



New Jersey School Boards Association

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**NEW JERSEY SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION
Testimony to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools
Submitted by Jonathan Pushman, Director of Governmental Relations**

Thank you Co-Chairs Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey and fellow members of the joint committee for inviting the New Jersey School Boards Association, a federation of all the state's boards of education, to testify at today's hearing.

The subject of today's hearing – school reopenings – is one that we could probably spend several days, if not weeks, discussing. Reopening our school buildings – and keeping their doors open – is something districts across the state have been diligently working towards since the public health emergency began in March 2020. Unless you have been living on another planet for the last 18-plus months, you are already acutely aware of the struggles school districts have encountered as they pivoted to fully remote instruction to hybrid settings and now back to full-time in-person instruction. The myriad challenges they have encountered, many of which will likely persist for years to come even as the pandemic subsides, have not made the process an easy one to navigate. With that in mind, I thought it would be best to use my allotted time to share with the committee how our Association has tried to help our members move forward and restore some sense of normalcy to our students' educational experience at a time when life has been anything but normal.

When I last appeared before this body this past February, the NJSBA had just issued the fourth in series of reports the Association has published since the COVID-19 pandemic began:

1. [Searching for a 'New Normal' in New Jersey's Public Schools: How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State](#) (*May 2020*) addresses the safe reopening of schools, students' mental health, academic and extracurricular programs, budgetary issues, and preparations for the future.
2. [Choosing the Best 'Road Back' for Our Children](#) (*August 2020*) provides an advocacy agenda for public education during the pandemic, including state and federal funding, assistance in securing personal protective equipment and technology, financial flexibility, and critical changes in law and regulation.
3. [Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide](#) (*October 2020*) looks at the challenges facing school districts in delivering instruction remotely to all students during the pandemic and beyond.
4. [Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health](#) (*January 2021*) shows how mental health programs are helping students withstand the pandemic.

Today's hearing is once again timely, as just last month, the Association issued its fifth report on education during the pandemic:

5. [Rebuilding Opportunities for Students](#) (*September 2021*) looks at challenges facing school districts and students in dealing with pandemic-related gaps in academic and social-emotional learning.

For the purposes of today's hearing, I would like to spend my time highlighting some of the key findings and recommendations included in this report. For your convenience, each of you has been provided an electronic copy of the report.

Earlier this year, the NJSBA established a Committee on Post-Pandemic Learning Gaps in Academic and Social Emotional Learning, which consisted of Association staff, local board of education members, and school administrators from across the state. Representatives from various education organizations, such as the NJPTA and NJEA, as well as the Department of Education served as resources to the group. 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 our schools returned to exclusively full-day, in-person instruction last month, the challenge that lay before the educational community was as follows: **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 objective, the committee provided information on effective practices and programs, guidance and support. The committee's final report provides insights, findings and recommendations on the following topics:

- Identifying gaps in academic learning and addressing academic learning gaps caused by the pandemic.
- 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 Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund, so that it has the optimal impact on growth and learning for all students.
- Ensuring adequate transportation for students to maintain full-time in-person instruction.

Key findings of the committee included:

- 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 assessment 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 summative 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.

In the end, the committee offered 15 different recommendations for the educational community to consider in confronting the challenges that lay before them:

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 acceleration and just-in-time teaching while also considering implementing a “spiral curriculum,” in which key concepts are presented repeatedly throughout the curriculum, but with deepening layers of complexity.
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.

- 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 (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Math) 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 NJSBA'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.

Thank you for your consideration of the NJSBA's perspective on these important issues. I encourage you to read the full report I have summarized, and please let us know if we can offer any additional information. The NJSBA stands ready to work with this committee and the entire Legislature to develop effective policies and strategies to advance the achievement of all students. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like to further discuss these matters, please do not hesitate to contact me at jpushman@njsba.org or (609) 278-5248.