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# *Committee Meeting*

of

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*“The Committee will meet remotely to discuss how New Jersey can successfully reopen schools while addressing the learning loss and the social emotional impact the pandemic has had on the students and teachers of New Jersey”*

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**LOCATION:** Remote Meeting Via Zoom

**DATE:** February 9, 2021  
10:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:**

Senator Ronald L. Rice, Co-Chair  
Assemblywoman Mila M. Jasey, Co-Chair  
Senator James Beach  
Senator Joseph P. Cryan  
Senator Declan J. O’Scanlon, Jr.  
Senator Michael L. Testa, Jr.  
Senator Samuel D. Thompson  
Assemblyman Ralph R. Caputo  
Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson  
Assemblyman Benjie E. Wimberly  
Assemblywoman BettyLou DeCroce  
Assemblywoman Serena DiMaso  
Assemblyman Erik K. Simonsen



**ALSO PRESENT:**

Rebecca Sapp  
*Executive Director*

Ivy Pomper  
*Executive Assistant*

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**Meeting Transcribed by**  
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,  
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey

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## SENATE

Hon. James Beach  
Hon. Joseph P. Cryan  
Hon. Declan J. O'Scanlon, Jr.  
Hon. Ronald L. Rice  
Hon. Michael L. Testa  
Hon. Samuel D. Thompson

## ASSEMBLY

Hon. Ralph R. Caputo  
Hon. BettyLou DeCroce  
Hon. Serena DiMaso  
Hon. Mila M. Jasey  
Hon. Verlina Reynolds-Jackson  
Hon. Erik K. Simonsen  
Hon. Benjie E. Wimberly

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

P.O. BOX 070  
TRENTON, NJ 08625  
(609) 847-3365  
FAX (609) 292-4912

**Rebecca Sapp**  
Executive Director  
[rsapp@njleg.org](mailto:rsapp@njleg.org)

**Ivy Pomper**  
Executive Assistant  
[ipomper@njleg.org](mailto:ipomper@njleg.org)

## MEETING NOTICE

**TO: Members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools**

**FROM: Senator Ronald Rice, Co-Chair  
Assemblywoman Mila Jasey, Co-Chair**

The Joint Committee on the Public Schools will meet on Tuesday, February 9, 2021, at 10:00 a.m., via Zoom, to receive testimony from invited guests on how New Jersey can successfully reopen schools, addressing learning loss and the social emotional impact of the pandemic on students and teachers in New Jersey.

**The public may address comments and questions to Rebecca Sapp, Executive Director, at 609-847-3365, or by email at [Rsapp@njleg.org](mailto:Rsapp@njleg.org)**

Issued January 20, 2021

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**ASSEMBLYWOMAN MILA M. JASEY (Co-Chair):** I want to welcome everyone, and good morning.

There is some advantage to being able to do this on Zoom, in that we have a really robust attendance this morning; and I appreciate that.

And I also want to welcome our very special guest, Acting Education Commissioner Dr. Angelica Allen-McMillan.

I'm thrilled that the Joint Committee is meeting today, as return to school in-person or hybrid, learning loss and the social/emotional toll the pandemic has taken upon our students, are critical issues.

Because of the large number of speakers who have joined us today, I think it will benefit us to treat this hearing as a robust information-gathering one -- meaning, questions are going to be limited. Otherwise, we're not going to be able to hear from everyone. However, Senator Rice, who has another Committee meeting and will be joining us if he's able to-- We're already planning another meeting for March, early March -- at this point, it's March 9 -- so you can put that on your calendars to continue the discussion.

So for this reason, speaking time will be limited to five minutes, and strictly enforced.

Our thanks to Executive Director Becky Sapp and Executive Assistant Ivy Pomper for their hard work in putting this together.

I suggest a quick roll call so that everyone knows the members who are present, and then we will dive right in by hearing from Acting Commissioner Allen-McMillan.

Thank you.

Becky.

MS. SAPP (Executive Director): Thank you.

Senator Beach.

SENATOR BEACH: I'm here.

MS. SAPP: Senator Testa.

SENATOR TESTA: Here.

MS. SAPP: Senator Thompson is here  
Senator O'Scanlon.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman DiMaso.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DiMASO: Here.

MS. SAPP: Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Here.

MS. SAPP: And Assemblywoman Jasey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Present.

MS. SAPP: Thank you

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

It is my pleasure to introduce the Acting Commissioner of  
Education, Dr. Allen-McMillan.

The floor is yours.

**ANGELICA ALLEN - McMILLAN, Ed.D.:** Thank you.

Good morning, everyone.

And I'd like to say a special good morning to our Co-Chairs,  
Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey; as well as the entire Committee,  
and all of those who are joining us this morning.

Thank you for inviting me today to share how New Jersey can  
successfully reopen schools while addressing the learning gaps, as well as the

social and emotional impact, that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the students and educators here in New Jersey.

The New Jersey Department of Education worked tirelessly on *The Road Back* plan during this past summer to ensure that school districts had a roadmap to reopening their schools this academic year. To date, the Department has continued to emphasize the importance of local decision-making based on consultation with local health officials. Our priority remains the same as it has been throughout the pandemic: supporting close collaboration between school districts and their local health departments to address local needs based on local circumstances.

Since June, we have continuously emphasized the importance of monitoring and responding to shifts in the public health data in a manner that recognizes both the value of in-person learning and the fact that school communities are best equipped to make decisions regarding the form of instruction that best suits them.

In August, Governor Murphy's Executive Order 175 codified those commitments by requiring districts to open for in-person learning if they are able to meet health and safety standards, while allowing districts to begin the year remotely as they build capacity to physically reopen.

To that end, our resources aim to empower districts to return to in-person instruction and to support students during periods of remote learning. Three hundred million dollars in elementary and secondary school emergency relief funding, \$100 million in Coronavirus Relief Fund grants, \$60 million in digital divide grants, competitive grants dedicated to remediating disruptions in learning, snapshot assessment tools, digital learning toolkits, social and emotional learning, as well as mental health

resources and other supports have helped to serve our students and educators, both academically and emotionally.

But most important to school reopening efforts has been the ingenuity and resilience of our educators, parents, and caregivers. Their efforts have all but closed the digital divide in our state. With more than 230,000 students estimated as needing connectivity or a device over the summer, only 413 students remained in need as of the end of January 2021. While there have been changes in learning models as the COVID transmission data evolves, we have also seen districts working to safely return their students to in-person learning. In September, just over 280 districts were all remote; as of yesterday, that number has decreased to 190. In the same span of time, the number of fully in-person districts jumped from just under 80 to 95, and the number of districts employing a hybrid learning model jumped from 400 to 491.

While we celebrate this progress in safely returning students to in-person instruction, we are well aware that the pandemic has only exacerbated learning gaps that already existed. Recent research conducted by the nonprofit assessment organization Northwest Evaluation Association -- commonly referred to as *NWEA* -- for example, suggests that the transition to remote learning in the 2019-2020 academic year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with expected summer learning gaps for students across all grade levels, will likely result in major losses in student learning and academic achievement.

As we know, these challenges do not affect our students equally. Under normal conditions, health and economic struggles tend to disproportionately affect low-income families and families of color. The

COVID-19 pandemic has amplified existing societal inequities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has reported increasing evidence that some racial/ethnic minority groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, which is linked to inequities in the social determinants of health. Consequently, many of New Jersey's economically disadvantaged and minority students have inevitably returned to school this academic year with not only more dramatic academic achievement gaps, but also with the emotional effects of sickness or the loss of a family member, giving rise to heightened social/emotional learning and academic needs.

The recently signed Federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act gives us an opportunity to combat these harms and to invest significantly in our students' academic and social/emotional needs. The law provided New Jersey an additional \$1.2 billion in K through 12 funding under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund, the vast majority of which is sent directly to districts to utilize flexibly to respond to and recover from COVID-19.

For the portion reserved for State initiatives, the Department has been working diligently to devise a strategy to leverage those funds in a manner that creates meaningful, equitable opportunities for districts to accelerate learning and address the social and emotional, as well as mental health needs of their students and educators. These initiatives would be grounded in research-based practices with demonstrated success accelerating learning, such as supporting districts in implementing high dosage one-on-one tutoring, extended learning opportunities, cultivating a growth mindset in students, professional development opportunities for educators, and multi-

tiered systems of support that empower districts to serve students' mental health needs through tailored interventions.

We are finalizing these plans as I speak, and anticipate releasing additional information shortly as we continue to engage with our stakeholders to formulate the best approach forward.

We understand, however, that it is impossible to accelerate learning if you cannot measure it, either with standard statewide assessment data or with local information on student performance.

At this time, the Biden Administration has not signaled any change to the United States Department of Education's previous position that it would not waive Federal requirements to administer standardized assessments. We continue to monitor Federal guidance closely and, most importantly, to engage with our stakeholders in order to make assessment decisions that best serve the needs of our students and educators.

Having learned valuable lessons from our administration of an optional formative assessment this past fall -- namely the *Start Strong* assessment -- we are exploring how to norm formative assessment this year and ways to expand formative assessment options next school year.

The New Jersey Department of Education will continue to collaborate closely with legislators, with key stakeholders, and other State and Federal agencies, and with those in the field to ensure that we employ the most appropriate measures to identify and mitigate the social, emotional, and academic learning gaps caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also committed to assisting our students and educators return safely to their schools and offices.

I am happy to take your questions.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Dr. Allen-McMillan.  
(laughter) I have to get used to that.

First, before taking any questions -- which will be limited because of our time constraints -- I want to welcome Senator Cryan and Assembly members Simonsen and Wimberly who have joined us.

I also want to let everyone know that written testimony will be distributed to all members, and additional submissions will also be considered. So you don't have to take too many notes while-- You will get it all in writing.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: I'm present; I just want to make sure you have me registered.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman Caputo. It's good to see you.

We'll take -- if there are there any short-answer type questions.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: I have a question, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Obviously, this is a very complex problem in the fact that there is a learning gap in many of the areas of the State of New Jersey.

What I'd like to ask the Commissioner about is, how she would feel about the parental right to retain kids -- to repeat the year, in cases where they would consult, at least, with school administrators, the Child Study Team, principal, and teacher. Because pushing some of these kids ahead would only make them fall further behind.

So it's a concept that-- I'm probably going to propose a bill on this, but I'd like to hear, if I could, from the Commissioner on that.

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Yes, and good morning to you; thank you. Nice to see you again.

So yes, as it relates to parental rights, while we have many regulations guiding this, as well as statutes-- But I like to refer -- to fall back to the local school districts that have policies in place guiding their retention practices and guidelines.

So I want to speak specifically about the research that speaks to remediation; and it states that remediation actually can continue to keep students lagging their peers. So before we look to make a wholesale approach, I ask that we be given more time to delve deeper into this and to revisit this topic. And I'd like to have my team work on gathering some facts that we can share with you to hopefully inform your thinking on this.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: I appreciate that, and I respect the fact that local districts should be making those decisions. But this is an unusual situation with COVID. So many kids have fallen behind for a number of reasons -- one is because the attendance problems; it's difficult to maintain. There's a lag there, in terms of the learning curve and other areas. So I think when the parent comes together with school personnel to evaluate that individual child, there's something that could result in a positive way for that child -- whether it be to move the child ahead or to retain them. And this may need a change in policy -- just to throw it out -- and I respect the fact that you want to research it.

I thank you for your answer; thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman.

And I also want to let you know -- you probably didn't hear this earlier -- we are already scheduling a meeting for March 9, of the Joint Committee, to continue this discussion and to hear from the Commissioner at that time.

ASSEMBLYMAN CAPUTO: Great.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Madam Chairwoman?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: I have a quick question, if I may.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Certainly, Senator.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Thank you, Dr. McMillan, for being here, and I appreciate your message this morning.

You and the Governor have both changed messaging, I think -- the Department and the Governor, over the past few months -- with the emphasis on reopening schools, which we know is so valuable to our children. And we have seen that it could be successfully done, going all the way back to spring when schools throughout the world started reopening. And we didn't know what was going to happen then. We now, I think, have overwhelming evidence that it can be done safely.

Unfortunately, the guidelines coming from the Department have posed a problem for our local districts. You and the Governor both have said that you want the decisions to be left up to locals. But we're hearing, over and over again, from locals that the Department's own guidelines -- which haven't been updated since, I think, the spring -- really push them to having to close, even when they think it's too conservative a call.

Assemblywoman DiMaso and I called a few weeks ago for the guidelines to be adjusted. Will we see that, and can we? Because these folks

are desperate for it; we've all heard you reiterate articulately the damage that's done when kids aren't in school. Will we see those guidelines revised to err on the side of giving local school district officials the option, in fact, the encouragement to remain open?

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Thank you for that question.

We continue to work closely with the Department of Health, and also look to align with the CDC. And so as guidance changes, we will update our guidance. Currently, there hasn't been a major shift. We have heard announcements, but we're looking for changes in practice. I know that across the country -- as I sit in on a call with other chiefs from other states -- that some have adopted a three-foot minimum distance, as opposed to the six feet that we utilize. And so we are waiting to receive the scientific support for that.

But as the CDC makes its updates and our Department of Health gives us the information to move forward, we will definitely communicate that with the field so that school districts can make the decisions based on the most timely information.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: I really appreciate that.

One key area -- just this last thing, in the last 15 seconds -- there are issues -- the length of time that schools are closing for. You know, we have this 14-day quarantine. We have school districts closing for weeks, sometimes six weeks; and that's demoralizing to children and to parents both. If you could help with messaging and guidance -- you and the Department of Health as well -- it would be a big shot in the arm for these local school districts that are battling, as we know frequently, the teachers' union, which is really incessantly almost pushing to keep schools

closed. They need the help and the credibility of you, and the Department of Health, and the Governor to be able to balance this and really take care of our kids as well as they can.

Again, thank you, Acting Commissioner. I appreciate it.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator

SENATOR CRYAN: Is it okay to ask a question?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, yes.

Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: I apologize.

Thank you, Chairwoman.

Doctor, I have a question. Given the amount of time to recover based on the opportunities lost -- given the pandemic -- is there any consideration for the summer -- for the extended time based on what we may use? There was a story, candidly, in Sunday's *New York Times* about folks looking at summer education as a possibility to help with some catch-up here. Have you folks taken a look at it? Has there been any-- I understand how complex that is; it's not simple. But is it -- has there been any sort of value-orientated discussion on that, and anything you can share with the Committee?

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Thank you for your question, Senator.

Yes, we are currently examining how we can support enriching summer experiences for students across the state. And so with the funding that school districts are receiving, we want to be in a position, as a Department, to share research-based practices that will help them better allocate the funding. So if we can support that with the portion that we have

as a set aside and ask them to direct funds there, I think this is a conversation that we look to continue to engage in.

So you are definitely spot-on in the direction we're looking to head.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

And I believe Senator Thompson-- And this will be the last question, because I know the Commissioner has other business to take care of. And again, as I said, we're going to meet again in March, on March 9; and all testimony that you're going to hear this morning will be sent to your offices.

Senator Thompson.

SENATOR TESTA: Madam Chair, I had my hand raised.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Oh, I apologize.

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: I have a few moments, if you'd like to continue.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right; Senator Thompson, and then Senator Testa.

SENATOR THOMPSON: What I consider to be a disturbing report came out yesterday. It indicated teachers in Newark had been instructed not to give any students an *F*. In fact, I think they were not to give any student a grade below *C*.

As Assemblyman Caputo was speaking of the impact of this on the kids' future -- if they're passed out of courses that they didn't learn in, that's going to impact (indiscernible) learning courses in the future. That seems like a very strange order: pass every kid, no matter how badly they did.

So I think you might want to look into that.

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Will do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Senator Testa.

SENATOR TESTA: First and foremost, thank you so much for having me here, Madam Chairwoman.

Dr. Allen-McMillan, thank you so much for being here.

As you're fully aware, many of our students are falling through the cracks and losing critical in-person learning. Their developmental skills are lagging; obviously, social interaction is at an all-time low. Has the Administration devised plans to address the needs of our most vulnerable students, our special needs students?

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Thank you for your question.

And so we continue to provide resources for districts to utilize -- some districts have been able to bring in their most vulnerable populations to the school's sites on their rotating schedule or on a daily basis. And this pandemic has just truly caused us to have to shift in ways that we could not have imagined. And so our stance is to be ready to assist when asked, to have resources available, and to provide direction to districts that will help them navigate this unexpected terrain. And I have to say it just that way.

We are mindful, with every program, with every option that we are putting forward -- we keep in mind the most vulnerable: our students with special needs, our English language learners, our homeless students, our migrant students. So we have an array of student populations, or subgroups, who we definitely want to keep on the radar and make sure that they don't fall further through the cracks or further behind.

SENATOR TESTA: Thank you.

And if you don't mind -- briefly, just a follow-up question. And I really value your time.

And look, resources are great; they're phenomenal to have. However, do we have a real clear picture of the entire problem? Does the State know the number of special needs children within our K-12 programs who have lost nearly one year of in-person learning? Do we have a real handle on the number of children who are affected by this?

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: So our understanding, from the research and what we're gleaning from school districts, is that every student in the state has, if you will, lost ground; they've had disruptive learning. And so, how can we help everyone move forward?

It is very difficult, I can say for us, to pinpoint the particular child's loss, if you will, or gaps. But we charge districts with having that data available. And so now we're examining how we can norm that data to be able to identify trends, as well as to plan policy directions so that we are able to further support them.

I just want to punctuate this point by providing information to you that we are highlighting priority standards. When learning is disrupted -- if the student has missed school, say, due to a broken leg or has had some other reason for being out of school -- we want to be able to catch that student up without remediating the student through all the paces that a child typically experiences in school daily. So we are providing educators with the key skills that are needed, with the priority standards that they need to make sure students are exposed to before they move on to the next grade.

SENATOR TESTA: My last question. It sort of piggybacks on Senator O'Scanlon's point -- and certainly what myself and he feels are some of the biggest hurdles -- and that is the NJEA, that appears to want to keep our schools closed. What are the largest hurdles that the Administration believes will impact getting children back into the classroom on a normal schedule?

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: So I just I have to say, in the spirit of full transparency and disclosure, I have a very positive working relationship with the NJEA and with the other associations representing educators: the NJASA, the NJPSA, the NJPTA, and the New Jersey School Boards Association. And so we meet regularly, and it's a time for thoughtful discussion. So I have found them to be very supportive. I have found them to ask very pointed questions and to challenge us to think differently about how we are supporting school districts; and to work to get schools open, but to open them safely.

So when we think about the greatest challenge, as I have learned from working with my sister -- excuse me, the Commissioner, Judy Persichilli-- I wanted to say my *sister Commissioner*, which is inappropriate, but some levity. But just working with Commissioner Persichilli -- is the vaccine. We know that the shortage of the vaccine has posed tremendous challenges for us, and we know that there is a greater demand than supply. And so if we had all of the supply that is needed, I think we would see more of our educators vaccinated -- as many do desire to receive the vaccination -- and we would see more schools in a stronger position to look at reopening and, more importantly, to stay open. You know, we can open,

but how can you stay open? And we want to minimize these breaks in learning experiences. So that is the greatest challenge that we're facing.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Commissioner; thank you, Senator.

And I want to remind everybody we're going to be back on March 9, and we will have fewer presentations and, perhaps, more time to speak with the Commissioner when we resume that.

I want to thank you for your time, Commissioner.

And before you go, I just want to mention that Assemblywoman DeCroce is on the phone, and Senator Rice is on the phone.

Senator Rice, would you like to say anything?

**SENATOR RONALD L. RICE (Co-Chair):** No. (laughter)

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: That's unusual. (laughter)

Thank you, Senator Rice. I appreciate your brevity so that we can get going.

Commissioner, thank you very, very much for your time today. I know that you're very busy. I'm going to let you go, and we will welcome you back next month.

DR. ALLEN-McMILLAN: Thank you; it was my pleasure.

Have a good day, all.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much.

All right, we're going to hear first from Dr. Christine Burton, Superintendent of the Millburn Public Schools and also with the Garden State Coalition of Schools; followed by Melanie Schulz.

Dr. Burton.

**C H R I S T I N E B U R T O N, Ed.D.:** Thank you very much, and good morning.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Good morning.

DR. BURTON: I'm Christine Burton, Superintendent of Schools of Millburn Township School District.

I'm providing testimony on behalf of my District, as well as the Garden State Coalition of Schools, as Assemblywoman Jasey mentioned, regarding how schools have successfully reopened while addressing learning loss, and the social/emotional impact the pandemic has had on the students and teachers in New Jersey.

I know as policies and regulations in standardized testing are being contemplated, we need to put into perspective the school environment that has suffered a tremendous shock to the system. The initial reality check was in the fact that it wasn't just going to be two weeks at home and then we will all be back in school. No, quite the opposite; this would be far from the case. When the months of March and June came and went, as did the summer, with the tragedies of loved ones and colleagues continuing, the natural reaction, really, was to stop the bleeding of these events, eliminate the hurt, the confusion, the anxiety, and the loss. And the reality, unfortunately, is that we're still in the midst of this pandemic, attempting each day to help students return to school instead of staying home in fear.

So our District here, in Millburn, was stymied by not having the number of staff available at the start of the school year, due to having pre-existing medical conditions. This led to hiring classroom -- what we refer to as *classroom managers* to supervise students, while teachers taught from home. We were, eventually, able to get all students into school by November

through a hybrid schedule, allowing for our staff to be socially distant while providing that nurturing environment that they thrive in each day.

The reality is, is that teachers' focus is on meeting the social and emotional needs of students in school each day -- with their masks, and their hand sanitizer, and, in some cases, desk sneeze guards. At the same time, our teachers, again, are multitasking, addressing the needs of virtual students who are streaming in live; and for our youngest learners, navigating with the help of their parents.

We know that our students in Millburn are among the lucky ones who have the availability of Chromebooks that we have issued to them; and, as well, we've also provided hotspots for connectivity where needed. While our students have had no issues with connectivity, I understand that hundreds of (indiscernible), trickled down to hundreds now -- they are still impacted by the same difficulties with anxiety, depression, trauma and grief, as their peers have been around the state. These mental health realities have required supports from guidance counselors and the Child Study teams.

So what are schools doing today, and what is most important that they do in the future to address these *learning delays* -- as I'll characterize them -- and the additional social and emotional impact on our students as a result of this pandemic?

I believe that before we can address the head, we have to commit to repairing the heart. Our students have had their childhood or young adult world turned upside down. Our response as a school is to passionately create a routine that feels as normal, as much as we can, for students. They need to know and feel that they're going to be okay, as are their families.

In the classroom each day, they're provided with a daily structure that they can count on being the same each day, with a staff who checks in on them, provides them time to ask how they are doing, and to really let them put their backpacks of burdens and fears down for a little while.

This past summer, the curriculum required a transformation that included a compacting of the most essential standards and expectations of skills, knowledge, and understandings. This was in response to, again, the limits of the school day and the new reality of the virtual classroom. Our staff, again, I will say, has done an amazing job, as they've stepped up to these new challenges with a fierceness and resolve that has been commendable.

So educators have been asked, "How do we measure this learning loss?" I posed the question as to whether now is the right time, and what the purpose is, if we know that there have been students who have not been in their building since last March. I want to posit that, isn't it obvious that there is going to be a delay in what they've been able to learn? Do standardize testing students to reveal the obvious, pose an even greater detriment to our students' mental health?

As I ponder the notion of having students taking online assessments at home -- as I understand is going to be the possibility -- I can only equate it to when we underwent the field testing, here in Millburn, for the PARCC assessments. Even with days of preparation for online tools, during the test there were students in the elementary through the high school who were in tears over the frustration of not being able to navigate the online testing expectations. Is this the climate that is best able to address students' current fragile mental health in the middle of a pandemic?

My concern -- will these scores be valid and reliable data of student performance?

In a recent webinar, sponsored by LinkIt, the comparison of student performance from in-district assessments from a year ago suggests that there is no, to limited, change in ELA, and a slight decrease in mathematics from students in grades 4 through 8.

One way that our District is addressing students' needs is by capitalizing on a pandemic opportunity. Last winter, our district was engaged in an investigation on later start times.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Dr. Burton, I apologize, but your time is up. We will distribute your comments to everyone. I apologize for having to cut you off, but we have a very long list.

DR. BURTON: Okay. I do want to thank you for the opportunity to come and share my testimony today.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Okay, thank you.

Melanie Schulz, Director of Government Affairs for the New Jersey Association of School Administrators is next up; with Dr. Margaret Dolan, President of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators and Superintendent of Westfield; and Robert Zywicki, Superintendent of Mount Olive.

Melanie, it's good to see you. And I will give you a one-minute warning.

**MELANIE SCHULZ:** Good morning, Assemblywoman Jasey and Senator Rice, Co-Chairs; and the rest of the members of the Joint Committee.

As Assemblywoman Jasey said, my name is Melanie Schulz. And for those of you who don't know me, for 22 years I had the privilege of

being the Executive Director of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools; and for the last seven years, the honor of being NJASA's Director of Government Relations. These positions have afforded me the opportunity to be at the forefront of addressing education policy, along with members of the Legislature, in many profound ways; but never in a more important time than we are currently experiencing.

When schools were abruptly shuttered in March 2020, the education community came together as in no other time that I have witnessed in my decades-long experience. The steadfastness of educators has been remarkable to witness. If there has been any success at all it is because government really got out of the way and allowed educators to do what they do best.

Now the time has come to look at where we have been, what we have experienced, and where we should head. We will need your help on the next leg of this journey. The Joint Committee on the Public Schools is the perfect platform to facilitate this work, as you are the intersection between theory and practice, and where they meet in a safe environment. Your work on school construction, school funding, QSAC, remote learning, achievement gaps, and school choice, among many others, led to groundbreaking statutory changes over the many decades.

That said, I'm going to get out of the way now and let you hear from two of NJASA's remarkable members. They are my boots-on-the-ground leaders, two of the people who I am fortunate to lean on in my work. Dr. Margaret "Peg" Dolan is the Superintendent of Westfield, in Union County. It's a Pre-K to 12 District of about 6,300 students. She is also NJASA's current President. And Dr. Robert Zywicki is the

Superintendent in the Mount Olive School District in Morris County. It's a K-12 school district of about 4,600 students.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to say hello to you all; and I can answer any questions you have, or, just, my members can start to speak.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

Dr. Dolan.

**MARGARET "PEG" DOLAN, Ed.D.:** Thank you; thank you very much.

In the spirit of looking at the clock, I'm going to edit my remarks and forward them to you later on.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

**DR. DOLAN:** In Westfield, we opened in September with a hybrid model of instruction, and we've worked hard to maintain that important level of in-person instruction while working to ensure the health and safety of our school community. And I think some lessons from this year might help inform decisions about next year and the rest of this school year.

So in order to be able to open, much work has focused on checking and improving ventilation in our buildings. Two of the buildings in my District are over 100 years old, three of them are over 80 years old, and most of the rest are 50 or 60 years old. In addition to continuous cleaning and disinfecting, we invested in bipolar ionization filtration systems in all classrooms, at a cost of over \$365,000. We also have some areas of the District that have rooftop air handling units, and for those we have installed ultraviolet light filters, at a cost of \$33,000.

The Board of Education recently reviewed a \$9.8 million plan for a ventilation and air conditioning project for our nurses' suites and elementary school multi-purpose rooms throughout the District. Due to the high cost, the project will be broken up into multiple phases over the course of several years. To accomplish this, other projected capital improvements will be delayed.

Another cost challenge was the purchase of devices for students. The decision was made to provide devices to students for their individual use to prevent sharing devices, and to assist in at-home learning. We also provided hotspots for families without Internet access, and teacher webcams. The cost of this technology was just short of \$500,000.

While we are offering hybrid instruction, approximately 60 of our 600 teachers are not able to work in-person because of their own health issues. This number does not include staff members who notify us that they are required to quarantine because of exposure, and that happens at least weekly, if not daily, in some months.

When teachers are healthy enough to teach remotely, we hire in-person substitutes to be in class with the students. The first challenge is finding individuals who want to be substitutes during the pandemic; the second is finding money in the budget to pay them. We project that our substitutes' cost will be \$300,000 higher than we had budgeted.

If I am honest, right now, in my District, I have a number of parents of younger students who are unhappy with the current hybrid schedule. While I have been able to bring back young students with significant needs for five half-days a week, at this point other elementary students attend class in-person for three half-days one week and two the next,

on alternating weeks. These students are learning remotely the rest of the time.

The current CDC guidelines continue to recommend six feet as the optimal distance between desks, along with mask wearing and hand washing. With this guidance I'm able to fit 10 to 12 students in a classroom at a time. The CDC has promised updated guidance for schools this week, and I look forward to seeing what other options might be possible.

Very briefly, I've summarized some of the challenges. But I want you to know that the teachers are teaching and the students are learning. And we have spent a great deal of time, as has been mentioned, talking about the priority standards, making sure all the teachers are working together to make sure that the students are not losing the year. They are learning, we are assessing. Technology has been a gift -- I have a wonderful paragraph, and I'm trying to go quickly -- technology has really helped the situation, and we've learned that technology helps deeper learning, and it also helps with deficiency.

So please know students are learning in their class. It's not perfect, and we work every day.

In regard to social and emotional learning -- it's constant, constant work, reaching out -- parents, teachers noticing that a student is not engaged; counselors reaching out, reaching out to parents, reaching out to students, finding out what the problem might be at home and trying to find ways to adjust. We're working very hard; and I think if you could see the work of our educators every day, all of them -- the administrators, the teachers -- I think you would all be proud.

I thank all of you for your efforts. This is an impossible year, no matter what you do, and I'm sure it's impossible for legislators.

So thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

**ROBERT R. ZYWICKI, Ed.D.:** Thank you very much for this opportunity.

I, too, will provide bolded, abbreviated comments, given the time constraints.

The first thing I want to say is that schools can be open and they should be open. In Mount Olive, we've had students on campus since our ESY program started in July. We've been serving lunch in our elementary schools since September. We have full-day instruction starting on February 16, and have been providing five-day-a-week instruction since September.

I have three big asks on behalf of myself, my District, and my fellow members of NJASA.

Please do not try and fix the learning loss situation with NJSLA. NJSLA data comes later; it's a test that has a 12-point margin of error. Instead, refer to *The Road Back* document, in the *Conditions for Learning* section, that talks about what's already in the Administrative Code: response to intervention, multi-tiered systems of support. Let us use our own data, like LinkIt. If you look at *The Road Back*, you'll see in the references that it actually refers to Mount Olive's RTI manual.

Let us use what we have now, but please provide funding for wraparound programs, summer programs, additional guidance counselors, additional interventionists. What I'm asking you for is a 24-month, fully funded statewide plan to combat learning loss. That means we need staff, we

need interventionists. And please let this be a moonshot that we can get this done, and let's talk about it, the next 24 months, the way other states are doing. That conversation is absent right now in the State of New Jersey.

The next thing: In Mount Olive, we're very proud to have on-campus testing. We've tested 3,000 people since January 1. That should happen in every single school district.

The other thing -- we need funding. Please help advocate with Governor Murphy to prioritize teachers and staff members. If you want schools open, we need vaccines. So as supply goes up, we need to be able to host that in our schools. But I need overtime funding for my security staff, for my nurses; so please help fund testing and vaccine sites in our districts.

And the last thing -- as you're about to approach the new budget year, please fully fund the formula. That includes adjustment aid for S2 districts. We cannot have another setback. Besides having to do our regular jobs, we have to tackle learning loss, social/emotional challenges, professional development challenges. So we need baseline funding that we were promised, and then we need additional funding for this 24-month plan. Please look to other states that are doing this already; I think they serve as a model. But we have to think about next year.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Dr. Zywicki. I really appreciate those very concrete suggestions from you.

And as I said earlier, everyone will get these in writing so that you can take the time, and your staff can take the time to go over the testimony.

Next up we have Marie Blistan, President of the NJEA; followed by Pat Wright, Executive Director of Principals and Supervisors.

Marie.

**MARIE BLISTAN:** Good morning; good morning, Assemblywoman.

Thank you Co-Chairs for inviting us to this Committee hearing. Thank you all Committee members for attending and listening to us.

I am Marie Blistan, a very proud New Jersey classroom teacher, well over 35 years in the classroom from kindergarten to 12th grade. And I think that's important, because I have that perspective.

And I'm also equally as proud to be the President of NJEA, representing our 200,000 members, representing the school districts that have the best public schools in the United States.

I'm also going to just highlight a few key points for us.

We are at a crucial, crucial time in the state's history. We are going to be making decisions on budgets at the State level and at the local level. And as we all know, budgets are our priorities in numbers.

For those of you who sponsored or co-sponsored the Clayton Project for our school buildings, or are sponsoring school nurses in every building, addressing the needs of our SDA buildings, addressing the needs of our S2 districts to transition into the SFRA formula, we thank you.

I sent all of you a copy of an open letter that was a result of a coalition that we led to form -- from all the stakeholders. It included not only principals, supervisors, school boards, superintendents, PTA; but also SOS, the NAACP, The Latino Network (*sic*), ELC. We invited the Chairs of the Education Committees in both houses. We invited Dr. McMillan, the DOE, and the Administration. We had three essential questions that guided

us: One, what have we learned from this pandemic; number two, what are student needs as we move forward; and number three, what are we going to do about the inequities that slapped us all in the face from this pandemic?

The first and most prominent need that was identified was the social and emotional needs of our students. We have research that has backed that up, but I also come to you from the personal experience and professional experience that we carry as educators. This must be a priority now, and as we move past the pandemic.

We also know that we have 300 buildings, right this minute, that don't have a school nurse -- not identified in a part-time or full-time basis. What does that matter with social/emotional? We have found out, through this pandemic, that our school nurses not only take temperatures, not only help provide meds. Ladies and gentlemen, they actually provide social and emotional support up to a third or more of their day.

We know that many of our buildings in our SDA districts -- like has already been noted -- are far older and have not been given the resources that they need for decades. We have, we know, since 2016, through the DOE and SDA, 429 emergent projects that were submitted; and up to this date, we only have record that 15 of the 429 were even on a list to address.

We know that our SDA districts, in fact, were overcrowded to begin with pre-pandemic, let alone to put social distancing in place right now -- it's almost impossible.

We know that our State has been working to get back on track with the SFRA formula, which had been neglected, literally, for decades. But we also know that our S2 districts are struggling, day in and day out, to make ends meet, and they need support. Every building needs to be physically safe

to protect students and staff from highly contagious and rapidly mutating airborne infections.

So I am completely perplexed with the State's continued path forward -- to go forth with a State-administered standardized test, at a cost of almost \$30 million, to purportedly get information on academic needs of our students -- which I know, and you have already heard, that our administrators, our districts, already have in place and can give that information right now -- instead of spending that money for 300 nurses which, by the way, \$30 million would cover. Or putting that money to S2, or putting that money into SDA districts.

The Biden Administration has encouraged all districts, in fact, to apply for the waiver. And I'm perplexed as to where Dr. McMillan got that information. I had a quote from Mr. Cardona himself that said that bringing students in just to do these tests is ridiculous right now. And so we are urging you to please support our Commissioner of Education; our Acting Commissioner, Dr. McMillan, to go forth and put forth the waiver.

What we do need to identify, however, is data on device access, Internet access, student absences, time spent in remote learning versus in-person learning; time spent in remote learning versus in-person for our students receiving special ed services, English language learners; and time spent learning versus in-person learning for our marginalized communities. We must do everything -- again, as noted -- to prioritize that vaccine access for educators.

While we certainly do understand the challenges and hard choices facing the State with lack of supplies, we also know how essential it is going to be for schools to reopen for in-person instruction. Vaccinating

educators -- having that access is crucial. Overall, when we look at the lack of school nurses, the lack of building safety, the lack of funding our public schools the last two decades, the misuse and abuse of past standardized student testing -- had New Jersey done a better job of addressing all of this in the last two decades, I dare say this pandemic might look a little bit different right now in this state.

We have unprecedented challenges, but we cannot accept business as usual going forward, especially when we have a waiver and an opportunity to get away from the stress of that student standardized testing -- which, by the way, is completely invalid, unreliable. We already know we can't secure the test and the administration.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Wrap it up. (laughter)

MS. BLISTAN: We can't solve all the problems, but we can start.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: All right.

MS. BLISTAN: Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Marie. I appreciate that, and I hear you loud and clear.

Next up we have Pat Wright, the Executive Director of Principals and Supervisors; and she will be followed by Elizabeth Warner, President of SELANJ.

Pat, good morning.

**P A T R I C I A W R I G H T:** Good morning, Chairman Rice and Chairwoman Jasey, and members of the Joint Committee.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to share the perspective of over 8,000 educational leaders in New Jersey -- principals, assistant

principals, supervisors, and directors. And I can't do this without saying, first of all, how extremely proud I am of the tireless efforts of all of our members and all educators to keep students safe while keeping them engaged in learning.

The challenges were huge, and we can't pretend they're gone. They are still very real, and yet we know we must now focus on the next set of challenges.

And I really want to put my remarks in the context of all this talk about *learning loss*. We keep asking the questions, "How will students catch up; how will educators know where students are and what they need to fill these learning gaps?" I think that's a huge issue right now. But I would really suggest that we reframe those questions and then propose some solutions that won't only benefit us now in the State of New Jersey, but will benefit our schools and communities in the future.

The essential question should be, "What will students need -- period -- when they return to full in-person learning?" They will need support, both academic, and social and emotional. They will need to know they are safe and secure, and that they have learned so many things that will help them be successful in moving forward. We need to take into account that students need to feel good when they return to school. They can't be mired in remediation. Social/emotional learning, trauma-informed instruction, the creation of healing-centered environments need to be at the top of every school's priority list.

Students do not need to feel like they've somehow failed, and that their future is in jeopardy because they might not have fully grasped certain skills and knowledge. Educators know that students need to see

themselves not returning to school to just make up what they've lost, but to move forward and accelerate their learnings. And educators know how to do this work. Schools across the state are already collecting student data, examining and revising curriculum, and making plans to use formative assessment continually throughout the next year to inform instruction. No one test is going to tell us where students are right now -- that is a fallacy, and we're falling back on it simply because it's what we've always done. Now is the time not to do what we have always done; instead, we have to focus on lessons learned that can inform the development of an even more robust educational system in the State of New Jersey moving forward.

And that brings me to this idea of testing. It is absolutely ridiculous. The data will certainly fail to be reliable, given the number of variables impacting the test-taking environments during a pandemic. It will be impossible to ensure that the results yield meaningful information about all the categories of test takers, including students from low-income families, racial and ethnic subgroups, and students with disabilities.

Falling back on these practices, as I say, is not -- this is not the time. This moment calls for a different approach. And I do want to put learning loss in context. Please understand that State testing is a summative assessment: What do students know at that one period of time at the end of the year; and it's an assessment of learning. What we need to do is not use those assessment results to focus on remediating deficits, but we need to spend time focusing on moving a student forward by using an assessment for learning; which is a set of formative assessments, that would be given throughout the next school year, in order to move students forward in their learning now, and fill in the gaps as we go so they don't fall further behind. As

even the Commissioner said, pure remediation sets students back; it doesn't move them ahead.

So the next important question that we need to ask is, "What do educators need to do, or what do they need to provide the possible learning experience?"

We've talked a lot about flexibility, local decision-making. Fine; however, now is the time for the New Jersey Department of Education to provide some essential tools and a vision, and, as Bob Zywicki pointed out, a plan for moving forward -- not leaving every district to reinvent the wheel. It's long voiced itself as not only an agency of compliance, but one that's a resource. And we believe that they have made some steps. The DOE has made efforts to provide standards-aligned units of study in language arts and math across all grade levels; but now is the time to create more tools that are standards-aligned so that we can provide such tools to all districts and get a more equitable instruction across the State of New Jersey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. WRIGHT: So you have the rest of my testimony.

Thank you, Mila.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN: Thank you, Pat; I appreciate it.

Next up -- Elizabeth Warner, followed by Jonathan Pushman.

Elizabeth.

**ELIZABETH HANSEN WARNER:** Yes, hello.

The Social Emotional Alliance for New Jersey, SEL4NJ, would like to thank the Joint Committee on the Public Schools for providing this opportunity to provide testimony regarding this critical issue facing our students and educators.

SEL4NJ, a statewide coalition with over 1,100 members, is an affiliate of a national organization, SEL4US. It is worth noting one of the founding members of SEL4US and SEL4NJ is Dr. Maurice Elias of Rutgers University, one of the nation's leading experts on social/emotional learning and school climate.

We start our testimony today knowing that research conducted prior to the pandemic has proven, without question, that students' social and emotional needs must be met before they can learn. It is also important to note SEL should not be perceived as something separate from academic learning. SEL is most effective when infused throughout the curriculum, modeled in every class and in every hallway.

SEL is not separate from academics. Social/emotional skills are what allow us to be good problem solvers, attentive listeners, valued team members, and provide the strength and resiliency to cope with adversity and uncertainty. And the pandemic, with its accompanying widespread impact of stress and trauma, has exacerbated existing inequities, and has amplified the importance and the urgency of supporting the social and emotional well-being of all those in the school community: students, staff, and parents.

SEL4NJ defines social/emotional learning broadly, consisting of, but not limited to, the five CASEL competencies which have been adopted by the New Jersey Department of Education -- self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making -- all skills necessary to cope with our current situation, as well as fundamental to success in work and life in the 21st century.

In addition to these five SEL competencies, we include, under the SEL4NJ umbrella, positive schooling and classroom climate, core values

that promote SEL as a goal, character education, whole child/whole school approaches, restorative discipline policies and practices, responsive classrooms, mental and physical health, anti-bullying practices, and social justice and equity. All of these work hand-in-hand, with a focus on developing the CASEL five skills, to create an environment where teachers and students alike can teach, learn, and thrive.

We believe the Committee should consider the following three points as foundational when planning for the resumption of live schooling. All three areas are supported by strong research.

Number one: SEL supports student learning and can reduce the achievement gap. Number two: SEL is a form of trauma-informed practice which helps reduce stress and anxiety for both adults and students. And number three: SEL can help to address damaging inequities faced by vulnerable populations, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

These three priorities were identified by six issue-specific working groups as part of SEL4NJ's statewide landscape analysis that began in 2019. Over 90 representatives from 60 organizations throughout the state participated, including representatives from New Jersey's key education associations, school districts, and leaders in the field of SEL.

A successful return to school will need to be organized, efficient, and effective, guided by clear priorities. To achieve this, the adults must be the first priority. It is important to focus on adult SEL skills so that the adults can model and teach SEL skills to their students. Adult emotions are contagious. The link between SEL and academic and life success needs to be clear to all -- students, teachers, and families. And three, efforts to address

the social/emotional well-being of students and staff need to be coordinated within each school, district wide, and throughout the community.

Specifically, our organization asks public leaders to publicly champion the importance of SEL and spread awareness via a public education campaign. The following steps will help to accomplish this goal.

Provide resources and public support for a public education campaign on what equity-oriented social and emotional learning is -- including its benefits, how it provides critical support to both teaching and learning during re-entry, as well as addressing inequities experienced by vulnerable populations.

Number 2: Encourage districts and school leaders to set a clear vision for integrating an SEL lens into re-entry protocols.

Number 3: Educate parents and families who are deeply concerned about their children's well-being and learning loss about how SEL skills have been associated with positive long-term academic and social outcomes.

And number 4: Encourage schools to collect data from students to determine school-wide classroom and individual needs.

We also underscore the importance of providing funding, training, and guidance for preparing all current and pre-service educators for the successful integration of SEL.

Number one, begin with the adults, by providing effective tools for processing and managing the stress experienced by COVID in this past year; number two, provide funding to support effective professional development; number three, encourage approaches that involve parents and families in SEL skill development and reinforcement at home; and number

four, identify quality SEL providers and products that enable schools to leverage funding effectively to positively impact their communities.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. WARNER: Thank you for the opportunity to share the work of SEL4NJ.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much; we appreciate it.

Next up, Julie Borst, Executive Director of Save Our Schools New Jersey Community Organizing, and Board President of New Jersey Community Schools Coalition.

Julie.

**JULIE BORST:** Good morning.

Thank you to the Chairs for having me here today. It's wonderful to see all these faces.

It seems like it's been a long time since we've all been in a room together, and hopefully, sooner rather than later, we can again.

There are a couple things that I'm hearing today. So I was going to talk about Community Schools -- and, hopefully, I'll have a minute to be able to do that, at some point -- but I think it's also really instructive.

I forwarded to Becky, this morning, a report by Dr. Mark Weber from Rutgers and NJPP, about who has been back inside a building and who has not. And I think it's very stark that our most underserved students are the ones who have not had the ability to be inside of a classroom.

Now, understand this is not the difference between a parent choice or a school choice -- about how it is that they can conduct schooling; but rather the ability to be able to open up a school building for students. It's

very stark. His first report was released in October of 2020; he just did an update a couple of weeks ago. I forwarded both links to Becky for her to share with you all, and you will see that it's basically unchanged since October.

So this leads into the school funding issue that we've been having for well over a decade. Our schools need to be fully funded; it's really that simple. Save Our Schools New Jersey was very pleased to be part of the group that Marie Blistan was talking about earlier. You know, we are all in agreement; our schools need to be funded. You can't run these programs, you can't have school buildings open if they're not maintained. And our school buildings have not been maintained. If you're lucky enough to be a wealthier district, as one of the superintendents -- the Superintendent from Westfield was talking about -- she had the money to be able to do that. But I promise you, places like Camden do not. And so at least her children were able to be in schools, while Camden, and Newark, and Paterson have not been able to do that. The buildings are just too old; they haven't been maintained. SDA needs to be funded.

On special ed, and as far as holding students back, I would beg you to please, please remember special ed students can have schooling through age 21. If you hold a student back, you start getting into that transition period between 18 and 21 that students desperately need. So unless you're prepared to extend that age -- and the 21 age limit is based on Federal law and IDEA -- and unless New Jersey is willing to push that further, I beg you, please do not hold those students back. Keep them moving forward. Pat Wright was very specific about why this is detrimental and how it is that we can keep moving forward. I fully support that.

I also want to say something about testing. We should absolutely be asking for that waiver -- the Federal waiver for the testing this year. Last week I put out a request to parents to send an e-mail to the Governor asking for the waiver. He's got more than 2,600 e-mails sitting on his desk right now, from parents all over the state, asking for that waiver. And as Diane Ravitch will say to you, tests are a measurement and not a remedy. You know, we know who those students are who need help; certainly their teachers and administrators do. But they don't have the resources in order to address them, and the resources are absolutely necessary.

Which leads me to community schools. So community schools provide the framework in which all of these things work -- SEL, wraparound services that Rob Zywicki mentioned -- which can be anything from having medical clinics inside school buildings; to providing enrichment like art, and music, and theater; to providing tutoring, to after-school programs, to before-school programs. And the beautiful thing about a community school is it's based entirely on the needs of the students, and the families, and the community members surrounding those buildings. That can happen in a public school; that can happen in a charter school.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: One minute.

MS. BORST: One minute? Okay, so let me wrap up here.

So there are three sources of funding, possibly, for us.

So the first is the American Rescue Plan from President Biden. It includes \$100 million for community schools. There is a Full Service Community School Expansion Act, that was introduced in 2020, which will be reintroduced again, that provides money for community schools. There is a Communities Serving Schools Act that also will be reintroduced at the

Federal level. And finally, our own Senator Booker has a Developing Innovative Partnerships and Learning Opportunities that Motivate Achievement Act DIPLOMA, which also provides support to community schools, including technical assistance, which is what my organization is all about.

So I think there's a way to spend the money. I think there is a framework that we should be using. Community schools across the country were able to hit the ground running. The moment the schools were closed, those site coordinators were in there helping families be fed, access to rental assistance -- you name it, they were there. And we obviously-- You know, we need this. I mean, the Joint Committee was kind enough to have a hearing on community schools; I would urge you to do that again.

Thank you very much for your time, and it was wonderful to see everybody.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Julie.

And I want you to know that I've already started the conversation with the Speaker about moving forward on the community school pilots. So I'll talk to you offline on that.

Thank you so much.

MS. BORST: Thank you so much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Jordana Horn is up next, and she will talk about pool testing.

Jordana.

**JORDANA HORN:** Hi; thank you so much for having me.

I'm very happy to be here today to talk about a different kind of testing, pool testing, as a possible option for a safe, large-scale return to in-person learning in public schools in New Jersey.

By way of background, I'm a lifelong New Jersey resident. I live in my hometown of Short Hills with my husband and our six children, aged 5 to 17. We're very fortunate to be in the Millburn Township Public Schools District, led by Superintendent Christine Burton, on this call.

I have two boys who are fully remote in Millburn High School. I have two girls who are hybrid, a combination of remote and in-person learning, at Hartshorn Elementary School. None of these four children have had a single full day of in-person school since March 13, 2020. However, my two youngest children, who are aged 5 and 7, have been learning for full days in-person, five days a week at New Jersey private schools since September. We sent them to those schools explicitly because they are tested regularly, one weekly and one twice a week, for coronavirus, using saliva pool testing.

So let me take a step back and explain what pool testing is.

Pool testing is a way to monitor COVID occurrences in a group setting with frequent, low-cost tests -- in these cases, weekly or twice a week -- utilizing small samples of saliva from participants. *Pooling* means combining a group of samples so that you can get a result using just one test, and doing so reduces the cost and the time involved in testing. And since most pooled tests will be negative, further testing and expenditure is only needed for a small percentage of samples.

Pool testing helps identify pre-symptomatic and asymptomatic cases of COVID, and identifying and quarantining those cases stops community spread, both in the classroom and beyond.

Just like the vaccine, pool testing is not foolproof. It's an additional layer of safety beyond current protocols of masking, hand-washing, plexiglass, and social distancing. So bringing pool testing into schools is analogous to adding anti-lock brakes to a car that already has seat belts and airbags. It doesn't prevent all accidents; it does minimize damage.

So how does pool testing work? In the case of my 5-year-old kindergartner, she spits into a small, 2-inch test tube first thing in the morning, or any other time a half-hour after eating or drinking. She fills it halfway with about 1-inch of saliva. We bring the vial to school, it's couriered to a lab, which gives results to the school administration within 36 to 48 hours.

Based on efficacy studies, pool testing detects the existence of COVID-19 as well as it can be detected via an individual COVID test, but at a fraction of the cost. And for individuals who are positive with COVID with very high viral loads, the test has a very high sensitivity and its accuracy ranges from about 97 to 100 percent. And for individuals positive with the COVID virus with lower viral loads -- for instance, in the very earliest stage of infection -- the exact sensitivity ranges from about 80 to 95 percent. So what that means is that for every 10 individuals who are truly positive -- whether asymptomatic or symptomatic -- pool testing finds 8 or 9 of them without difficulty. It's possible the approach finds all 10; we're not sure. That's why getting tested every single week or twice a week is so important.

As a parent, I have a vested interest in helping to facilitate more solutions to the education COVID crisis than to getting kids back in school.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of surveillance testing like this -- it's directly proportional to the amount of community participation. As with testing generally, the utility for the individual is always high; but the utility for the community of pool testing is higher the more people participate.

Private schools in our area are able to require participation, but other public school districts that have attempted pool testing were able to reach the high level of participation with voluntary programs. At Wellesley Public Schools in Massachusetts, for example, 80 percent of the population opted to participate in pool testing. And Massachusetts, now, this week, has a program starting statewide where 120 schools will do pool testing. I've sent supplemental information about their program as a potential model.

So why is this important? Because I believe that it is flippant at best and disingenuous at worst to say that there are no outbreaks in schools. Without testing we actually have no idea whatsoever how much asymptomatic spread there is in school. One person's asymptomatic COVID becomes the next person's symptomatic, long-term health crisis.

Pool testing is a way to ensure that students can be in school for more time by addressing the many variables that await us, not only in the remainder of the school year, but in the school year to come.

There are those who say that as teachers and more adults in New Jersey are vaccinated, this shouldn't be an issue anymore. I disagree. There's no vaccine even possible for children under 12 in 2021. Our youngest learners pose the risk of continuing and perpetuating this epidemic if the

spread of COVID and all its new variants goes unchecked. With vaccine hesitancy, the likelihood of reaching herd immunity looks like it will be later rather than sooner; and we've only begun to get a handle on the long-term COVID effects on children.

Inequities between public and private schools are well-known and well-documented. In New Jersey, all students should be able to be in school as close to full days as possible, with the greatest strides possible taken to ensure their safety. Pool testing would require rethinking of closure rules, as now it would be possible, theoretically, to close a pod or a pool, rather than an entire school, upon finding a positive case.

Pool testing would require a financial investment of Federal and State funds, but the return would be tremendous if pool testing were provided at public schools with the option existing to opt out, but the assumption being that students, faculty, and staff would opt in otherwise.

As a parent, I want all public school students in New Jersey to have the same in-school opportunities for education as they do at private school; with the guard rail of pool testing preventing outbreaks and community spread, as well as having the side benefit of encouraging us, at this point in time and in our country's history, to remember that we're, literally, all in this together.

Thank you very much for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much, Jordana; I appreciate it. That's new and good information.

Thank you.

Next up, Jonathan Pushman -- Jonathan -- and you'll be followed by Cathy Lindenbaum from the PTA.

All right; Jonathan then Cathy.

**JONATHAN PUSHMAN:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair, fellow members of the Joint Committee.

Jonathan Pushman, NJSBA Director of Governmental Relations.

I certainly appreciate your invitation to provide feedback on how we can successfully reopen schools, while addressing the learning loss and social/emotional impact the pandemic has had on students and teachers of the state. These are indeed weighty and sensitive issues that will take a concerted effort of all stakeholders throughout the educational community to effectively address.

What I'd like to do, for the purposes of today's hearing, is to highlight some of the work that NJSBA has done over the past year in providing guidance and resources on the state of education during the pandemic; and what we'll need to do as we move out of the emergency and into what we all anticipate will be a new normal for public education in New Jersey.

So far, the NJSBA has issued a series of four reports on education during the pandemic, since our world was turned upside down by COVID-19. These have been included along with my written testimony, and I believe Rebecca has forwarded those along to the members as well. We believe each of these reports can serve as a vital resource, not only to our school board members, but to the broader educational community, as well as key policy makers such as yourselves, as we chart a path forward for our students. I hope you'll give them due consideration, and please let us know if you'd like to further discuss any aspect of the reports.

As for the safe reopening of schools -- it goes without saying that board of education members are certainly eager to reopen their respective district facilities and return students to in-person instruction as soon as possible. Obviously, doing so safely and without risking the health of students or staff is of paramount importance. Once we are able to get more teachers and staff vaccinated, we can then return to in-person learning, and districts will be able to focus their time, energy, and resources on the issues that are the focus of today's hearing -- addressing learning loss and the social/emotional impact of the pandemic on students.

Currently, it is unclear when enough people will be vaccinated to make a return to some semblance of normalcy possible. And unfortunately, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines has been disappointingly slow. Additionally, teachers and other school personnel have not been given the level of prioritization to receive the vaccine, which is essential to reopening schools to more in-person instruction.

At the request of many of our members, the NJ School Boards Association has drafted a sample resolution urging the Governor to give appropriate priority in the statewide administration of the vaccine to all public school district personnel. Many have or plan to adopt this resolution, and we certainly appreciate the support of this body to urge that those teachers be given the priority we believe they desperately need.

No conversation surrounding the reopening of schools can occur without emphasizing what all districts can certainly use more of, and that's financial resources. Districts have and will continue to incur expenses that they never could have planned or budgeted for when COVID-19 took over the world last March. Even before the pandemic, the State had failed to meet

its existing obligations under the school funding formula. And while we appreciate that the Legislature and Governor Murphy have made a concerted effort in recent years to increase overall education funding, we believe more needs to be done. Flat funding will not be sufficient for another year, so it's critically important that the State prioritize increased funding for schools in the next State budget so that they have the financial resources to confront the learning and SEL needs of students.

The State funding has fallen short of what districts need; Federal assistance also remains woefully inadequate. Fortunately, our elected representatives in Washington did pass the most recent, long-awaited COVID relief package in December, and this is what we consider an important first step, as New Jersey is slated to receive approximately \$1.2 billion of the \$54 billion dedicated to K through 12 school reopening efforts. This equals about four times what the State received in the CARES Act last spring. However, it still falls significantly short of the \$200 billion our partners at the National School Boards Association estimates we'll eventually need, and President Biden's \$1.2 trillion stimulus proposal would provide an additional \$130 billion for K through 12 schools. And we're hopeful that Congress will take swift action to approve this desperately needed assistance.

As for social/emotional needs and mental health -- while these were serious concerns before the pandemic, they've generated increased attention during this extended period of social isolation. And fortunately, as illustrated in NJSBA's most recent report on the impact of the pandemic, a compilation of national and State data, an NJSBA survey shows that, for the most part, the worst has not occurred. Although student suicides and

incidents of self-harm remain at disturbingly high levels, the pandemic, apparently, has not created a new wave of incidents. This should not be interpreted to mean that the pandemic has not had any impact on the mental health of students.

I just want to make a few recommendations of some of our proposals of what can be done.

Obviously, as mentioned earlier, more Federal and State aid is needed. We should give consideration to postponing or providing flexibility around high-stakes, federally required assessments, as these can be stressful and take time and resources away from providing mental health services and maintaining educational programs.

There's a five-bill package sponsored by Majority Leader Greenwald, that we've been actively supporting, that would enhance mental health services. We encourage you to strengthen and preserve the School-Based Youth Services Program, which was threatened with elimination in the last budget. We believe this needs to be maintained, if not strengthened, in an increased budget. And we need to develop long-term recovery plans.

And the learning loss issue I do address in my written testimony. I hope you'll give it due consideration, and I look forward to continued conversations.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Jonathan; much appreciated.

I know it's hard to not share everything that you have, but we are getting everything in writing, and we will read it, I promise.

Next up, Cathy Lindenbaum, New Jersey PTA President.

Cathy.

**CATHY LINDENBAUM:** Thank you.

Yes, good morning, and thank you Chairwoman Jasey and the Joint Committee for having me here today.

Twenty twenty-one has begun; and although we are still faced with many of the same challenges of 2020, we at New Jersey PTA are inspired to think that 2021 will bring a renewed strength and hope. With the anticipation that vaccines will help control the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the tremendous efforts of our education leaders and school staff, these challenges will subside.

Our struggles have not been few, but we have many challenges ahead of us. We are here, and we continue to support all efforts to ensure our children and families have a voice.

New Jersey PTA, along with our parent organization, the National PTA, supports requirements for reopening schools with appropriate health and safety guidelines that protect every student, faculty, and staff member. We also advocate that each district has individualized plans for reopening their schools based on their communities' and students' needs.

As seen from the broader side of things, not any two school districts in New Jersey are precisely the same. Teams must be working together to reopen schools, including stakeholders from the community, school staff, boards of education, and, most importantly, parents and guardians. Parents and guardians are the direct connection between the school district and the students. By including parents and guardians, these teams are showing that they want the input and ideas from the stakeholders

that, at the end of the day, will decide if their child will be entering the school building or not.

Through 2020, we have joined forces with the New Jersey Department of Education, the New Jersey Education Association, New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, New Jersey Association of School Administrators, and the Association of School Business Officials. Along with these organizations and many State-level advocacy organizations, we have set it as our continued mission to ensure that children's education remains a priority, supports students and staff, and keeps them safe.

New Jersey PTA knows there have been, and will continue to be, many challenges in the future that we must continue and to address. In light of all this, we must focus on a fair and equitable education for all students, regardless of the school building or zip code. We need to ensure that school districts are equipped and continue to make educational technology and broadband capabilities available to each student in need of it. There is no possible way for education in 2021 to be fair and equitable if every student doesn't have the ability to complete their assignments on a school-issued device with appropriate broadband capabilities to ensure they can take part in the educational program, assignment, or task.

National PTA and New Jersey PTA's primary focus area is researching and advocating for funds and resources to address all students' and the staff's health, safety, and welfare.

So you have copies of my testimony.

What I want to say is that we really have to fight for funding, we have to support parents, we have to support the teachers, we have to support the staff. Without the funding to do this, none of this stuff can happen. And

we want it to be fair and equitable for all students, not just for the parents and the students in the wealthier areas.

So I did send in my testimony; thank you for the time.

And if there are any questions, you can please get in touch with me, and I'll be more than happy to answer anything.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Cathy; and we will do that.

I failed to say that after Cathy, are Harry Lee and TJ Best from the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association; and they will be followed by Judy Savage.

H A R R Y L E E: Thank you, Assemblywoman Jasey and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools.

I want to thank you for allowing us to address this Committee on this very important topic.

I want to especially thank Co-Chairs Senator Rice and Assemblywoman Jasey for this opportunity.

My name is Harry Lee, and I am the President of the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association.

When we talk to our school leaders, they tell us things are not okay, their families are not okay. As the Acting Commissioner noted, as well as others, this pandemic has disproportionately impacted low-income families, which are the families that public charter schools serve. We have 57,000 students in charters today, another 36,000 on wait lists, and 3 out of 4 public charter school students come from low-income backgrounds. Our kids attend school primarily in our urban centers in Newark, Camden, Paterson, Trenton, and Plainfield.

And during this challenging time, I've been amazed at how public charter schools have gone above and beyond to meet the needs of our most vulnerable students and families. This is a time to reimagine public education and how to meet the needs of all learners.

We did a survey in the fall with our schools, and I want to share with you learnings from some of the most innovative public schools in the state.

In-person learning. While most urban districts in the state are providing only virtual instruction, some public charter schools in Newark, Camden, Paterson, Trenton, and Jersey City have been able to provide a much-needed hybrid option -- an in-person option for families. And my colleague TJ Best is going to share his personal experience about that shortly.

Our charter schools are working more directly with students and families to increase participation in student engagement -- which is a huge issue -- with more check-ins, home visits, and monthly small group events. They have increased staffing, such as having two teachers in each room, and smaller class sizes. And they are providing more engaging and creative instruction.

Of the schools we surveyed, 90 percent stated that their average daily attendance rate was 90 percent or higher. How is this happening? In exchange for high levels of accountability, public charter schools typically have more flexibility over school operations than traditional districts, especially around staffing, budgets, and curriculum.

So here are some real life examples.

Discovery Charter School Newark calls every single student every single day. KITT Newark is providing kindergarten at night for families who

are unable to log in during the day. College Achieve Paterson is providing a daily virtual tutoring program for all students in grades K-9. Great Oaks Legacy Charter School in Newark opened a remote learning hub for students in September. They had a few students who had not logged into a single class; but once the hub opened up, they were fully engaged in the remote learning experience. They simply needed a safe, technology-enabled place to go. Cresthaven Academy in Plainfield promoted a teacher to Dean of School Culture to continue to support social/emotional learning, monitor attendance, and lead special events. Additionally, they offer daily tech support office hours and parent training sessions around Google classroom, in both English and Spanish. And Paul Robeson Charter School in Trenton set up an advisory system to facilitate one-on-one check-ins, at least weekly, with every student and family. They're doing regular mental health hours, and family surveys are issued regularly to assess COVID impacts.

I could keep going, but I know we're out of time. I'm going to stop and turn it over to my colleague TJ to share his experience.

**T J B E S T:** Thank you, Harry; and thank you Chairs Rice and Jasey for this opportunity.

In addition to serving as Director of Government Affairs for the New Jersey Public Charter Schools Association, I also have a more important title of father of two. As educators, we understand that no computer can replace the quality of in-person instruction from a caring, competent, educated teacher.

Virtual instruction does not always translate into virtual learning; and the learning loss and achievement gap in SDA districts, such as in my hometown of Paterson, is only widening.

Initially hesitant to enroll our son into in-person hybrid instruction at College Achieve Paterson Charter School, our minds were put at ease after reviewing the health and safety plan presented to us by school leaders. With reduced class sizes, staggered starting times, mask mandates, social distancing, and sanitation stations throughout the building, we allow our son to attend school in-person, which has been beneficial to his academic and social growth.

My daughter, who attends traditional public school, unfortunately did not have this same option, and still does not. The thought of missing over a year of in-person instruction caused us to transfer our daughter to a school district that was providing hybrid instruction.

So what can we do to get to the point where all students can get back to in-person instruction? We have four simple suggestions; you've already heard some.

Really quickly, I just wanted to point out a couple again. Vaccination priorities for all teachers. The only way to increase teacher confidence is to have the ability to have them vaccinated.

Second is free COVID testing. Our State should provide free COVID testing to schools the same way as they do in New York and Massachusetts.

Third, increased funding for facilities, and equal funding. Schools, on average, are spending 10 to 15 percent more than they had planned to at the beginning of the year; and in charter schools, on average, we are receiving \$4,300 less per pupil and still providing the same quality of education as our traditional school districts.

And lastly, staffing solution: Our Association fully supports Senator Ruiz's Teacher Diversity Bill, which provides more flexibility for teacher certification. The passage of this Bill will provide schools with increased pool teachers for selecting, particularly teachers of color.

We thank you so much for your time and consideration in these matters.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you so much, TJ.

Let's see, I've lost my way on this list; I apologize. Oh, I'm sorry -- Judy Savage from the Vo-Tech schools; followed by Rosa Acerra, Executive Director of We Raise New Jersey; and Patricia Morgan, New JerseyCAN.

Okay; so Judy, are you still with us I hope?

**JUDY SAVAGE:** I am indeed.

Thank you very much, Assemblywoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you.

MS. SAVAGE: Thank you members of the Joint Committee for the chance to speak today on behalf of the New Jersey Council of County Vocational-Technical Schools.

I want to use my time to really focus on the unique issues for providing career and technical education throughout this pandemic.

Many of our 35,000 secondary students are in career programs that are really in essential areas, like healthcare, construction trades, manufacturing, and public safety. These careers have been front and center as our state has responded to the COVID-19 emergency. And other career programs that our students pursue are really in areas that are going to be absolutely essential to New Jersey's post-pandemic economic recovery.

I think we've all surprised ourselves with our adaptability this year, but I just have to ask: Can you imagine the difficulties of trying to teach or learn hair styling, automotive repair, or welding via Zoom? Our teachers have really been nothing short of heroic. Last spring, they quickly upped their tech skills and pivoted to hands-on instruction to adapt their lessons to a virtual environment. Their creativity and commitment has really been inspiring. We've seen everything from teachers putting GoPro cameras on their heads while they demonstrate automotive repair, to districts sending home Go-Boxes of things like kitchen tools for their culinary students, face mannequins for their cosmetology students, and fiber optic kits for green building students to practice wiring and programming thermostats.

While remote learning is still in the mix, our County Vocational Schools have really prioritized in-person CTE instructing so that students could get back into their highly specialized shops and labs this fall.

Our students come from many different sending school districts; it makes scheduling very challenging, especially for those students called *shared time* who take their academic classes in a local high school and come to the vocational school for their career and technical education.

Certainly most students are getting less time in their CTE labs this year, but their teachers and administrators are doing their best to maximize that hands-on, in-person experience.

One area that is definitely suffering this year is work-based learning. It's an important part of career programs, but we know that many employers are either operating remotely or they're just reluctant to bring in additional people because of social distancing. And this has limited things like internships, site visits, and job shadowing. Still, our schools are doing

whatever they can to find authentic work experiences for students, sometimes remotely, sometimes jobs within the school.

As they've done for each of the past 11 months, our schools will continue to go above and beyond to meet students where they are and help them achieve their full potential. We totally concur with all the previous speakers, both about the need for additional resources and about the potential negative consequences of focusing too much on standardized testing, and not enough on the whole student.

Along with closely monitoring and addressing learning gaps, our County Vocational Schools are developing plans to help their CTE students tune up their technical skills to be ready for their licensing or certification exams, to make sure they can fulfill any CTE requirements for certain credentials. We're looking at all options, like summer and weekend programs, particularly to help graduating students make sure they are job-ready.

With respect to the essential resources, particularly Federal funds, I think it's just important to note that, so far, these funds have been allocated based on the Title I funding formula, which prioritizes funding for economically disadvantaged students. Certainly, those students and their districts have the greater needs; but it is important to understand that COVID has decimated the budgets for all types of districts and the limited additional Federal funds provided to higher-wealth districts, simply will not even come close to helping with the PPE cost, the retrofits, and the additional academic learning and socio-economic needs. More resources are definitely needed.

So with that, thank you so much for the opportunity to say a few words today, and thank you for focusing on this important issue.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Judy. It's good to see you as well.

Rose Acerra.

**R O S E A C E R R A:** Sure, thank you.

Thank you to the Committee for this opportunity to testify today on behalf of We Raise New Jersey.

We Raise New Jersey is a statewide coalition of leaders representing students, parents, families, educators, administrators, policymakers, business and industries, partnering to advance an inclusive and equitable vision for the success of our state students in the 21st century.

We represent over 200,000 New Jerseyans from across the state, dedicated to the equitable education for all. We are proud that students and educators directly influence our advocacy efforts, and I want to share two quick examples of our work.

Under the leadership of member organization Parent Impact, 13 outstanding students from across New Jersey were selected for our new Youth Leadership Ambassador Program. This program provides training, and mentorship, and civic engagement, and education policy, and stipends for student participation.

Under the leadership of member organization JerseyCAN, we also launched a Teacher Leader Policy Fellowship, where we engage 12 diverse educators to participate in policy and advocacy training and dialogue.

Following the onset of COVID-19 last March, we began to focus on addressing the needs of students, families, and educators throughout the

pandemic. We and they are all interested in having students return to in-person instruction, as it is essential for learning and allowing parents to return to work. We must advance this priority, while keeping a keen eye on safety and work conditions.

Further, we must ensure students are physically present and socially and emotionally ready to learn. We must prioritize students' social/emotional well-being. While the pandemic is unprecedented, it gives us the opportunity to set a new precedent, while developing models that will address our children, families, and educators' needs, now and in the future.

With all this in mind, I would like to share our three priorities that would advance inclusion and equity throughout the evolving pandemic and beyond.

First, you must expand and ensure connectivity and virtual instruction for all students. Regardless of whether and when districts offer in-person instruction, we must provide equitable access to online learning now and for the future.

Last month, we hosted a webinar to discuss the digital divide, and heard from experts and community members from across New Jersey. We posted a video and resources related to this event on our website. The key recommendations are in the written testimony I sent to Rebecca yesterday to share with you.

Second, we believe schools and districts must transparently diagnose current learning levels to accommodate individual student needs. We must understand what students are learning or missing, and set ambitious, but achievable goals, and focus on the whole child. This starts with strong partnerships between the teacher, student, and family. Last year,

under the leadership of member organization New Jersey PTA, we worked with the national nonprofit Learning Heroes to research New Jersey families' needs emerging from the pandemic, detailed the findings both in English and Spanish. But overall, we learned that parents' top concern for the current school year was safety, followed by the social and educational impact of COVID on their children.

We also learned that parents have an inflated perception of student achievement. Over 90 percent of parents believe their students are performing at an above average level in reading and math; but in reality, close to half of New Jersey students were achieving at that level before -- at less than that level before the pandemic.

Finally, we learned that parents feel more connected to their child's teachers than ever before, and want to be more involved and informed.

Our third goal is to ensure the use of quality curriculum, instruction, and materials, and reinforce high expectations. All New Jersey students deserve access to a rigorous curriculum and differentiated instruction that provides what they need to achieve. At the same time, our educators deserve robust and relevant professional development and training so that they feel equipped to meet the students' and families' needs.

Some of the insights were shared with us by Teacher Policy Leader Fellows, such as Ben Kleiner, a 5th grade teacher in Toms River, who explained it was essential that students and family became proficient in using platforms, because that was going to be their main source of communications every time they switched instructional model.

Jersey City Middle School teacher Roseangela Mendoza said, “We’re not just a school, we’re family. Whatever we do, together or as individuals, we should benefit everyone within our community.”

We Raise New Jersey applauds educators’ efforts like these, and envisions a future where all students have access to similar experiences.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. If I could leave you with just one imperative thought, it is that we listen to our students, our educators, parents, and families, and the full range of stakeholders at the local and State level, to address the challenges before us. We Raise New Jersey is here to collaborate with you on these issues; our only way together (*sic*) is together.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Rose; much appreciate it.

And I believe last, but certainly not least, is Patricia Morgan, the Executive Director of JerseyCAN.

**PATRICIA MORGAN:** Good morning, Chairwoman, and thank you to the members of the Committee for allowing us to testify today.

As the Chairwoman said, my name is Patricia Morgan, and I’m the Executive Director of JerseyCAN. I’m also the mother of three daughters, two of whom are home today having a virtual snow day. So I offer my perspectives not only as an education advocate, but also as a parent of school-age children.

At the outset, I just want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of our district leaders, teachers, and the countless other individuals who are in our schools helping support our students every day. Their efforts cannot be

understated. As a parent, I am just so grateful to know that my daughters have access to high-quality educators every day, who are really helping them through such a traumatic time in their childhood.

I want to start by acknowledging some of the long-standing, persistent achievement gaps that Rose spoke about a moment ago. We know that New Jersey has suffered these achievement gaps for a long time; and my concern, and JerseyCAN's concern, is that this pandemic has the potential to drastically exacerbate those achievement gaps and really create educational inequities for an entire generation of students. We are almost one year into the pandemic; 11 months in. Now is really the time to double down on our efforts to close opportunity gaps, accelerate learning, and meet students' social and emotional needs.

And I want to offer three things that I believe the pandemic and school closures have made clear.

First, the research. Research is showing steep learning deficits. You heard our Acting Commissioner speak about those learning deficits, as well as so many others on this call today. But I really want to put a point on those numbers.

There's been one study that has given color as to what those deficits might look like in New Jersey. It's a CREDO study, and the estimates show that for reading, New Jersey students might have experienced anywhere from 174 days of lost learning in reading -- so almost an entire school year -- or they may have gained, actually, some marginal gains, especially in our districts where we know students are reading and have supportive parents at home.

In math, New Jersey students may have experienced learning loss as large as 464 days -- that's almost three school years -- or as small as 58 days. We just don't know quite yet. Even more troubling is another study from NWEA, which the Acting Commissioner did know as well. That study-- I'm not going to actually talk about the days of learning loss; I'm actually going to tell you something that's even more troubling and disturbing. That learning loss study uncovered that there are students missing. When the researchers looked at the data, they found that our most vulnerable students, our low-income students, our black and brown students, are actually missing from the datasets. They didn't take the assessments. We need to know and understand why.

So respectfully, I implore the Joint Committee, as well as the other education stakeholders and decision-makers at the State level -- we need to know the extent of the learning loss here in New Jersey. And I actually agree with Dr. Zywicki. Other states have focused on learning loss and have remediation plans in place; and we need to move in that direction as well. However, we should not wait for those studies to look at implementing programs to help families.

And I'm going to scoot to that now, Chairwoman Jasey.

We really need to look at innovative programs now. There are really promising programs around school tutoring, which can allow for high-dosage, high-impact tutoring to students anywhere in the state, where individual teachers can meet the students where they are now. Tennessee has created a tutoring corps; we should look at doing the same in New Jersey. We should also be looking at and exploring the intensive summer programming, making sure thousands of students -- not just those who are

traditionally served, but those who we know are falling behind -- can be served this summer.

And finally, I want to reiterate one of the questions from earlier -- about giving parents the ability to make a determination about whether their children should be retained. Parents know what their children have been through this last year. They know, keenly, what has happened in the actual home, and what has happened at school. They should have an active part in the conversation, and ultimate determination as to whether they want to choose to give their child the gift of time to understand the academic content for which our school systems exist, in order to allow their child to succeed academically and socially.

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you very much.

I want to thank everyone who has testified today. There's a lot of information to digest and to consider.

Because we have 11 minutes left in our Zoom, I would like to ask members if you would like to-- First of all, we have some new members. Would you like to introduce yourselves? And secondly, I would encourage you to send any questions that you have to our Executive Director, Becky Sapp, and we will make every attempt to have them addressed.

And I also remind you that on March 9 we will be meeting again to-- This is just the beginning of what will probably be a number of not just conversations, but explorations of where do we go from here. The pandemic has certainly put, under a real spotlight, the inequities that we knew existed; but now we have the opportunity, I think, to address them aggressively.

So let me open it up to members -- if there's anyone who would like to speak.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DiMASO: Madam Chair?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN DiMASO: Assemblywoman DiMaso. For those who don't know me, I represent Legislative District 13.

I have a series of questions that I'm going to send to the Commissioner, or the Acting Commissioner, for now. It was unfortunate she didn't have more time for us.

I'm a little concerned that we are waiting an entire month to have another meeting. I know schedules are sometimes tight, but before you know it, the school year is going to be over and kids are not returning to school. And we need-- Kids need the socialization. We're seeing a lot of issues with our young people, and so we need to get them back in school.

So I would hope that, maybe-- I know you have it March 9; but maybe there will be another one shortly after that, and we make some recommendations, very quickly, to the Department of Education and the Department of Health. And maybe we have the Department of Health Commissioner on our next meeting to give us some information.

You know, I'm certainly interested in some of the things that were said today, about three feet versus six feet, and perhaps helping with plexiglass -- or whatever it is we have to do to get children back in school. And make it-- And the initiative of -- teachers get their flu shot (*sic*) from the nurses -- or from the nurse's office; and maybe CVS comes in and helps. So maybe there's some initiative we can do there.

But I would really appreciate it if we could move along a little more quickly, being that the school year ends in June. And in some cases, if you're in private schools, it ends in May. I like to say the more you pay, the less you go. So kids sometimes get out in May. So if we could move that along, that would be my wish for this Committee.

Thank you; I appreciate your time. Thank you for putting this together to begin with, at all.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblywoman; noted definitely.

Is there anyone else who would like to speak?

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Yes; Chairwoman Jasey?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN WIMBERLY: Yes; I absorbed everything that was said today. And some things sound very ideal.

In my largest city that I represent, Paterson, you have 19 buildings over 100 years old. As a District, we've been underfunded the previous 10 years of over \$300 million. We've cut staff -- close to 400 to 500 staff members. I just want to make sure, in this process, that there are no penalties -- that these districts will, on top of some of the learning loss in-person issues that we face with special ed and bilingual student, English as a Second Language students -- that's brought into consideration by the Administration.

And I will send-- I've spoken previously to the Commissioner, and it's just a major concern. It's a major concern when it comes to their mental health, physical health -- all the issues that we face already, without

the pandemic, have been exacerbated because of the pandemic. So we will be in a recovery mode when it comes to getting our kids physically fit -- it's important -- and mentally fit. Some of them -- when you're living in a two-bedroom with eight people, that is a mental health hazard on a regular basis; but when you do it under these circumstances, it creates 10 times the amount that we're facing.

So I look forward to additional hearings so we can work on this for each and every student.

And I think the same could be said for many of our residents of rural areas when it comes to some of the issues that we talked about today -- Wi-Fi and things, access and all that stuff. So this is not just an urban issue, this is a statewide, a nationwide issue.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblyman.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Madam Chairwoman Jasey?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes, Senator.

SENATOR O'SCANLON: Thank you very much for putting this together. It was really productive.

I did make some comments at the beginning -- so I won't reiterate those -- other than to say that virtually everything we've heard today strengthens, I think, all of our belief in how important in-person learning is for our children, how negatively impactful a lack of in-person learning is.

Assemblyman Wimberly just mentioned, again -- and we all need to stress -- that there's a disproportionate impact on our lower-income kids and kids at a disadvantage to begin with. So it needs to be all our focus to get kids back in school in a healthy way and to keep them there.

And I can't stress enough the need for a revision of the State guidelines, out of the Health Department and the Department of Education, to enable and empower our local officials to keep schools open, or get them reopened. I think that's absolutely critical.

Thank you for everyone who did chime in today. It was really informative and appreciated.

Lastly, I think we are going to have to make an effort to get teachers vaccinated. I'll echo Assemblywoman DiMaso's comments. We need to get creative about that, and do it now. Hopefully, the Governor will include teachers in the next round of folks who are eligible; it's only fair to them. We want them in the classrooms. We think they could do it safely, but it's even better if they're vaccinated. It's not a necessity, but we need to make an effort to prioritize them.

Again, thank you very much, Chairwoman.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: Chairwoman Jasey?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN REYNOLDS-JACKSON: I want to thank you for this opportunity.

I am new to this Joint Committee, and I have learned a tremendous amount.

I have been in contact with a lot of the advocates on the call throughout my tenure in the Assembly. And we all want our children and our teachers to be safe in returning. I think it's an excellent idea that we bring the Department of Health Commissioner to collaborate with the

Department of Education in trying to figure out what the best practice is for everyone to return.

I think there's no doubt on this call that we all want schools to reopen; but we want to do it safely, and to address some of the underlying issues that have been just prominently on display right now in our urban areas, as well as our suburban and rural areas. And we don't want to be harmed any further. I think Assemblyman Wimberly, you pointed out a lot of the issues that we face here, with our city of Trenton; in our school districts throughout the state. But it is a crisis that -- we just don't want to be harmed any further, as we already tried to build equity in the education system.

So thank you so much, and I look forward to working with you all.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Assemblywoman.

Yes, Senator Thompson.

SENATOR THOMPSON: The bottom line -- we need to do whatever is necessary to get the students back in school ASAP. Because as was said, there are all kinds of problems occurring for the students, etc., and we need to take action immediately to get it done.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN JASEY: Thank you, Senator.

And I want to thank all my colleagues for being on and being attentive, and we will be in touch in terms of the next meeting.

I made a note that perhaps DOE and DOH both need to be on our next meeting to address the issues that have been raised today.

And so with that, I would like to thank everyone for their participation. We will have fewer speakers next time so that we can have more discussion. But I think today it was important to get as wide a range

of points of view as possible. And I think we're in real agreement, in terms of the need to address the many problems that have been raised and highlighted by this pandemic.

It's going to be a slow slog back, but I think -- I believe we can do it. We have all this expertise, and information, and experience represented today; and I think that by harnessing it we can come out of this stronger for our students and our families here in New Jersey.

So with that, I want to wish you all well, stay healthy, and we will push for the vaccines. I've been advocating for it, and will continue to do so, for our educators.

Thank you very much. And thank you to Becky and Ivy; you guys have been terrific, and I look forward to you sending this information, all the testimony, out to every member.

Thank you so much. Be well.

**(MEETING CONCLUDED)**