Association, May 22, 2018), https://acrl.org/IS/wp-content/uploads/is-research_5Things_asset-based-teaching.pdf (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴² “An Asset-Based Approach to Education: What It Is and Why It Matters,” NYU Steinhardt Teacher Residency Program (New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, Oct. 29, 2018, updated Sept. 16, 2020), <https://teachereducation.steinhardt.nyu.edu/an-asset-based-approach-to-education-what-it-is-and-why-it-matters/> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴³ “What is deficit mindset in education?” *EduSpeak* (blog) (ANet, Achievement Network, Jan. 14, 2020), <https://www.achievementnetwork.org/anetblog/eduspeak/deficit-mindset> (accessed Aug. 16, 2020).

⁴⁴ EduSpeak.

⁴⁵ Angela Di Michele Lalor, “3 Steps to Developing an Asset-Based Approach to Teaching,” *Edutopia* (George Lucas Educational Foundation, Oct. 22, 2020), <https://www.edutopia.org/article/3-steps-developing-asset-based-approach-teaching> (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

⁴⁶ Learning Acceleration Guide, 4.

must ensure [that] educators possess an advanced understanding of the [New Jersey Student Learning Standards](#) and implement those standards through high-quality, engaging lesson plans for all students.”

Post-pandemic, a thorough and efficient system of public schools for all students will require robust learning opportunities in all nine of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards: 21st Century Life and Careers; Comprehensive Health and Physical Education; English Language Arts; Mathematics; Science; Social Studies; Technology; Visual and Performing Arts, and World Languages.

State assessments, however, measure student progress in only three of the content areas: English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. Consequently, the NJSBA Committee cautions against focusing attention exclusively on learning gaps in the state-tested areas, particularly ELA and math, rather than on those not subject to state assessment. As much learning delay may exist in non-state-tested content areas, particularly subjects such as physical education and the visual and performing arts, which do not easily lend themselves to remote instruction.

The content areas not subject to state assessments are critical components of a thorough and efficient system of public education and, significantly, can provide ways for students to reengage in schools, the committee believes.

The NJSBA Committee urges educators to ensure that efforts to address academic learning gaps are implemented in all nine content areas of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

EMBEDDING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE SCHOOL PROGRAM

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School district action plans to address the impact of the pandemic on education should have a dual focus, addressing both social-emotional and academic challenges.
- Social-emotional learning practices should be ongoing, embedded in every lesson and activity, including co-curricular programs, and facilitated throughout the school year and beyond the school day.
- School leaders should be cognizant of staff members' emotional health, which affects the ability of students to process trauma resulting from the pandemic, and should provide appropriate services through employee assistance programs, professional development and other activities.
- Board of education policy should express a belief that social-emotional learning/character development strengthens social competencies, provides for the well-being of students and staff, and facilitates academic achievement.

During the pandemic, many students have experienced isolation and loneliness, the impact of which will not automatically dissipate when they return to in-school instruction. Many students have experienced trauma, resulting from illness among family members, financial issues, and other factors.

NJSBA's January 2021 report⁴⁷ on student mental health during the pandemic includes the following findings:

- "Children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends."⁴⁸
- "Early indications in the COVID-19 context indicate that more than one-third of adolescents report high levels of loneliness ... [and] there are well-established links between loneliness and mental health."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health" (New Jersey School Boards Association, Jan. 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/eye-on-the-future-as-districts-monitor-student-mental-health.pdf, 9-10> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁴⁸ Maria Elizabeth Loades *et al.*, "Rapid Systematic Review: The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of Covid-19," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (November 2020), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7267797/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁴⁹ Loades.

- 60% of school district leaders responding to an NJSBA survey felt that students were more anxious and depressed or [that they] had seen increased evidence of serious emotional crises.
- More than 90% of the respondents felt that the impact of remote learning on parents increased stress at home.

A May 2021 special report, published by *Education Week*, notes that the public health emergency exacerbated rising emotional stress among students and increased the difficulty that schools face in addressing the problem. “Even before the pandemic, mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, were on the rise among children and adolescents and many schools were struggling to keep pace with that demand,” states the report.⁵⁰

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL): A PRIORITY

In its report, “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation of Hope,” the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development linked social-emotional development to academic growth and illustrated its benefit for children from low-income backgrounds.

“An analysis of more than 200 studies of programs that teach students social and emotional skills found that these efforts significantly improved student behavior, feelings about school, and most importantly, achievement, and made schools safer,” the national commission found.

“Social and emotional learning benefits all children, of every background,” the report states. “But it disproportionately benefits children from low-income communities, many of whom experience trauma and adversity resulting from insecure access to housing, food, healthcare and safety.”⁵¹

In a fall 2020 article in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, Dr. Maurice J. Elias, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab and one of the nation’s leading experts in building healthy school climates, and Robert Morrison, director of Arts Ed NJ, summarized the situation facing school districts.

...school leaders confront the ever-increasing signs of stress and trauma our students are experiencing. The alarming rise in suicides (which are now appearing in our middle schools and high schools), social media shaming, ghosting, peer pressure, and school shootings have all contributed to what is clearly a mental health crisis in our schools. All of this was occurring pre-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues due to the

⁵⁰ Arianna Prothero, “Mental Health Problems Loom for the COVID Generation. Here’s What Schools Can Do,” *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., May 25, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/mental-health-problems-loom-for-the-covid-generation-heres-what-schools-can-do/2021/05> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵¹ “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope” (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Jan. 15, 2019), http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_aspen_final-report_full_webversion.pdf, 7 (accessed Aug. 16, 2021).

anxiety and loss some students are sustaining, the social isolation that comes with stay-at-home orders, the milestones students have missed (graduations, concerts, proms, trips, sports activities, travel), and even questions regarding career aspirations and students' finding a successful pathway to their passion in life.⁵²

"The confluence of student mental health and well-being issues and the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the need for SEL front and center," wrote Elias and Morrison.

The May 2021 *Education Week* special report cites the importance of SEL to academic recovery.

"To be sure, it will be difficult to balance mental health support with an equally massive academic recovery. But child development experts say it's a balance schools must attempt to strike if they want students to regain their academic footing after an unprecedented year of disruptions, stress, and trauma."⁵³

Following a review of research, the NJSBA Committee finds that addressing academic learning gaps cannot be successful unless students' social-emotional needs are met. In addition, overcoming learning gaps will require a school climate in which students feel safe, feel valued, have a sense of belonging, and are heard—all key components of SEL.

SEL THROUGHOUT THE SCHOOL PROGRAM, THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

During its discussion of social-emotional learning, the committee considered two previous NJSBA reports: "Building a Foundation for Hope," which focused on mental health services in the public schools, and "The Final Report of the NJSBA Task Force on Student Achievement" (2017). Both reports cite the importance of social-emotional learning and include recommendations based on the work of the Rutgers Social Emotional and Character Laboratory and CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning).

Relevant research, findings and recommendations from the 2019 and 2017 NJSBA reports include the following:

- Social-emotional competence and academic achievement are interwoven. Integrated coordinated instruction in both areas maximizes students' potential to succeed in school and throughout their lives.⁵⁴
- Evidence-based SEL should be a core part of the K-12 educational experience. The five core competencies associated with social-emotional learning—self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and

⁵² Robert Morrison and Maurice J. Elias, "Social and Emotional Learning and Arts Education," *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, Oct. 9, 2020), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/september-october-2020-vol-51-no-2/social-and-emotional-learning-and-arts-education/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵³ Prothero.

⁵⁴ Joseph E. Zins and Maurice J. Elias, "Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students," *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17, no. 2-3 (2006): 233.

responsible decision-making—should be infused into the daily school routine.⁵⁵

- Local school districts should make social-emotional learning part of every course to increase academic performance.⁵⁶

The 2018 report “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” by the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, includes a series of recommendations on the optimal implementation of SEL. A key recommendation: *Change instruction to teach students social, emotional, and cognitive skills; embed these skills in academics and school-wide practices.*

“There is a wide range of effective programs that provide frameworks, activities, and developmental sequences for teaching these skills,” states the national commission. “In addition, many districts and schools have developed their own programs and resources. But if a single curriculum or program is the extent of a school’s or district’s commitment—if students and teachers see developing these skills as a focus only in morning meetings, or in grades 5 and 8—there is little hope for real impact.”⁵⁷

A recent article in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine describes how the Kenilworth school district has infused social-emotional learning into the education program in its efforts to accelerate learning:

- Kenilworth increased SEL efforts in anticipation of pandemic-related needs, and integrated emotional supports into the curriculum. Outside support came from licensed therapists assigned to each school building to provide additional help to students, staff, and families.
- Teachers also received professional development in trauma-informed classrooms; additional rounds of this instruction will be available in the fall.
- Counseling teams coordinated with elementary school teachers on interventions, and followed up with parents to assess needs for counseling, community resources, and technology assistance.⁵⁸

The NJSBA Committee finds that, for social-emotional learning to be effective, it must be ongoing, embedded in all school activities and stressed throughout the school year.

EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF STAFF

Helping students deal with pandemic-related trauma will require adults who have successfully processed their own trauma, the NJSBA Committee believes. School leaders, therefore, must be cognizant of the emotional health of all staff and should

⁵⁵ “SEL: What Are the Core Competence Areas and Where Are They Promoted?,” SEL is... (CASEL, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021)

⁵⁶ “Building a Foundation for Hope” (New Jersey School Boards Association, September 2019), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NJSBA-Final-Mental-Health-Task-Force-Report-September-2019.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁵⁷ “From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope,” 44.

⁵⁸ Berkery.

provide supports through professional development, employee assistance programs, and other activities.

Pre-pandemic studies point to the benefit of teachers' emotional well-being to the advancement of students' academic and social-emotional learning.

"...teachers' own social and emotional competencies influence the quality of the learning experiences they offer their students," states the 2018 Nation at Hope report. "A growing body of research suggests that developing teachers' social and emotional competencies improves teacher well-being, reduces stress and burnout, and can reduce teacher and principal turnover. Teachers also report greater job satisfaction when their students are more engaged and successful."⁵⁹

A 2016 study by Penn State University and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation indicates that programs to "promote SEL among students also help reduce teacher stress and create more positive engagement with students."⁶⁰ In addition, the report cites studies showing that mindfulness and stress-management professional development provide psychological and physiological benefits to teachers, as well as improvements in quality of instruction.

NJSBA's report, "Building a Foundation for Hope" (2019), cites the importance of staff health and wellness in advancing student learning. It recommends that districts "[s]upport the emotional health of staff by providing structures and opportunities to build collegial relationships through professional development and team building."⁶¹

POLICY SUPPORTING SEL AND ITS EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

NJSBA's 2019 report on mental health services also recommends that school districts "ensure that SEL programs are a priority and that they emphasize empathy, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking—skills that not only enable academic achievement, but also success in college, career and family life."⁶² A key element to setting this priority is board of education policy.

Through policy, the board of education expresses its goals and desires for the district's schools and the education of its students. It provides direction to administration and staff on implementing programs to meet those goals, while reflecting state and federal laws and regulations that govern public education.⁶³

Addressing board policy in support of SEL, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development recommends statements that:

- Set clear vision for students' comprehensive development;

⁵⁹ "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope," 25.

⁶⁰ Mark Greenberg, Joshua Brown, and Rachel Abenavoli, "Teacher Stress and Health: Effects on Teachers, Students, and Schools" (Bennett Pierce Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University, September 2016), <https://www.prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf430428-TeacherStress.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁶¹ "Building a Foundation for Hope," 8.

⁶² "Building a Foundation for Hope," 4.

⁶³ "The Board's Role in Policy Development," *Fundamentals of School Board Membership* (New Jersey School Boards Association, 2016), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/fundamentals-of-school-board-membership.pdf> (members-only, accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

- Encourage the continuous improvement of learning that advances strong relationships, personalized supports for students, and engaging and relevant learning opportunities;
- Promote the development of adult capacity to support students' social, emotional, and academic development, and
- Align resources efficiently and equitably to support the success of the whole student.⁶⁴

NJSBA Policy Services offers a sample discretionary policy addressing “*Mental Health and Well-Being*”⁶⁵ to local boards of education in New Jersey.

“The many challenges faced by schools adapting to...instruction during the pandemic have raised concerns about the mental health and well-being of students, school teachers and staff,” noted NJSBA Policy Services staff in a February 2021 message to local school board members and administrators.

The NJSBA sample policy states that a safe and secure school climate promotes positive mental health and well-being for students and staff and supports student achievement. It further expresses the belief that social and emotional learning and character education strengthen social competencies that will empower students to connect across race, class, culture, language, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, and learning needs.

In addition, the sample policy directs the chief school administrator to integrate SEL and character education into all aspects of the educational program.

The NJSBA Committee urges local school boards to review its policies on SEL and mental health in light of the sample developed by NJSBA Policy Services.

⁶⁴ John Bridgeland *et al.*, “A Policy Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens” (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, Jan. 15, 2019), http://nationathope.org/wp-content/uploads/aspen_policy_final_withappendices_web_optimized.pdf, 14 (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁶⁵ “Mental Health and Wellbeing,” File Code 5141.5, NJSBA Policy Services Clearinghouse (New Jersey School Boards Association, February 2021) <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/5141-5-mental-health-wellbeing-clearing-house.pdf>, (accessed Aug. 17, 2021).

THE ROLE OF ARTS EDUCATION IN SEL

RECOMMENDATION

As school districts revise their curricula to align with the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts, they should consider using the Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework, which connects the artistic processes with social-emotional learning competencies.

Increasingly, educators have recognized the benefit of arts education to social-emotional learning and academic achievement. Today, the connection between the artistic processes and SEL competencies has become more significant due to the impact of the pandemic on students.

The number one priority of our schools as we emerge from the pandemic is the social emotional well-being of our students, faculty, and staff...

As we return to school, it is critical to remember that our students will not learn:

- *until they feel safe*
- *until they have a sense of belonging, and*
- *until they feel valued*
- *until they are heard*

That is why the intersection between music and arts education and social emotional learning will be so important as our students return to schools.⁶⁶

In a Fall 2020 *School Leader* article, nationally recognized leaders in arts education and SEL addressed an initiative to tap the unique synergy between the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts⁶⁷ and Social-Emotional Learning Skills, identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning⁶⁸ for the benefit of the state's K-12 students.



"I believe everyone will soon come to realize that our arts educators are the secret weapon to implementation of social-emotional learning in our schools."

—Dr. Maurice J. Elias⁶⁹

⁶⁶ James Weaver and Lynn Tuttle, "Student Well-Being: Social Emotional Learning and Music Education," Music Guidance and Resources (National Federation of State High School Associations, May 10, 2021), <https://www.nfhs.org/articles/student-well-being-social-emotional-learning-sel-and-music-education-return-to-music-resources/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁶⁷ Creating; Performing/Presenting/Producing; Responding, and Connecting

⁶⁸ The SEL competencies span the areas of Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, and Relationship Skills.

⁶⁹ From "Fostering Social-Emotional Learning through Arts Education," a presentation by Robert Morrison at the NJSBA Social and Emotional Learning Conference (New Jersey School Boards Association, Feb. 14, 2020), <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/NJSBA-SELArts-021420-pdf.pdf> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

“Schools have an obligation to prepare students for the tests of life and not just a life of tests, by taking SEL seriously. And that means ensuring systematic opportunities for students to engage in SEL,” wrote Robert Morrison, director of Arts Ed NJ, and Dr. Maurice J. Elias, director of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, in an October 2020 article in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine.

They emphasized how the visual and performing arts can provide such an opportunity.

*...one of the most important avenues for this to take place is in the visual and performing arts. The reason is obvious. It’s hard to imagine students creating, presenting, performing, reviewing, responding to, and communicating about the arts in the absence of empathy, perspective taking, a sophisticated knowledge of emotions, and the emotion regulation, problem solving and relationship skills needed to do the work that artists must do.*⁷⁰ [Emphasis added.]

The initiative, *Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework*, was designed by a team of experts in SEL and Arts Education, with members drawn from SEL4NJ (the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for New Jersey) and Arts Ed NJ (previously the New Jersey Arts Education Partnership).

Over an 18-month period [starting in early 2019], this task force explored all of the intersections between SEL and arts education through the lens of the arts education standards. This approach maintained the focus on the primary goal of teaching the arts while making a clear connection to SEL to inform [instruction]. This allowed the team to illuminate the inherent nature of SEL within arts education and how this can be activated in students intentionally.⁷¹

Compelling rationale for arts education utilizing SEL are:

- Purposeful integration of SEL into arts education will enrich the students’ personal connection to the arts.
- The relationship built between arts teachers and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build school connectedness and foster empathy.
- The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to artistic excellence fosters resiliency both in and out of the arts classroom.
- Artistic creation fosters self-awareness and allows students to develop a greater sense of autonomy and emotional vocabulary.
- The collaborative community developed in the arts classroom welcomes discussions and an awareness of acceptance and embracing diversity.

⁷⁰ [Morrison and Elias](#).

⁷¹ “Arts Education and Social and Emotional Learning Framework: A Synergistic Pairing,” ArtsEdSEL (The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning, Sept. 8, 2020), <https://selarts.org/about/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

- Through the arts students learn the necessity of personal goal-setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop high standards for their artist endeavors and themselves.
- Arts education provides developmental experiences that actively allow students to practice and hone social emotional competencies.⁷²

“By connecting the new arts learning standards to the SEL competencies, along with examples of effective strategies, New Jersey arts educators and administrators will have a road map they may use to aid in the SEL integration process and our students, schools and communities will be the better for it,” explained Morrison and Elias in *School Leader*.⁷³

A State Board of Education directive requires school districts to align their curricula with the revised New Jersey Student Learning Standards, including those for the Visual and Performing Arts. The deadline for implementation was extended to September 2022, due to the public health emergency.⁷⁴

“By encouraging your own district to embrace this approach, our schools and districts will accelerate the incorporation of SEL into the curriculum during the revision process in a way that underscores the inherent nature of SEL within the arts,” Morrison and Elias advised.⁷⁵

The NJSBA Committee encourages school districts to consider the components and principles of the *Arts Education Social Emotional Learning Framework* as they align the curriculum with the revised New Jersey Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts and embed SEL and character development throughout the school program.

⁷² “Social and Emotional Learning and Arts Education,” September Forward (Arts Ed NJ, Aug. 10, 2021), <https://www.artsednj.org/september-forward/> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷³ [Morrison and Elias](#).

⁷⁴ “Resolution to Amend the 2020 New Jersey Learning Standards Curriculum Implementation Schedule,” State of New Jersey (New Jersey State Board of Education, May 5, 2021), <https://nj.gov/education/sboe/meetings/agenda/2021/May/public/5d%20Item%20D%20Resolution%20to%20Amend%20the%20Implementation%20of%20the%20New%20Jersey%20Student%20Learning%20Standards.pdf> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷⁵ [Morrison and Elias](#).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS

RECOMMENDATION

To meet the needs of the students most severely affected by the pandemic, educators should consider effective practices being implemented in New Jersey school districts, as well as guidance from the U.S. Department of Education and the New Jersey Department of Education. Strategies may include accelerated learning, extended learning time and one-to-one tutoring, as well as enrichment in STEAM education and access to Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs and career-technical education pathways.

Conclusions drawn from nationwide data on learning during the pandemic range from overall progress in math and reading for the total student population⁷⁶ to lower achievement for all relative to pre-pandemic years.⁷⁷ Whether the various studies show progress or regression in learning for the total student population, they include a consistent finding:

The pandemic's impact has been far more negative for economically disadvantaged students, students of color, students with disabilities and English language learners than for the student population as a whole.

A June 2021 report by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, focuses on the disparity. "...there are two headlines about COVID-19's impact on America's students: First, the pandemic posed profound challenges for nearly all students and schools in every part of our country; and second, the disparities in students' experiences are stark. Those who went into the pandemic with the fewest opportunities are at risk of leaving with even less."⁷⁸

The USDOE report indicates the following:

- For many elementary and secondary school *students with disabilities*, COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the education and related aids and services needed to support their academic progress and prevent regression. And there are signs that those disruptions may be exacerbating longstanding

⁷⁶ Sarah Schwartz, "‘Learning Loss, in General, Is a Misnomer’: Study Shows Kids Made Progress during Covid-19," Education Week (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., April 23, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/learning-loss-in-general-is-a-misnomer-study-shows-kids-made-progress-during-covid-19/2021/04> (accessed Aug. 19, 2021).

⁷⁷ Lewis.

⁷⁸ "Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students," U.S. Department of Education. Office of Civil Rights (U.S. Department of Education, June 9, 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/20210608-impacts-of-covid19.pdf>, 51 (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

disability-based disparities in academic achievement.

- Even before the pandemic, many *students learning English* struggled to participate on equal terms in the classroom as they confronted the dual challenge of mastering grade-level content while continuing to learn English. For many English learners, the abrupt shift to learning from home amid the challenges of the pandemic has made that struggle even harder.
- COVID-19 appears to have deepened the impact of disparities in access and opportunity facing many *students of color* in public schools, including technological and other barriers that make it harder to stay engaged in virtual classrooms.⁷⁹

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Based on their needs, students with disabilities have specific challenges that require interventions outlined in IEPs (Individualized Education Programs)⁸⁰ and 504 Plans.⁸¹ Delivering these services during school closings and periods of remote instruction have posed challenges to school districts and educators.

“As the Government Accountability Office detailed in fall 2020, the school districts they surveyed reported encountering ‘a variety of logistical and instructional factors [that] made it more difficult to deliver special education services during distance learning,’” the USDOE reports. “And for students whose needs require hands-on, face-to-face interaction—like occupational or physical therapy—COVID-19, in some cases, brought services to a stand-still.”⁸²

Nonetheless, in New Jersey, many school districts overcame obstacles.

In an interview published this summer in NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, Dr. Michael Nicosia, director of special services for the Butler Public Schools,⁸³ described how the district overcame obstacles in the early days of the pandemic when remote provision of services was not permitted and, later, when virtual delivery was allowed.

“With virtual therapy not being an option, and in-person instruction also off the

⁷⁹ “[Education in a Pandemic](#),” iv.

⁸⁰ Required by state and federal law, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the IEP is a “set of prescribed instructional activities and services developed by a child study team together with teaching staff and parents for the identified needs of a learning or physically disabled student.” From “Glossary of Education Terms and Acronyms” in *Fundamentals of School Board Membership*, NJSBA, 98 (members-only).

⁸¹ A 504 plan is a “set of accommodations, or changes in the classroom environment, to help your child follow the regular curriculum. It is less formal and involved than an IEP and does not change the instruction itself.” From “Special Education: A Glossary of Terms and Acronyms,” Exceptional Lives, Sept. 4, 2019. https://www.exceptionallives.org/blog/special-education-a-glossary-of-terms-and-acronyms?gclid=Cj0KCQjwpf2IBhDkARIsAGVo0D1LLHfjEGnZtwgiPrQ2VnTogvkcUcdGNpEOeKrXiGMSY15b6uOrEtg8aAnMgEALw_wcB (accessed Aug. 20, 2021). It is based on Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1972 and implementing regulations.

⁸² “[Education in a Pandemic](#),” 25.

⁸³ At the time of the interview Dr. Nicosia was transitioning to a new role as superintendent of the Bloomingdale Public Schools.

table, our therapists seamlessly pivoted to ‘prevent regression’ mode,” Nicosia explained. “Individualized learning plans were created for each student, therapists held office hours for parents to provide training, and Google Classrooms were developed with a plethora of tasks and activities to target student goals.”

When remote delivery was permitted, staff pivoted “seamlessly,” he said.

“Green screens, which allowed added video effects, and boom cards (interactive lesson plans) were used to deliver therapy,” Nicosia explained. “Our students’ parents, grandparents and siblings, in a sense, became paraprofessionals who assisted with therapy sessions.”⁸⁴

As the 2021-2022 academic year approaches, the USDOE provides the following direction to school districts:

Whether offering instruction online or in person, school districts must continue to provide special education and related services to eligible students with disabilities in accordance with the requirements of Section 504, which may include implementing an appropriately developed IEP. Districts should continue to provide these services in a way that protects the health and safety of students with disabilities and those who provide education, specialized instruction, and related services to these students.

Many disability-related accommodations, modifications, and services may be effectively provided in remote learning. These may include, for example, extensions of time for assignments, videos with accurate captioning or embedded sign language interpreting, accessible reading materials, and many speech or language services through video conferencing.⁸⁵

In New Jersey, recently enacted laws respond to the pandemic’s impact on special education students by extending age-eligibility for services and allowing parents to request grade retention for their child.

- Legislation enacted on June 16, 2021⁸⁶ allows schools to provide one year of additional or compensatory special education and related services to students with disabilities beyond the age of 21 (the current age limit for eligibility) through the 2022-2023 school year.

“The law requires boards of education to offer up to one year of additional or compensatory special education and related services, including transition services, to students with disabilities if a determination is made by the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) team and the student’s

⁸⁴ Alan Guenther, “Finding Solutions in the Fall for Special Education Students,” *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/finding-solutions-in-the-fall-for-special-education-students/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

⁸⁵ “*Education in a Pandemic*,” 52-53.

⁸⁶ “P.L. 2021, C.109 (S3434 2R),” Office of Legislative Services (State of New Jersey, June 16, 2021), https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/PL21/109_.HTM (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

parent that the student requires such additional or compensatory special education and related services,” states an Aug. 4, 2021 NJDOE memo to school district administrators.⁸⁷

Prior to enactment of the legislation, NJSBA successfully sought an amendment providing that the extension of services would be paid for by federal monies, rather than local or state funds.⁸⁸

- Signed into law on June 30, 2021, *P.L. 2021, c. 141* permits parents or guardians to request that their child repeat a grade during the 2021-2022 school year. The new law affects students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. Parents can submit a written request to the principal, asking to have their child held back.

The request must be evaluated by the school counselor, IEP team or child study team, and the student’s teachers, to determine whether holding the child back a year will meet the academic and social-emotional needs of the student.⁸⁹

- In June 2020, Governor Murphy signed legislation,⁹⁰ which established a Bridge Year Pilot Program for students who met graduation requirements in 2021 and 2022. The law, which allows students to defer graduation from high school for one year, also applies to special education students.

Implementation guidance from the New Jersey Department of Education states the following: “Students with disabilities who receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act must be granted the opportunity to participate in a district’s Bridge Year in accordance with federal and state special education requirements. Regarding Bridge Year’s age requirements...the department reminds districts that students with disabilities who have satisfied their state and local graduation requirements but may need an extra year of services, and will not turn 21 years old before June 30, may receive services for another year as determined by the student’s IEP team...”⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kathy Ehling and Kevin Dehmer, “Implementing *P.L. 2021, C. 109*: Providing Additional or Compensatory Special Education and Related Services to Students with Disabilities,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, Aug. 4, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/aug/4/ImplementingPL2021c109-ProvidingAdditionalorCompensatorySpecialEducationandRelatedServicesToStudentswithDisabilities.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁸⁸ “Governor Signs Bill Extending Special Education Benefits for 8,700 Students,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, June 22, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-22-2021-vol-xliv-no-49/governor-signs-bill-extending-special-education-benefits-for-8700-students/> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁸⁹ “Legislative Update: Murphy Signs Bill Permitting Parents to Ask that Their Child Repeat a Grade,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 14, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/july-13-2021-vol-xlv-no-1/legislative-update-murphy-signs-bill-permitting-parents-to-ask-that-their-child-repeat-a-grade-chapter-44-measure-signed-senate-approves-regionalization-bill/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

⁹⁰ “*P.L. 2020, C. 041* (s2383 SCS 1R),” Office of Legislative Services (State of New Jersey, June 26, 2020), https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2020/Bills/PL20/41_.HTM (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

⁹¹ “Bridge Year Pilot Program (*P.L. 2020, C.41*) Implementation Guidance,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, January 2021), https://www.nj.gov/education/covid19/boardops/docs/NJDOE_BridgeYearGuidance.pdf (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

For English learners, virtual instruction can cut off opportunities for academic progress, according to the USDOE Office of Civil Rights.

“In many cases, virtual learning effectively foreclosed opportunities for English learners to engage in English-language conversation with adults and with peers, receive intensive language instruction at frequent intervals, and encounter conversational and formal language in a range of social and academic contexts,” states the USDOE in its June 2021 report.⁹²

“To meet their obligations under Federal law,” the USDOE Office of Civil Rights advises, “the school districts must ensure that English learners have the language services and supports they need to promote their English language development and meaningfully access their content classes that are held remotely. And districts must ensure that parents, guardians, and caregivers have access to any information about district programs, services, or activities in a language they can understand.

“That includes information related to school health and safety measures, information about COVID-19 and actions the schools are taking in response to the pandemic, and information about remote learning and how to contact and communicate with teachers.”⁹³

The New Jersey Department of Education’s “Learning Acceleration Guide” cites innovative programs (“Principles in Action”) implemented by the state’s school districts to address the various challenges inherent in providing education during the pandemic. Examples include programs to engage English learners and their families and culturally responsive practices.⁹⁴

Members of the NJSBA Committee also shared local school district practices. For example, at Cliffside Park High School, where English learners comprise approximately 12% of the student population,⁹⁵ a variety of interventions was adapted to meet the needs of the students during the pandemic. Below is a description of the educational process for English learners, along with modifications adapted during remote instruction.

- To be placed correctly in the school program, incoming English learners are interviewed and tested remotely using WIDA (World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment), which measures English-language development.
- Transcripts from the nation of origin are professionally translated to determine the students’ academic foundation. Students with the greatest needs are placed in “sheltered classes,” which provide push-in support (i.e., support in the general education classroom), preferably with a native-language-speaking teacher, who provides specific modifications for science,

⁹² [Education in a Pandemic](#), 20.

⁹³ [Education in a Pandemic](#), 51.

⁹⁴ [Learning Acceleration Guide](#).

⁹⁵ “Fall Enrollment Reports, 2020-2021,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, October 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/doedata/enr/index.shtml> (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

social studies and mathematics.

- At the beginning and middle of the year, teachers administer online diagnostic tests, which support and measure writing and critical thinking skills.
- Teachers also use a computer program to monitor students' use of online instructional vehicles.
- They use data-driven instruction. Based on data obtained from the assessments, students who are remote receive hard-copy, "leveled" learning materials, such as modified novels, workbooks, journals, and *Scholastic* magazines. (This aspect of the process also addresses the needs of students who have no computer devices at home.)
- Cliffside Park High School provides English learner SAT preparation. The students can use their specific language dictionaries and receive directions in their native language. In addition, the high school also offers a Students Interrupted Formal Education program for those with a measured gap in learning of at least two years below grade level.
- English learners may also participate in the Latino Promise Program at Fairleigh Dickinson University, which offers an Associate's Degree for Spanish-speaking students and provides transition to a four-year degree program.
- English learners interested in trades, such as plumber or electrician, can advance to the Bergen County Adult Vocational Program after graduation.⁹⁶

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR

"Emerging evidence also shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a strikingly negative impact on academic growth for many students of color, widening the pre-existing disparities...More recent evidence shows that the gap continued to widen sharply through winter 2021 for many Black and Latinx students," states the USDOE Office of Civil Rights in its "Education in a Pandemic Report."⁹⁷

The Office attributes the gap to lack of access to technology, internet and full-time in-person instruction, limited mental health services and greater vulnerability to the financial impact of the pandemic.⁹⁸

While showing achievement gains in math and reading for all students during the pandemic, an April 2021 report by Renaissance, a provider of student assessments, also indicates a slower rate of growth for Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, as well as for English learners and students with disabilities.

"When you think about some of those communities, there have been really hard impacts of COVID. Education importantly is one of those..." said Katie McClarty,

⁹⁶ Information was provided by committee member Janes Gaffney. Mr. Gaffney is president of the Bergen County School Boards Association, a member of the Oakland Board of Education, and an administrator at Cliffside Park High School.

⁹⁷ [Education in a Pandemic](#), 15.

⁹⁸ [Education in a Pandemic](#), 11-14.

vice president of research and development for Renaissance, in an article published by *Education Week*.⁹⁹

CLOSING LEARNING GAPS/OVERCOMING BARRIERS

The NJDOE Learning Acceleration Guide places a strong focus on “safeguarding educational equity and access in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis.” It cites several evidence-based practices for “creating access to and opportunity for a well-rounded education.”

- Leverage opportunities for extended learning, including extended day, summer learning programs, and one-on-one tutoring.
- Create summer programs that provide academic support and the ability for students to preview and be exposed to advanced content in upcoming courses.
- Offer enrichment activities that include science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) experiences, career and technical programs, youth development, physical fitness and health education, and arts programs.
- Remove barriers by making programs free, inclusive, and supportive of families by including free transportation and meals.
- Implement policies that support the enrollment, placement, and credit accrual for students who frequently move among schools and LEAs.
- Provide push-in support or co-teaching for students with disabilities and English language learners in general education classrooms.
- Utilize evidence-based and research-based strategies to ensure that grade-level content is accessible for all students.
- Review policies around Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Career and Technical Education pathways, and dual enrollment to remove barriers and establish programs to provide students with meaningful support.¹⁰⁰

A number of New Jersey school districts have implemented strategies based on these concepts. For example, the Learning Acceleration Guide cites efforts by 13 New Jersey school districts to reach economically disadvantaged students, English learners, and students with disabilities, as well as acceleration efforts to address academic and social-emotional learning gaps among all students.

“While COVID-19 may have further limited those opportunities, a number of summer programs have recently been developed by New Jersey LEAs using federal funding to remove barriers to advanced coursework and prepare students for advanced coursework at the secondary level,” states the NJDOE Guide.¹⁰¹

Further examples can be found in an article in the Summer 2021 edition of NJSBA’s *School Leader* magazine, which focused on the efforts of three lower-income New Jersey school districts to address the technology gap, as well as strategies for the

⁹⁹ [Schwartz](#).

¹⁰⁰ [Learning Acceleration Guide](#), 13.

¹⁰¹ [Learning Acceleration Guide](#), 12.

coming school year.¹⁰²

In April, the U.S. Department of Education issued a school reopening guide¹⁰³ that offers a framework for addressing learning gaps resulting from lost instruction time. It includes information on the following steps:

- Accelerating learning through instructional approaches, tutoring and expanded learning time.
- Supporting equitable access and effective use of technology.
- Using data to help target resources and support.
- Addressing resource inequity.

The pandemic's impact on learning can vary widely among school districts, schools and individual students. Therefore, the NJSBA Committee believes that strategies to address learning gaps among vulnerable populations must be determined locally, comply with state and federal requirements and, as appropriate, reflect guidance offered by the state and federal education agencies.

¹⁰² Alan Guenther, "A Quieter Evolution," *School Leader* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 27, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-leader/summer-2021-vol-52-no-1/a-quieter-evolution/> (accessed Aug. 10, 2021).

¹⁰³ "ED COVID-19 Handbook: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs," Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development (U.S. Department of Education, April 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/reopening-2.pdf> (accessed Aug. 20, 2021).

PLANNING, FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTING RECOVERY

RECOMMENDATIONS

- School districts should consider developing multi-year financial plans that extend beyond the expiration of American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding to ensure continuation of effective programs to meet students' post-pandemic learning needs.
- The planning, implementation and evaluation of district plans to address social-emotional and academic learning gaps should be based on proven practices that are inclusive and collaborative, enhance effective organization structures and promote healthy school climate and cultures.
- Schools should use the opportunity presented by the American Rescue Plan/ESSER funding and related planning to ensure a continued focus on equity throughout the educational system.
- To ensure adequate transportation services when students return to school full-time, the federal and state governments should address the shortage of school bus drivers by revising requirements for the commercial drivers' license-acquisition process, removing requirements that are unnecessary for school bus drivers.

On Aug. 12, 2021, the U.S. Department of Education approved New Jersey's application¹⁰⁴ for the \$2.7 billion available to the state's local school districts¹⁰⁵ through the third round of federal coronavirus relief funding—the American Rescue Plan/ Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief Fund. (ARP/ESSER).¹⁰⁶ School districts must submit use-of-funds plans by Nov. 24, 2021.¹⁰⁷

“...the ARP ESSER requires [a school district] to reserve not less than 20 percent of

¹⁰⁴ Angelica Allen-McMillan, Ed.D., “State Plan for the American Plan Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund,” New Jersey Department of Education, July 26, 2021. <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/New-Jersey-ARP-ESSER-State-Plan-Final.pdf> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

¹⁰⁵ “American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Fund: Mandatory Sub-Grant Awards as of May 18, 2021,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 18, 2021), https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/ARP_ESSER%20III%20Fund%20Allocation%20Table.pdf (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹⁰⁶ American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER), New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/arp/index.shtml> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹⁰⁷ Kathy Ehling and Kevin Dehmer, “American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ARP ESSER) Funds Application and Update,” New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 24, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/broadcasts/2021/may/24/ARP-ESSERFundsApplicationandUpdate.pdf> (accessed Aug. 18, 2021).

its total ARP ESSER allocation to address learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, extended day, comprehensive afterschool programs, or extended school year programs, and ensure that such interventions respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student groups," states the New Jersey Department of Education's ARP/ESSR information page.¹⁰⁸

The remaining ARP ESSER funds may be applied toward the same uses as those allowed by the previous federal coronavirus relief packages, ESSER and ESSER II, according to an NJDOE fact sheet comparing the three programs.¹⁰⁹ Permitted uses include hiring new staff and avoiding layoffs, as well as social-emotional learning initiatives.¹¹⁰

When it announced its approval of the New Jersey plan on Aug. 12, the USDOE referenced three areas of focus for state:

- Supporting Students Most Impacted by the Pandemic
- Addressing the Academic Impact of Lost Instructional Time
- Investing in Summer Learning and Expanded Afterschool Programs¹¹¹

ENSURING EQUITY

Much of the research considered by the NJSBA Committee finds that the pandemic has magnified past inequities in the provision of education. Both the USDOE and the New Jersey Department of Education have stressed the use of ARP/ESSER funds to advance equity.

"[NJDOE] will provide guidance and technical assistance on the use of ARP ESSER funds that highlight how allowable activities may be used to advance educational equity," states the federal education department's announcement of the approval of the New Jersey plan. "As part of their ARP ESSER Use of Funds application, [local education agencies] will be required to provide information on their plans to use ARP ESSER funds to implement an equitable and inclusive return to in-person instruction."¹¹²

The American Rescue Plan Act includes "maintenance of equity" provisions:

¹⁰⁸ [American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief](#).

¹⁰⁹ "Comparison of ESSER Fund (CARES Act), ESSER II Fund (CRRSA Act), and ARP ESSER (ARP Act)," New Jersey Department of Education (State of New Jersey, May 24, 2021), <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/docs/ESSERFactSheet.pdf> (accessed Aug. 22, 2021).

¹¹⁰ A list of the 16 "Allowable Uses of Funds" by local school districts is available on the New Jersey Department of Education's ARP ESSER webpage at <https://www.nj.gov/education/esser/arp/index.shtml>. (Scroll down to the "Allowable Uses of Funds for LEA" bar and click on the arrow at right to see the full list.)

¹¹¹ "U.S. Department of Education Approves New Jersey's Plan for Use of American Rescue Plan Funds to Support K-12 Schools and Students, Distributes Remaining \$923 Million To State" (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 12, 2021), <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-approves-new-jerseys-plan-use-american-rescue-plan-funds-support-k-12-schools-and-students-distributes-remaining-923-million-state> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹² [U.S. Department of Education Approves New Jersey's Plan](#), Aug. 12, 2021.

Maintenance of equity provisions will help ensure that schools and [districts] serving large proportions of historically underserved groups of students—including students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness—receive an equitable share of State and local funds as the Nation continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact.¹¹³

In a May 2021 posting, the Education Resource Center stated that, in light of the pandemic, the “depth, breadth, and inequity of student need is greater than ever before” and advised an “equity-centered approach to understanding federal education stimulus dollars.” Its major points include:

- Deeply understand how student need has changed during and as a result of COVID, and use this information to drive ESSER spending decisions.
- Target new ESSER funds to schools and students with the greatest needs.
- Use ESSER funds to disrupt long-standing inequities that existed long before COVID...¹¹⁴

FORMING A LONG TERM PLAN

A June 2021 working paper published by the Brookings Institute characterizes the pandemic’s economic impact as the deepest worldwide global recession since World War II. It cites estimates of slow recovery through 2025, along with employment losses, declines in economic spending and deterioration of local economic conditions in the United States.¹¹⁵

As they plan strategies to address post-pandemic academic and social-emotional learning, including the use of federal ARP/ESSER funds, school districts should be mindful of economic trends and the health emergency’s financial impact on their students and families.

A January 2021 study published by Education Resource Strategies provides an early estimate of the cost of academic recovery. Nationwide, on average, a strategy involving increased learning time and social-emotional supports would cost approximately \$12,000 to \$13,500 per pupil over five years, or an average increase of approximately \$2,500 per pupil per year.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ “FAQ: Maintenance of Equity Requirements,” American Rescue Plan/Elementary and Secondary School Relief Program (U.S. Department of Education, Aug. 6, 2021), https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/08/Maintenance-of-Equity-updated-FAQs_final_08.06.2021.pdf (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁴ “An Equity-Centered Approach to Investing Federal Education Stimulus Dollars,” Education Resource Strategies: Urban School Resource Organization and Transformation (ERS, May 17, 2021), https://www.erstrategies.org/news/blog_equity-centered_approach_stimulus_dollars (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁵ Eduardo Levy Yeyati and Federico Filippini, “Social and Economic Impact of COVID-19” (Brookings Institute, June 9, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Social-and-economic-impact-COVID.pdf> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹¹⁶ Tiffany Zhou, Tomas Molfino, and Jonathan Travers, “The Cost of COVID: Understanding the Full Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Districts and Schools” (Education Resource Strategies, Jan. 13, 2021), <https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/4709-cost-of-covid-updated-2.pdf> (Aug. 23, 2021).

The ERS report also cites “the new triple squeeze” facing school districts:

- New costs for both remote and in-person instruction
- Declining revenue
- Greater student needs.

For many New Jersey school districts, the 2021-2022 state budget, signed June 29, offers some respite from revenue concerns by providing a \$578 million increase in formula aid. The state funding increase is largely due to the infusion of federal aid through the American Rescue Plan and the previous sale of bonds.¹¹⁷ Additionally, school districts statewide are eligible for the \$2.7 billion in federal APR/ESSER subgrants, which can be released through September 2024.

Nonetheless, the need for programs and services to address the impact of the pandemic on all students—and to resolve past inequities exacerbated by the health emergency—may extend well into the future. Therefore, the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning believes that school district fiscal plans must provide for continuation of effective programs after the federal emergency funding expires.

AFTER ARP FUNDS EXPIRE: HAVE A PLAN

During discussions at planning meetings on local district use of the ARP funds, hosted by the New Jersey Department of Education this summer, stakeholders addressed key strategies:

- Developing five-year financial plans that, at a minimum, encompass the year following the closing of the ARP/ESSER funding window.
- Throughout each year, creating priority lists of items for consideration that clearly identify “needs/musts” rather than “wants/additional programs.”

Questions to Guide Local School District Development of Plans

Based on discussions at NJDOE strategy meetings

- | | |
|---|--|
| • What is the current financial state of the school district? <ul style="list-style-type: none">– What are short-term versus long-term needs?– What is the status of the district strategic action plan? | – Are programs being planned to specifically address COVID-related impacts? <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Will these programs also have sunset provisions? |
| • Where does the school district invest its funds? | • What supports for students, teachers, and families were in place prior to the pandemic? What new supports are being considered for these sub-groups? |
| • How can the district maximize the impact of the federal ESSER funds? | • How is the district re-thinking the delivery of education based on lessons learned during the pandemic and the needs of 21st Century learners? |
| • What is the balance of investing in normal, regularly recurring operations <i>versus</i> the funding of new programs? <ul style="list-style-type: none">– How/will these new programs be funded when federal funds cease? | |

¹¹⁷ “New State Budget Contains \$125 Million More to Meet Extraordinary Special Education Costs,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, July 13, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/june-29-2021-vol-xliv-no-50/new-state-budget-contains-125-million-more-to-meet-extraordinary-special-education-costs/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

In addition to guidance offered by the state and federal education departments, the experience of the district's student population should factor into local plans to address post-pandemic learning needs, including the use of the federal ESSER funds, the NJSBA Committee believes. It suggests a process to identify student needs, effective strategies, opportunities for additional instructional time, and costs.

FOUR STEPS TO PLANNING*

- Identify individual and group learning gaps through analysis of formative assessments. This information will enable educators to assess student progress toward meeting standards and determine where they would have been without disruptions caused by the pandemic.
- Determine the most effective instructional strategies to address gaps by recognizing the learning styles of individual students.
- Identify the learning opportunities, practices and programs that can provide additional instructional time during and beyond the school day, including weekends and summer vacations.
- Determine the costs based on programming needs.

* *Based on Discussion of the NJSBA Committee on Post-Pandemic Gaps in Academic and Social-Emotional Learning*

A STUDIED AND COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

In developing plans to address learning gaps, school districts should consider taking a studied approach to decision-making, while considering the concerns and viewpoints of employees and management, the NJSBA Committee believes.

One strategy involves the use of the four frames of organizational leadership, introduced in 1991 by Lee Bolman, an author and educator, and Terrence Deal, an expert on leadership. The four frames can serve as guideposts in identifying efforts to address learning gaps.

Each of the frames addressed by Bolman and Deal—*human resources*, *politics*, *symbolism and structure*¹¹⁸—provides an opportunity to examine the challenges of post-pandemic learning gaps and social-emotional learning. The process can give school district leaders the opportunity to develop values, programs and analyses of outcomes that advance academic achievement and social-emotional learning.

- The *structural frame* speaks to control that is either too loose or too tight and how structural change is episodic.
- The *human resource frame* allows the end-user to examine how *people* impact the success of the organization.
- Examining *symbolism*, when considering the importance of perception, offers leaders the ability to comprehensively approach an issue.

¹¹⁸ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 4th edition. (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2008).

- The *political frame* provides an example of what takes place when factions of stakeholders coordinate on an issue.

Viewing challenges through the four frames can promote a deeper understanding of organizational behavior and guide a school district through complex issues.

COLLABORATION IS KEY

Referencing the work of the New Jersey Labor-Management Collaborative,¹¹⁹ the NJSBA Committee also agrees that the more inclusive and collaborative the processes used to develop plans to close learning gaps, the greater they will be embraced and implemented with fidelity. Therefore, school boards, educators, central office administrators and building administrators must all be included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of efforts to address academic and SEL learning gaps.

Positive outcomes from labor-management collaboration include improving student achievement, boosting school safety, and reducing staff turnover. Although the pandemic has put a strain on schools, districts participating in the New Jersey Labor-Management Collaborative have been able to respond more favorably to the challenges because they had collaborative structures in place.¹²⁰

Based on its review and discussions, the NJSBA Committee believes districts with current multi-year strategic plans—especially those that have reviewed and revised those plans based on post-pandemic needs—are better positioned to maximize the use of ESSER funds.

TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES 2021-2022

With all students expected to attend school full-time and in-person this fall, the NJSBA Committee also considered the transportation challenges facing school districts.

Prior to the pandemic, a number of school districts and bus contractors across New Jersey indicated that they were experiencing difficulties securing an adequate number of bus drivers to meet their transportation needs.

¹¹⁹ “Program on Collaborative School Reform,” Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations (Rutgers University), <https://smlr.rutgers.edu/faculty-research/center-study-collaboration-work-and-society/program-collaborative-school-reform> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

Founded in 2014, the initiative facilitates collaboration among unions and management at the state and district levels to strengthen and improve teaching and learning. The collaborative includes the NJSBA, the NJEA, AFTNJ, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association and Rutgers University. Dr. Saul Rubinstein, director of the Center for the Study of Collaboration in Work and Society at the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations, spearheaded the project.

¹²⁰ “U.S. Education Secretary to Attend N.J. Public Schools Labor-Management Collaborative Conference,” *School Board Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, March 16, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/march-16-2021-vol-xliv-no-35/u-s-education-secretary-to-attend-n-j-public-schools-labor-management-collaborative-conference/> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

“In February [2020], *School Transportation News* reported that 80% of school bus companies and school districts surveyed were having trouble finding enough drivers,” states NJSBA’s first report on education during the pandemic, “Searching for a ‘New Normal’ in New Jersey’s Public Schools.”¹²¹

Concern continued during the pandemic. According to NJSBA’s second report on education during the pandemic, “Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children,” over one-quarter of superintendents and school business administrators responding to a survey anticipated a shortage of school bus drivers.¹²²

Most recently, NJSBA’s *School Board Notes*¹²³ and the *NJ.com* news website¹²⁴ featured articles focusing on the bus driver shortage facing many of the state’s school districts as they reopen for the 2021-2022 school year.

To drive a school bus, an individual needs a commercial drivers’ license with school bus endorsement. One reason for the shortage is a lack of available individuals with commercial drivers’ licenses, according to the *NJ.com* article. Growing demand among online retailers for delivery persons with CDLs has contributed to the shortage for schools.

Previous NJSBA reports indicate that the shortage could be eased with changes in the lengthy process for securing a CDL to drive a school bus.

“A number of school officials cited the need to change regulations pertaining to school bus driver certification,” states NJSBA’s August 2020 report.¹²⁵ “However, changing regulation does not mean eliminating necessary security and safety procedures, but rather eliminating unnecessary requirements... A concern has been expressed that some CDL requirements—for example, training in the repair of buses and ability to make such repairs—are not applicable to driving a school bus and slow down the licensing process.”

The National School Transportation Association, which represents school bus contractors, has been “lobbying the federal government to allow a license just for school bus drivers that would remove a repair-oriented, under-the-hood vehicle inspection requirement under the CDL test that is only relevant to long-haul truckers,” according to an Aug. 12, 2021 ABC News report.¹²⁶

¹²¹ “Searching for a ‘New Normal’ in New Jersey’s Public Schools,” New Jersey School Boards Association, May 20, 2020, <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SearchingForNewNormal.pdf>, 20 (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²² “Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children,” New Jersey School Boards Association, Aug. 31, 2020, <https://www.njsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/August-31-FINAL.pdf>, 6 (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²³ “National School Bus Driver Shortage Affecting New Jersey Schools,” *School Boards Notes* (New Jersey School Boards Association, Aug. 24, 2021), <https://www.njsba.org/news-publications/school-board-notes/august-24-2021-vol-xlv-no-4/national-school-bus-driver-shortage-affecting-new-jersey-schools/> (accessed Aug. 26, 2021).

¹²⁴ Larry Higgs, “Bus Driver Shortage Has Schools Changing Schedules, Putting Teachers behind the Wheel,” *nj.com* (New Jersey Advance Media, Aug. 20, 2021), <https://www.nj.com/news/2021/08/bus-driver-shortage-has-schools-changing-schedules-putting-teachers-behind-the-wheel.html> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²⁵ [Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children.](#)

¹²⁶ Meredith Deliso, “Why School Districts Nationwide Are Facing Bus Driver Shortages,” ABC News, Aug. 12, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/school-districts-nationwide-facing-bus-driver-shortages/story?id=79124876> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

Other reasons for the driver shortage include layoffs and furloughs during periods of school closings, which resulted in a number of employees not returning, and concern among older drivers about exposure to COVID-19.¹²⁷ In addition to changing the CDL requirements for school bus drivers, possible strategies to address the problem may include changing school starting and ending times to increase the number of routes covered by a single driver and vehicle, increasing shared services with neighboring districts and/or through educational services commissions,¹²⁸ and restructuring jobs into full-time positions.¹²⁹

The NJSBA Committee agrees with findings of the Association's previous reports, which support changes to streamline the CDL-acquisition process for school bus drivers that would not impair student safety.

¹²⁷ Dalia Faheid, "Bus Driver Shortages Worsening for Many Districts as Schools Reopen," *Education Week* (Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., May 21, 2021), <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/bus-driver-shortages-worsening-for-many-districts-as-schools-reopen/2021/05> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

¹²⁸ [Higgs](#).

¹²⁹ [Faheid](#).

CLOSING THOUGHTS

RECOMMENDATION

In developing programs to address post-pandemic education, local boards of education should review recommendations and suggestions contained in the New Jersey School Boards Association's research reports on school safety, special education, student achievement, mental health and the career-focused learner, as well as the five reports on education during the pandemic that have been issued since May 2020.

Today, New Jersey's local school districts have a unique opportunity: Taking the lessons learned from the pandemic—that is, the experiences of school leaders, educators, students and their families—and transforming them into strategies to ensure that we continue to provide for the growth, learning and well-being of all of our students.

The New Jersey School Boards Association produced this report with two goals in mind: to provide guidance to those districts that are in the process of developing plans to address gaps in learning and the use of federal emergency funds, and to support districts that have adopted strategies to enhance social-emotional learning and character development, learning acceleration, and related practices.

District planning should encompass many components, including:

- Communication that is transparent and honest and considers the numerous challenges that students, their families and educators must confront.
- A culture of caring that emphasizes empathy.
- Information for parents about programs, practices, and progress.
- Professional learning opportunities in social-emotional learning and academic practices.
- Consideration of the growing body of research on the positive impact of formal collaboration on learning, school culture, teacher retention, and climate.

These principles are not new. They are reflected in the findings and recommendations of NJSBA's body of research, starting with the 2013 report "Special Education: A Service, Not a Place" and continuing with projects on school safety, student achievement, the career-focused learner, and mental health services in our schools, right up to our current series on education during the pandemic.

In addition to reviewing the resources listed throughout this document, school leaders should review the suggestions and recommendations contained in the

NJSBA's reports as they assess their districts' programs during this unique period of opportunity. (All of the NJSBA research projects can be accessed at www.njsba.org/research-projects.)

Effective planning requires us to take an unvarnished look at the impact of the pandemic on our students' academic progress and social emotional health. However, we should also recognize—and celebrate—the accomplishments of the past 18 months and the work of our students, teachers, school administrators, and board of education members. The work of rebuilding opportunities for students has begun.

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- Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide (Oct. 23, 2020)
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