

New Jersey Leadership for Educational Excellence



June 17, 2020

Dear Colleague,

As the education community awaits Governor Murphy's announcement on plans for the reopening of school in 2020-2021 and long-awaited guidance from the New Jersey Department of Education, New Jersey Leadership for Educational Excellence (NJ LEE) wishes to share our priorities and advocacy efforts.

NJ LEE is comprised of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, New Jersey School Boards Association, New Jersey Education Association, New Jersey Association of School Business Officials, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, and New Jersey PTA.

Our organizations have been meeting on a weekly basis with the NJDOE to address the broad range of issues that have been impacting students, educators and school districts since the statewide closure began in March. We have been conveying to state leaders the growing frustrations of our memberships with the uncertainties, lack of consistent guidance, and lack of needed resources to meet students' educational and wellness needs. Our members have also served on NJDOE Work Groups addressing the numerous issues related to a safe school reopening, and we have recently met with a representative of the Governor's office to share our top priorities on this matter.

As the current school year comes to an end and districts prepare for the next, NJ LEE has identified the following priorities:

1. Public health is the critical bridge to school reopening.

Clear, universal requirements on health and safety practices must be at the foundation of school reopening. Simply directing schools to follow generic CDC guidelines, without customizing requirements for the realities of the school setting in New Jersey, is insufficient for a safe school reopening statewide. *We need clear health and safety requirements from the New Jersey Department of Health specifically for schools. For planning and training purposes, we need this information now.*

2. State-level decision-making on school reopening must be consistent, give reasonable notice of any changes, provide regulatory flexibility and include appropriate planning time so that schools can be prepared to meet student needs.

Schools are unique and complex environments with many variations statewide. Master schedules, course offerings, and hundreds of staffing and operational decisions must be made at the local level, whether schools operate virtually, in-person or on a hybrid basis.

We recommend that districts be given a 60-day advance planning window, following the state's announcement of a date on which schools will reopen. The same 60-day window would apply following any further change in the status of school operations. During the planning period, state-level directives would not change except for emergent developments involving the health and safety of students and staff.

In addition to the 60-day advance planning window, schools will need statutory and regulatory relief to enable them to secure necessary services and fulfill business operations.

3. To maintain our strong public education system during this difficult economic time, New Jersey schools need additional funding and resources to meet health and safety needs.

Schools serve as a community hub. They provide for instruction, student safety, food distribution, community connection, technology access, and the social-emotional health of students and families. New Jersey schools will face an estimated \$490 per pupil expenditure for PPE, in addition to cost increases for transportation, facilities, sanitization, staffing (particularly nurses), and technology. Even with the availability of federal CARES Act monies, the reality is that our schools need additional funding to reopen safely.

4. To safeguard the health and well-being of students and staff, we seek state-level assistance in securing PPE.

Masks and other personal protection equipment are a prerequisite for a safe reopening, yet district leaders are facing limited supplies and back-order status. It is counterproductive and inefficient to have 580 school districts individually ordering this equipment. Instead, state-level procurement would be cost-effective.

The decision to move New Jersey schools to remote instruction because of the impact of COVID-19 was based on science and facts. For the safety of our students, our staff and our communities, all decisions related to school re-openings must be made using the same criteria.

NJ Leadership for Educational Excellence is committed to working in the best interests of our students and the entire school community. We will continue working with the New Jersey Department of Education, the New Jersey Department of Health and the Office of the Governor in order to make the best decisions for New Jersey students and schools.

Sincerely,

Lawrence S. Feinsod, Ed.D.
Executive Director
New Jersey School Boards Association

Richard Bozza, Ed.D.
Executive Director
NJ Association of School Administrators

Patricia Wright
Executive Director
NJ Principals and Supervisors Association

Cathy Lindenbaum
President
NJ Parent Teacher Association

Steve Swetsky
Executive Director
New Jersey Education Association

Susan Young
Executive Director
NJ Association of School Business Officials