



**NJSBA Comments to the NJ Department of Children and Families
on the
New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) Proposal
October 14, 2022**

The New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA), a federation of all of the state’s local boards of education, appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) proposal to establish the NJ Statewide Student Support Service (NJ4S) Network. According to an Executive Summary of the proposal, the NJ4S is a student mental health initiative that “will modernize and expand New Jersey’s School Linked Services to increase its reach beyond the 2% of New Jersey students that are currently engaged, while ensuring continuity of support.”

The goal of the NJ4S is certainly a laudable one. To be clear, the NJSBA strongly supports efforts to enhance and expand mental health services for students, particularly as they recover from the trauma they have experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Association has long advocated for increased state and federal support for mental health initiatives. We greatly appreciate that the Murphy Administration is heeding that call through the NJ4S proposal by pledging an additional \$8.5 million in federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) dollars to support the startup of the program, on top of the \$6.5 million in ARP funds already allocated through the FY2023 state budget. The NJSBA applauds the intent of NJ4S and is hopeful that it will enable more of the state’s 1.4 million students to receive critically important supports.

Unfortunately, the NJ4S proposal also calls for the transition away from the School Linked Services portfolio including the School Based Youth Services Program (SBYSP), in its current form, and replacing it with the NJ4S at the end of the current school year. While we appreciate the ambitious timeframe, and recognize its necessity to implement a full transition from the SLS model to the NJ4S model, it has raised concerns regarding the difficulty of ensuring continuity of services at their current scope. The SBYSP provides students – in a school setting – with critically important supports, such as mental health counseling, employment counseling, substance abuse education and prevention, preventive health awareness, primary medical linkages, and learning support. Dozens of our member districts participate in the program and find it to be an incredibly valuable resource that has achieved positive results for thousands of students and parents across New Jersey. When the program was threatened with elimination two years ago, the NJSBA argued, along with many other education groups, advocates, and state lawmakers, that the SBYSP should not only be maintained, but also strengthened and expanded. Thankfully, the SBYSP was preserved and continues providing students with the supports they need to this very day.

NJSBA shares the concerns of many of our member districts throughout the state over how NJ4S will affect the delivery of mental health supports and other services to students currently receiving services under the existing SBYSP, particularly as we already face a serious shortage of mental health professionals. Should the state proceed with the implementation of NJ4S, continuity of and access to the services many students have come to rely on must remain a priority. While we are encouraged by the Governor's commitment to student mental health – and the DCF's commitment that “students currently receiving services will continue to be supported” – it is imperative that the transition to NJ4S include additional steps to ensure that students and schools experience minimal disruption.

The anxiety that schools currently participating in the SBYSP have been feeling since the NJ4S initiative was announced is significant. To alleviate their concerns and ensure that students and parents continue to receive the level of services they have come to rely on through the SBYSP, the NJSBA believes that the program must remain in place in its current form for the foreseeable future. Until we can guarantee that students will receive the same level of support through the NJ4S that they receive under the SBYSP, we are concerned that phasing out programs in their current form without having the evidence and experience to demonstrate that the NJ4S model is working as intended could adversely affect student mental health supports and other important services. Furthermore, we believe that a longer implementation timeframe, preservation of the SBYSP, and more robust collaboration with all stakeholders will provide this proposal the time and support it needs to have the greatest chance of success.

For the reasons set forth herein, we respectfully, but strongly, encourage the state to maintain the existing School Based Youth Services Program while moving forward with implementation of the new NJ4S initiative. Even if, given the realities of limited resources, an overlap of SBYSP and NJ4S necessitates gradually phasing-in the NJ4S “Hubs” over time, we believe that this approach strikes the appropriate balance between providing continuity of supports for currently-served students and ensuring a seamless transition to the NJ4S model.

Thank you for your consideration of our feedback on this critical matter. The NJSBA stands ready to work with the Murphy Administration on this and any other initiatives that promote the mental health and achievement of all of the state's 1.4 million students.