



## NJSBA TESTIMONY FY2021 PROPOSED BUDGET

The New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA) represents all of the state's local boards of education in their pursuit of quality education for all students. We welcome the opportunity to comment on education funding under Governor Murphy's proposed state budget for fiscal year 2021.

NJSBA recognizes the unique confluence of public health and economic forces that our state leaders are facing in crafting this budget. We agree with the Governor on the need for federal funding to help state and local governments in this time of crisis. A July survey of superintendents and school district business administrators conducted by NJSBA echoes this sentiment. In this survey, 62% of respondents found federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding insufficient to cover costs associated with COVID-19.

The absence of federal support exacerbates the challenges facing local school districts. Anticipated costs have increased for FY2021, yet this proposed budget essentially flat funds aggregate school district state aid. Moreover, approximately one-third of school districts are scheduled to receive less state aid than they did last year.

NJSBA appreciates the \$100 million from the Coronavirus Relief Fund announced by the Governor to assist in meeting health standards and other expenditures involved in the reopening of schools. The association also supports the dedication of \$60 million to address the digital divide and \$20 million to address social-emotional learning and learning loss. However, when viewed in the context of 1.4 million K-12 public school students in New Jersey, approximately \$129 per student is simply not enough. NJSBA urges the state to provide more funds to school districts as we address this once-in-a-century crisis.

A survey conducted by national organizations representing school superintendents and business officials released earlier this year estimated an additional cost of \$490 per student for COVID-related expenses. Costs needed to accommodate social distancing and other health protocols include sanitation and monitoring equipment, personal protective equipment (PPEs), additional nursing and maintenance staff, and additional busing. It should also be noted that the \$490 per pupil amount is a nationwide average and does not factor in New Jersey's higher-than-average cost-of-living.

In addition to COVID-related expenditures, local school boards are faced with other significant financial challenges.

- 375 school districts will remain underfunded per SFRA guidelines under the current budget proposal.
- Extraordinary special education, which the legislature had made great strides toward fully funding in recent years, remains underfunded by at least \$75 million.

Beyond the issues of direct aid to school districts, many NJSBA members have expressed concern over the proposed reduction of the Office of School Linked Services within the Department of Children and Families (DCF). This program, previously funded at \$15.3 million annually and initially scheduled for an increase to \$16.9 million back in February, provides approximately 90 districts with school-based youth services such as mental health counseling, employment counseling, substance abuse prevention, suicide prevention, pregnancy prevention and sexual assault prevention.

The once-in-a-century health crisis has resulted in greater isolation among students, magnifying the need for these services. This is the type of program we should be augmenting, not eliminating. The DCF has indicated that this is merely a restructuring of the state's Children's System of Care. NJSBA hopes these valuable services are only enhanced by this restructuring and urges the legislature, through the budget process, to ensure such enhancement occurs.

On July 16, the Governor signed the "New Jersey COVID-19 Emergency Bond Act" authorizing the state to assume up to \$9.9 Billion in debt, including \$7.2 billion for FY2021. This was subsequently found constitutional by a unanimous decision of the New Jersey Supreme Court. The current proposed budget would use \$4 billion of that authorization.

NJSBA urges the legislature to carefully and prudently exercise this authority to more robustly help school districts deliver educational programming during the pandemic, continue the path towards full SFRA funding, and fulfill the state's commitment to full funding for extraordinary special education.