
OUR CHILDREN/OUR SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Who is part of the Our Children Our Schools Campaign?

Our Children Our Schools is a coalition of some of New Jersey's most prominent education advocacy and civil rights groups.

The groups who have signed onto the campaign principles include Abbott Leadership Institute, ACORN, BlueWaveNJ, Committee of Advocates for Newark's Children, Education Law Center, Hispanic Directors' Association of New Jersey, League of Women Voters, NAACP (State Chapter and local branches in Irvington, the Oranges and Maplewood), New Jersey Black Issues Convention, New Jersey Education Organizing Collaborative, the Paterson Education Fund, Statewide Education Organizing Committee, Trenton CHANGE, and ValueNJ.

(Note to members: Other groups who have come to the table but have not yet signed onto OCOS are: Aspira, Association for Children of New Jersey, Fund for an Open Society, New Jersey Business and Industry Association, Urban League of Hudson County)

What do you stand for?

All New Jersey kids deserve great schools no matter where they live.

All New Jersey families expect their public schools to prepare their kids to grow into adults who can meet the demands of today's society and take a meaningful role in their community.

Our school funding system is about making schools better for kids who live in some of our state's poorest neighborhoods. Let's build on that, not erase it.

What made you come together?

When the Governor called on the legislature to create a new school funding formula we all wanted to urge them to show their commitment to excellent public schools for children no matter where they live and maintain their support for children in the poorest urban school districts.

We all agree that excellent public education for all children is absolutely essential to our state's long-term prosperity.

We all want the new funding formula to preserve the equity commitments embodied in the New Jersey Supreme Court's Abbott decisions *and* extend them to *all* children with special needs (children from low-income households and neighborhoods, children with disabilities, and English language learners) no matter where they live.

Because we want New Jersey to maintain its place as a leader in the national movement for educational equity.

Why are you doing this now?

Because the legislature is considering school funding right now.

Because the new funding formula provides an opportunity for us to build on New Jersey's history of leadership in education equity

Because a new funding formula provides an opportunity to do right by all children

Soon, the administration is expected to unveil its proposal to revamp the school funding formula.

What would you like to see in a new funding formula?

It should be based on credible estimates of what it costs to educate children to the state's standards.

"Abbott plus:" funding for the programs and services that children need to attain the knowledge and skills embodied in the state standards.

It needs to provide additional funding to make sure that LEP, special ed children, and children from low-income families can meet the state's standards.

We would like to see an increase in the state share of education costs to bring us up to the national average.

What should the special committee take away from the expert testimony?

New Jersey was commended for its excellent graduation rates and for having the highest minority graduation rates in the nation in particular. (Molly Hunter, ACCESS Project, Teachers College, Columbia University)

Studies show that it costs a more to educate disadvantaged children than it does children from more affluent households. It also costs more to educate children who are learning English as a second language and children with disabilities. (John Yinger, Professor of Education Policy at Syracuse University and Jay Chambers from the American Institutes of Research)

National experts think that good funding formulas should be adequate, just, flexible, predictable, and produce the desired results. Maryland's formula comes closest to meeting all 6 criteria. (Michael Griffiths, from the National Conference on State Legislatures)

New Jersey's state share of school spending is low compared to the national average. As a result, NJ relies heavily on local property taxes to fund schools. (Michael Griffiths, NCSL)

What about the NJDOE's Cost Study people have been talking about? Is that a good beginning for a funding formula?

Absolutely not. We agree with experts Rutgers Law Professor Paul Tractenberg, University of Pennsylvania Professor Peg Goertz, and the experts hired by the State who all found serious flaws in the study. Some of the study's flaws were:

- It was not based on credible numbers.
- It repeats the mistakes made in CEIFA (the old funding law), especially relying on hypothetical models of school districts that don't bear a resemblance to NJ school districts
- It doesn't provide the resources, programs, and services guaranteed to children under Abbott
- Procedures the NJDOE used to conduct the study were too secretive and not rigorous enough to be considered worthy of basing a school funding law on it.

If we don't have a good cost study, then what should we do now?

ELC, OC/OS and the Committee of Advocates are releasing their own cost studies this fall.

It's more important to get it right than to do it fast.

In the meantime, the legislature ensure that all schools have better resources to deliver a high quality education and to ease residents' property tax burdens.

But people say that Abbott doesn't work. What makes you think that "Abbott plus" will work?

Actually, Abbott has shown some tangible, positive results:

- There are now more than 40,000 children in high quality preschool programs in the Abbott districts.
- Teachers in the program have college degrees and are state-certified.
- Abbott preschool programs are aligned with the state core curriculum standards.
- A recent study by the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers shows that kids who attend Abbott preschool are entering Kindergarten with significant, positive gains in literacy and math skills.
- Abbott 4th graders have cut the achievement gap with non-Abbott districts in half – in both language arts and literacy and in math.
- Since the poorest cities have received equalized funding, they have had smaller class sizes, full-day Kindergarten, and better technology in the classroom.
- Graduation rates have increased in New Jersey's poorest cities. New Jersey has the highest minority graduation rates in the nation.

Finally, Abbott's been in place just seven years after decades of disinvestment and underfunding in our state's poorest urban school districts. Reason suggests that it's going to take more than a few years of time and effort to fulfill the promise embodied in Abbott. Now is *not* the time to pull the plug on over 300,000 kids.

Do you think the broader public agrees with you?

We know they do. Monmouth University just ran a poll that clearly shows New Jerseyans are not willing to compromise education quality in their pursuit of lower property taxes.

It also shows that New Jersey families accept the responsibility to ensure that every child in the state has access to an excellent education.

A majority of New Jerseyans favor providing additional state aid where it is needed.

What about accountability?

No matter where the money comes from to pay for schools, we all need to make sure that it is being used effectively and efficiently to educate the children.

A recent Monmouth University poll showed that New Jerseyans want to see stronger accountability in all school districts.

The State must assume responsibility for making sure that "Abbott-plus" and associated school reform approaches, are working properly.

We need an accountability system that works. A new accountability system should include benchmarks to measure educational progress that are reported to the public on a regular basis to keep the public informed, clear lines of responsibility and proven methods for correcting inadequate performance.

We also need to remember that accountability applies to schools, school districts, and the state alike. All levels have responsibilities to the children.

Where is the money (revenue) going to come from?

The lawmakers must figure out where this money is going to come from. Our concerns at this point are that the funding sources they identify be predictable and sustainable in the long-term, and equitable and fair (not regressive).

It will take more, not less, money to ensure that all kids get great schools.

We encourage lawmakers to look at a variety of strategies used in other states and evaluate them according to what makes the most sense and is the most equitable.

What does OC/OS do to accomplish its goals?

Over the past several months, OC/OS members have worked together in a variety of ways to support a better school funding formula including:

- Testifying at public hearings
- Hosting or co-hosting statewide forums including:
 - ✓ January 2007 PEF Education Summit entitled “Extending the Promise of Abbott to all of New Jersey’s Children” attended by over 200 education stakeholders
 - ✓ March 2007 PEI forum entitled *The Cost of an adequate education in New Jersey: Where Do We Go from Here?*
- Communicating our concerns to elected and appointed officials
- Through meetings, teleconferences, and our monthly e-newsletter: sharing information and analyses of developments in school funding and property tax reform

What should New Jerseyans do right now?

Send letters to their legislators and to Governor Corzine to tell them you are *not* willing to compromise education to achieve lower taxes and that you support extending educational opportunity to all children in New Jersey.

Go to e-advocacy websites at www.givekidsgoodschools.org/nj, www.acnj.org, and www.abbottleadership.org where you can send an already written letter.

Get your organization to sign up: contact harrisj12@hotmail.com, lhirsch@edlawcenter.org, rosieg@paterson-education.org, or dspietro@hdanj.org

Stay informed. Email info@ourchildrenourschools.org to get the OC/OS newsletters and circulate them to everyone you know.