

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Advancing the achievement of *all* students is at the core of the New Jersey School Boards Association's mission. Toward that goal, then-NJSBA President John Bulina appointed the Task Force on Student Achievement, comprised of local school board members, school district administrators, educators, health care experts and representatives of the faith-based community, to explore the challenges school districts face in attaining this goal.

More than two years of study and healthy discussion, followed by many months of extensive research, culminated in this final report, which includes 83 recommendations, as well as examples of interventions that contribute positively to student achievement. The Task Force offers these strategies for the consideration of New Jersey's local boards of education, the state Department of Education and the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Within the Task Force's purview were the academic achievement gap, students' access to technology, and the impact of high rates of incarceration. The Task Force also studied the impact of state and local education policy on the advancement of student achievement, as well as best practices to advance the performance of economically disadvantaged students.

The Task Force approached its charge from a variety of perspectives: the physical and emotional health of students; the involvement of parents and communities; the impact of poverty; the benefits of early childhood education, and the role of local boards of education and their individual members. The group identified examples of interventions that all school districts should consider and which they should implement if applicable to their communities' students and educational programs. In all, the task force heard from more than a dozen experts in the areas of education, student health and school climate, as well as from members of local school boards that had experience with one or more of the identified interventions.

### *Through the Lens of Student Achievement*

A genuinely thorough and efficient education is the only means for New Jersey's youth to be optimistic about their future and to make healthy decisions. The challenges involved in achieving equity and excellence for all children in our state, regardless of ZIP Code of residence, requires the attention of all New Jerseyans, whether they live or work in urban, rural or suburban communities.

- *As the result of its research and deliberations, the Task Force believes that all school districts should review their adopted policies through the lens of student achievement to ensure that they support, and do not discourage, achievement for all.*

- *Due to the significance of the achievement gap and the evolving nature of school reform, including legislation at the state and national levels, the Task Force believes that NJSBA should continue its focus on student achievement for all regardless of community of residence, economic status, race, gender, or disability.*

### ***Social Conditions that Deter Success***

The Task Force finds that the causes of student *underachievement* often emanate far from the schoolhouse door. Major social issues are at the heart of many of the struggles facing our children, and they require complex intervention by a variety of institutions. As this report attests, there are numerous ways to address the social conditions that deter student success and to increase the responsibility of the public school community in this effort.

- *Individuals and organizations within the education sector should support the work of those outside the education community in helping children overcome these social challenges.*

### ***The Benefits of Pre-Kindergarten***

A disparity of experiences among children begins at birth. The Task Force cites research, which finds that many children of poverty hear 30 million fewer words than do their peers by the age of 3. This deficit has a negative impact on language development including reading. Therefore, further work is required to comprehensively address preparation for kindergarten, which is most lacking in our rural and urban areas.

The Task Force believes these disadvantages can be overcome by effective early childhood education. The benefits of universal pre-kindergarten include increased academic attainment, less likelihood of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system, healthier adult lives, and higher wages.

- *The advantages of pre-kindergarten should be included in NJSBA professional development programs where appropriate.*

### ***The Achievement Gap and the Employment Gap***

Across the nation, the academic achievement gap is closely related to the “employment gap.” Prior generations had greater opportunities to secure manufacturing jobs. Those whose formal education ended with a high school diploma, and even those without a diploma, could secure “blue collar” jobs that came with middle-income wages. Substantially fewer such jobs exist today.

Clearly, the era of high-paying manufacturing/industrial jobs that enabled those with a high school diploma, or less, to earn wages well above the minimum and to support a family in a “middle class” lifestyle is over. At first, many of these positions were relocated from the “rust belt” — states in the Northeast, the mid-Atlantic region and the Midwest — to the southern states and “sunbelt.” In recent years, many of these jobs have been moved to other countries, ranging from Mexico to China. Others have been the victims of technology.

Advancing the academic achievement of all students is critical to addressing this issue, which not only affects the well-being of individuals and families, but also impacts the engine that drives our economy. The ultimate goal of the education system is to provide all children, without exception, a path to healthy, happy, safe and secure lives. This includes the ability to financially support oneself. Children who do not benefit from an education that enables them to be independent become part of the great employment gap that has been growing for decades.

We are in the midst of a technological revolution that creates an exponentially increasing amount of information. Today's employment landscape requires a skill set far different than what was necessary for prior generations.

- *A, if not **the**, primary responsibility of boards of education is to ensure that their educational programs are preparing all students for post-secondary 21<sup>st</sup> Century educational opportunities and/or careers. If not, the economic stability of our nation is in jeopardy.*

### **Overcoming Challenges Requires Collaboration**

The Task Force identifies numerous factors, or "impacts," all of which affect student achievement, but to varying degrees based upon the individual community's profile. The Task Force believes that this list of "impacts" will continue to grow and evolve.

The list encompasses factors within and outside of schools: community, home and family life; family income level; personal/emotional support and self-image; faith; teachers; facilities; curriculum; school climate; planning for the future; communications, and technology.

- *The wide variation of factors affecting student achievement underscores the critical need for collaboration in any and all improvement efforts.*
- *Collaboration among school districts and academia can contribute to enhancing learning for all students. Membership in the Rutgers Institute for Improving Student Achievement (RIISA), part of the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, and the Rutgers New Jersey School Development Council can provide exemplary instructional strategy and leadership professional development.*
- *Participation in the National Network of Partnership Schools can also prove highly worthwhile. The professional development provided by networking with other schools and education personnel and the related guides and parental involvement materials can contribute to successfully addressing the achievement gap and school climate challenges.*
- *Collaboration with the local governing body, faith-based groups, industry and business, service and community groups and, especially, families is critical to the success of our children.*

NJSBA is spearheading the New Jersey Public Schools Labor-Management Collaborative, a partnership with the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations. The multi-district pilot also involves the NJEA, AFT-NJ, the New Jersey Association of School Administrators and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. Its goal is to validate the impact of positive management-labor relations on teaching and learning in New Jersey's public schools.

- *Boards of education and education leaders should be aware of the benefits and positive impact on student learning and organizational climate provided by formal collaboration between labor and management.*
- *Local school boards, administrators and teachers' representatives should follow the progress of the New Jersey Public Schools Labor-Management Collaborative and discuss with one another its impact on student achievement.*

### *The School Board's Role in Advancing Student Achievement*

Research conducted by the National School Boards Association's Center for Public Education and the Iowa Association of School Boards illustrates how boards of education that embrace professional development, collectively and for their individual members, enhance student achievement.

The study, the "Iowa Lighthouse Inquiry," categorizes boards of education as either "stuck" or "moving." The Task Force submits that boards described as "stuck" are actually conducting business as per the expectations of a generation ago. Just as 21<sup>st</sup> Century expectations are rapidly changing for teachers, administrators, and especially students, the role of the Board of Education has also evolved.

An essential responsibility of today's board of education is to ensure that the schools serve as learning centers for all students, including those with the greatest needs.

- *Working through their administrators, school boards should make certain that classrooms are engaging places for young people to spend their days and that high expectations characterize all staff interaction with the students.*
- *The Task Force encourages local school boards, in carrying out their responsibilities, to focus on teaching and learning and the achievement of all students.*
- *For a school board, being data savvy and participating in meaningful professional development are as important as ensuring that the district is financially responsible; this attribute contributes to the success of all students.*

If we expect every child to succeed, then the schools will be filled with men and women pouring over information about their students so they can build alternative, often innovative, experiences to bring each child to learning. Administrators will carefully examine children in their classrooms and observe the work of the students carefully to

ensure that each one is being challenged. Teachers will know their children, their subject matter and how to teach that subject matter so that the children learn it. And finally, our schools will be welcoming, spirited and joyful.

This is what school boards are all about. This is what we are accountable for

We might not be able to stop poverty. We are still faced with racism. Every day, we face major budget issues. Sometimes, we must turn our attention to dissatisfied community members. Too often, engaging parents, who are so overworked they have difficulty attending back-to-school night and other functions, becomes a serious challenge.

The Task Force on Student Achievement recognizes the reality of these and other factors, but firmly believes that we can build schools where our children are successful and as prepared as possible for the future. As members of New Jersey's boards of education, we accept this responsibility.

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### *How to Read this Report*

The Final Report of the Task Force on Student Achievement recommends actions by local school boards and other members of the education community as they work toward the goal of advancing the achievement of every student.

The report is divided into 12 chapters, each exploring a factor that influences teaching and learning. Chapter 1, "The Challenge Ahead" and Chapter 2, "Closing the Achievement Gap: Obstacles And Strategies," provide an overview of the issues facing local boards of education, school district staff, parents, students and the community at-large in closing achievement gaps.

Local school board members will be especially interested in Chapter 3, "The Local School Board: A Positive Influence on Student Achievement." This section addresses the practices of school boards in high-achieving districts, regardless socio-economic status, and provides guidance on effective governance and policy-setting.

This report is also designed to serve as a resource for school leaders on research related to student achievement and the information, programs and services available to school districts. Throughout the narrative are references, most including web links which can be accessed live when viewing the report online. Rather than using a traditional footnote structure, with citations on the bottom of the page, this report places the references within the body text for readers' ease of access.