



Our Children/Our Schools Education Policy Priorities and Recommendations for Lawmakers

September 2024

Executive Summary

In this brief, [Our Children/Our Schools](#) (OC/OS), a statewide network of New Jersey education, children’s rights and civil rights organizations that share a commitment to supporting public school students and schools, outlines important education policy priorities and presents recommendations to inform state policymakers.

I. Reform School Funding

While the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) is fully funded in the FY25 State Budget, there is still work to be done to ensure that the formula is working effectively and that all public schools have the resources they need to provide a constitutionally mandated “thorough and efficient” education for their students. We recommend the following:

1. Because the SFRA is now 16 years old, the Legislature should undertake an in-depth study of the SFRA and the Local Fair Share (LFS) calculation in the formula to ensure the formula is providing adequate resources. This should include a robust community engagement process and consultation with school finance experts.
2. Reasonable caps on state aid reductions should be implemented in future years to avoid the annual disruptions and uncertainty in school district budgets due to budget cuts.
3. The 2% property tax cap should be lifted for districts with school levies below their LFS.

II. Reform Special Education Funding

Census-based special education funding has caused severe inequities, and over 60% of districts received funding for fewer special education students than they actually enrolled in 2022-23. We recommend the following:

1. Legislators should convene finance experts and meet with stakeholders to craft a system that better meets the actual special education funding needs of school districts. The SFRA should be amended to reflect this input.

III. Reject Private School Vouchers

Legislation to establish the state’s first private school voucher program through a tax credit mechanism was introduced in early 2024, but subsequently withdrawn. While the proposed program was capped at \$37.5 million, examples from other states show that small voucher programs can quickly expand and have debilitating impacts on state budgets. We recommend the following:

1. Legislative leaders must reject any future education privatization efforts to ensure taxpayer dollars flow to public schools and do not subsidize tuition at private or religious schools.

IV. Fund the School Construction Program

The state has a constitutional obligation to fund capital and emergent projects in the thirty-one former Abbott districts, now referred to as SDA districts. The FY25 State Budget included only \$50 million for school construction, and over \$7 billion is needed to alleviate overcrowding and replace aging buildings in the SDA districts. We recommend the following:

1. Dedicated funding must be established for the school construction program, either through direct appropriation, the Debt Defeasance and Prevention Fund, or bond authorization.
2. \$30 million must be provided to fund the Buildings Conditions and Assessment Survey, first recommended by the SDA in 2019. The survey will provide uniform, comprehensive information about the number and types of capital maintenance and emergent project needs in the SDA districts.

V. Fund Community Schools

The community schools model allows schools to work collaboratively with students, parents, and teachers to identify the needs of the school community and develop a unique plan for that school and neighborhood. Community schools are proven to be an effective strategy for addressing students' needs. We recommend the following:

1. The Legislature should support A4107/S2243, a five-year pilot initiative that would expand community schools to an additional school in each of the state's twenty-one counties.
2. The Governor and Legislature should establish a line-item appropriation for community schools in all future state budgets to allow all public schools to become community schools.

VI. Fund Healing Centered Engagement (HCE)

The collective uncertainties and resulting traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic have severely impacted students, families, and school personnel, and educators are increasingly called on to meet the social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students. Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a model for improving the well-being of students and the adults who serve them in schools. We recommend the following:

1. The state should explore expanding the HCE model to every school so that all schools can address students' needs in holistic ways, considering their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being. All future state budgets should include an appropriation for HCE.

VII. Integrate New Jersey's Segregated Public Schools

New Jersey's public school system is among the most segregated in the country, largely due to residential segregation and the state's requirement that most students attend schools within the districts where they reside. We recommend the following:

1. The state should engage in public conversations with diverse stakeholder groups about the benefits of school integration for all students and ways to ameliorate segregation in New Jersey's school system.
2. The state should engage in research and data collection related to desegregation, spearhead planning and implementation of desegregation policies, and provide support and technical assistance to districts and localities in desegregation efforts.

VIII. Address Staff Shortages at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE)

The NJDOE has the crucial role of supporting New Jersey schools, districts, and educators, and ensuring that all students have access to equitable learning opportunities and the resources they need to be successful. The NJDOE has experienced substantial staff loss. We recommend the following:

1. The NJDOE must prioritize hiring additional staff members and work to reduce turnover rates. New Jersey schools, districts, and students depend on and deserve a well-functioning Department of Education.

IX. Implement Culturally Responsive Curricula and Diversify the Teacher Workforce

New Jersey's public school system, while racially and economically segregated, is growing in diversity. It is imperative that school curricula and the state's educator workforce reflect the diverse ethnicities and cultures of the state's student population. We recommend the following:

1. In all future state budgets, the Administration and the Legislature should fund every NJDOE Commission (Amistad, Asian American Heritage, Holocaust, Italian and Italian American Heritage, and Latino and Hispanic Heritage) that supports efforts to ensure culturally responsive curricula.
2. The NJDOE should prioritize efforts to increase the recruitment and retention of students of color into teacher preparatory programs and ensure funding is provided for these efforts.

X. Fill Expired Seats on the State Board of Education (SBOE)

The SBOE plays a vital role in education policy decisions that impact New Jersey schoolchildren, their families, and educators across the state. Nine of thirteen members currently sit in expired seats, and one additional seat is vacant. We recommend the following:

1. The Governor must nominate additional State Board members so that no expired seats remain. The Senate Judiciary Committee must then expeditiously work to confirm the nominees until all expired seats are filled.

Introduction

[Our Children/Our Schools](#) (OC/OS) is a statewide network of New Jersey education, children’s rights and civil rights organizations that share a commitment to supporting public school students and schools. We are united in our goal of ensuring all of the state’s 1.4 million schoolchildren have access to the resources they need to be successful, and that districts, schools, and educators have the support they need to effectively educate students.

In this brief, we outline the coalition’s education priorities and offer recommendations for New Jersey policymakers. Topics include the urgent need for school funding and special education funding reform; rejection of private school vouchers; appropriations to the Schools Development Authority (SDA) for the constitutionally mandated construction and modernization of school facilities; appropriations for effective programs and services that positively impact students, schools, and communities, including community schools and Healing Centered Engagement (HCE); integrating the public schools; addressing staff shortages at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE); and the immediate need to fill expired seats on the New Jersey State Board of Education (SBOE).

I. Reform School Funding

It has taken a decade and a half for the state to reach full state funding of the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), the state’s school funding formula. While full funding should be celebrated, there is still work to be done to ensure that all public schools have the resources they need to provide a constitutionally mandated “thorough and efficient” education for their students.

The next Educational Adequacy Report (EAR), required every three years under the SFRA, is expected in early 2025. The EAR provides the Governor and Commissioner of Education with the opportunity to recommend updates to certain components of the formula. Prior EARs have done little more than revise formula costs using updated salary and benefit data and inflation. It is past time for an in-depth analysis to see whether the formula adequately reflects the resources needed to deliver the state’s curricular standards and best practices around teaching and learning.¹

The state must also consider ways to help mitigate the harm caused to districts from unexpected year-to-year changes in state aid. The Local Fair Share (LFS) calculations in the SFRA, which are used to determine the local share of funding based on property taxes and income levels, have proven to be unpredictable. The LFS should be revised, with input from experts, to better reflect school districts’ ability to support their education budgets with local revenue. And school districts that are not raising their fair share need additional tools to enable them to reach and maintain adequate funding, including lifting the 2% cap on levy increases.

¹ Farrie, D. *A Roadmap for Improving New Jersey’s School Funding Formula: The FY2026 Educational Adequacy Report*. Education Law Center. March 2024. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-FY2026-Educational-Adequacy-Report-1.pdf>; Education Law Center. *A Roadmap for Improving New Jersey’s School Funding Formula: The FY2026 Educational Adequacy Report Policy Brief*. March 2024. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/The-FY2026-Educational-Adequacy-Report-%E2%80%93-Policy-Brief.pdf>.

Recommendations:

1. The failure to provide funding for the upcoming EAR limits the ability of the NJDOE to conduct an in-depth analysis and revision of the formula for the FY26 Budget. However, the Legislature and the NJDOE should identify and implement research-informed improvements to the SFRA, even if that takes place outside of the EAR process. Any proposed changes should include a robust community engagement process and consultation with school finance experts.
2. Reasonable caps on state aid reductions should be implemented in future years to avoid the annual disruptions and uncertainty in school district budgets from budget cuts.
3. The 2% property tax cap should be lifted for districts whose school levy is below their LFS.

II. Reform Special Education Funding

As part of the SFRA, the state changed how it funds special education, moving from a system where districts received per-pupil funding based on the count of classified students and differentiated by the severity of their disability to a census-based approach that distributes aid based on the statewide average classification rate, regardless of whether a districts' actual special education enrollment is higher or lower.²

Census funding has caused severe inequities in state funding for special education, as classification rates vary widely across districts, from a low of 3% to a high of 34%.³ A [recent report](#) found that over 60% of school districts received funding for fewer special education students than they actually enrolled in 2022-23. These districts, which had classification rates that were higher than the statewide average, received \$378 million less than if they were funded based on their actual special education enrollment.⁴

A study commissioned by the state in 2011 to review the impact of the change to census funding on school districts was inconclusive due to the brief period of implementation, the lack of full SFRA funding, and limitations in the data collected by the NJDOE.⁵ It's been over a decade since this initial study, and no further analysis of census funding has been released. It's time for the state to finally step up and address the issues created by census funding.

Recommendation:

1. The state should convene school finance experts and meet with stakeholders to craft a system that better meets the actual special education funding needs of school districts. The SFRA should be amended to reflect this input.

² The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. *Paying for Special Education*. Common Ground. 2022.

<https://njcommonground.org/paying-for-special-education/#:~:text=Since%201996%2C%20the%20New%20Jersey,both%20spending%20and%20student%20outcomes>.

³ Farrie, D. & Ciullo, N. *A Roadmap for Improving New Jersey's School Funding Formula: The Impact of Census-Based Funding for Special Education*. Education Law Center. April 2024. <https://edlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Impact-of-Census-Based-Funding-for-Special-Education.pdf>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Augenblick, Palaich and Associates. *Analysis of New Jersey's Census-Based Special Education Funding System*. Oct. 2011. <https://www.nj.gov/education/sff/sereport.pdf>.

III. Reject Private School Vouchers

Legislation to establish the state's first private school voucher program through a tax credit mechanism was introduced in early 2024, but subsequently withdrawn. Under the proposed legislation, individuals and corporations would give money to "student support organizations" that hand out vouchers for private school tuition; 75% of the value of their "donation" would be returned in the form of a credit against their tax liability. This money would otherwise be directed to the State Treasury's General Fund, which supports a wide array of public services for the residents of New Jersey, including public education.

While the cost of the tax credit voucher program was capped at \$37.5 million, examples from other states show that small voucher programs can quickly expand and have debilitating impacts on state budgets.⁶ For example, the cost of Arizona's voucher programs grew from \$68 million in fiscal year 2008 to over \$250 million per year in fiscal year 2019,⁷ and updated figures estimate the program will cost \$943 million in 2024.⁸ In Florida, the state's voucher program grew from \$241 million in fiscal year 2008 to almost \$1 billion in fiscal year 2019.⁹ It is now projected that the cost of the state's expanded voucher program could reach \$4 billion per year.¹⁰

It is important to note that New Jersey would be the first "blue" state in the country to enact private school vouchers, which are hugely unpopular and have been rejected at the ballot box every time they have been proposed to voters. In addition, New Jersey already spends tens of millions of public dollars each year on transportation, textbooks, nurses, security, and technology for private school students.¹¹

Recommendation:

1. New Jersey has one of the top public school systems in the country and has proudly resisted earlier attempts to enact any type of voucher system. There is widespread agreement among state and national organizations, families, students, education advocates, and taxpayers that vouchers have no place in New Jersey.¹² We implore legislative leaders to continue to reject any future privatization efforts. Taxpayer dollars should flow to our public schools, which serve the vast majority of students, and should not subsidize the cost of tuition at private or religious schools.

⁶ Hinh, I. & Tucker, W. *State Lawmakers Are Draining Public Revenues with School Vouchers*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. June 2023. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/state-lawmakers-are-draining-public-revenues-with-school-vouchers>; Public Funds Public Schools. *The True Cost of Private School Voucher Programs*. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/Voucher_Cost_Fact_Sheet_Final_1.pdf.

⁷ Abrams, S.E. & Koutsavlis, S.J. *The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers*. Public Funds Public Schools. March 2023. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf.

⁸ Office of the Governor. *Governor Katie Hobbs Statement on New School Voucher Cost Projections*. July 25, 2023.

<https://azgovernor.gov/office/arizona-governor/news/2023/07/governor-katie-hobbs-statement-new-school-voucher-cost>.

⁹ Abrams, S.E. & Koutsavlis, S.J. *The Fiscal Consequences of Private School Vouchers*. Public Funds Public Schools. March 2023. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf.

¹⁰ Postal, L. *Florida's Voucher Plan Could Cost Public Schools Nearly \$4 Billion, Report Says*. Orlando Sentinel. Jan. 24, 2023.

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2023/01/24/floridas-voucher-plan-could-cost-public-schools-nearly-4-billion-report-says/#:~:text=PUBLISHED%3A%20January%2024%2C%202023%20at,a%20progressive%20state%20think%20tank>.

¹¹ Education Law Center & Public Funds Public Schools. *NJ A4144/S3035 is a Private School Voucher Bill and it is Extremely Dangerous*. https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/ELC-PFPS_2-Pager_on_S3035-A4144.pdf.

¹² *The following is an open letter to Governor Phil Murphy, Senate President Nick Scutari, Assembly Speaker Coughlin and the entire state Legislature*. Insider NJ. April 2, 2024. <https://www.insidernj.com/press-release/the-following-is-an-open-letter-to-governor-phil-murphy-senate-president-anthony-scutari-assembly-speaker-craig-coughlin-and-the-entire-state-legislature/>.

IV. Fund the School Construction Program

The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the state must provide 100% funding for all school renovation and construction projects in the thirty-one Abbott districts, now referred to as SDA districts. In their ruling, the Court stated that unsafe and overcrowded buildings prevented children from receiving a "thorough and efficient" education as required under the New Jersey Constitution.¹³ The Schools Development Authority (SDA) was established to fund and manage new construction projects and the modernization of existing school facilities.

The state's constitutional obligation to fund capital and emergent projects in the SDA districts is ongoing, but the FY25 State Budget included only \$50 million to continue to meet the need, and over \$7 billion is needed to alleviate overcrowding and replace aging buildings.

Many schools in these districts are nearing, or already over, a century old. These facilities cannot provide the same education standards provided to students in suburban school districts. Many classrooms also lack adequate ventilation or the climate controls necessary for creating a conducive learning environment. The latest SDA Strategic Plan Update identified a need for 7,914 additional seats to reduce overcrowding in these districts,¹⁴ and recent testimony presented by the SDA to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools puts this number even higher.¹⁵

Recommendations:

1. Dedicated funding for the school construction program must be established, either through direct appropriation, the Debt Defeasance and Prevention Fund, or bond authorization.
2. Additionally, we recommend that \$30 million be provided to fund the Buildings Conditions and Assessment Survey first recommended by the SDA in 2019. The survey will provide uniform, comprehensive information about the number and types of capital maintenance and emergent project needs in the SDA districts.

V. Fund Community Schools

Community schools, which restructure existing public schools so they more deliberately serve as community hubs, are an effective strategy for addressing students' needs.¹⁶ They take a "whole-child" approach based on four pillars of support: integrated student supports, expanded learning time and opportunities, active family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practice.¹⁷

¹³ *Abbott v. Burke*, 153 N.J. 480 (1998). https://edlawcenter.org/assets/files/pdfs/abott-v-burke/Abbott_V.pdf.

¹⁴ New Jersey Schools Development Authority. *2022 Strategic Plan Update and Capital Plan Presentation*. April 6, 2022, Revised Feb. 2024, As amended at the Feb. 7, 2024 NJSDA Board Meeting.

https://www.njsda.gov/Content/Projects/2022_Strategic_Plan_Update_and_Capital_Plan.pdf.

¹⁵ Joint Committee on the Public Schools. April 26, 2024. <https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/archived-media/2024/JPS-meeting-list>.

¹⁶ Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J. & Lam, L. *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute. 2017. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/community-schools-effective-school-improvement-report>.

¹⁷ These four pillars have been identified by the Learning Policy Institute and adopted by the U.S. Department of Education. Other organizations, including the National Education Association and Journey4Justice, include additional pillars, such as culturally relevant curriculum.

The community schools model allows schools to work collaboratively with students, parents, and teachers to identify the needs of the school community and develop a unique plan for that school and neighborhood. Schools then partner with outside nonprofit organizations that help provide services to students and families, such as additional mental health supports, extended school days and summer school, health clinics, and food assistance.

Support for community schools is growing. Eight states recently began state-level initiatives to support the expansion of community schools, with the largest effort in California. That state has invested \$4.1 billion through 2031 to make sure that every high-poverty public school becomes a community school.¹⁸ The Biden Administration also strongly supports state and local efforts to expand community schools, evidenced by the inclusion of \$150 million for Full-Service Community Schools in the current federal budget and a requested increase to \$200 million in next year's federal budget.

New Jersey has examples of extremely successful community schools, including in large urban cities like Paterson, Trenton, and Jersey City, and in smaller suburban districts like Newton. With additional state support, more school districts can implement community schools, focusing on developing local solutions that increase equity by helping students and their families overcome in-school and out-of-school barriers.

Recommendations:

1. We urge the Legislature to support A4107/S2243, a five-year pilot initiative that would expand community schools to an additional school in each of the state's twenty-one counties.
2. Additionally, we urge the Governor and Legislature to establish a line-item appropriation for community schools in all future state budgets to allow all public schools to become community schools.¹⁹

VI. Fund Healing Centered Engagement (HCE)

In New Jersey and across the nation, the collective uncertainties and resulting traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic have severely impacted students, families, and school personnel. Educators are increasingly called on to meet the social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students, and recent estimates suggest a substantial number of students will continue to need critical support. Given these emerging needs, students and educators can benefit from systemic efforts to implement universal, culturally affirming, and relevant Social and Emotional Learning.

Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is a model for improving the well-being of students and the adults who serve them in schools. The Flourish Agenda describes HCE as "an asset-based and culturally rooted approach to healing and well-being for young people of color and their adult allies."²⁰ The four foundational practices of healing-centered community schools are justice (centering racial equity and justice by repairing and earning trust), learning (providing student-centered opportunities to explore,

¹⁸ Maier, A. & Rivera-Rodriguez, A. *State strategies for investing in community schools*. Learning Policy Institute. 2023. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/state-strategies-investing-in-community-schools-report>.

¹⁹ Both New York and Maryland have added community school funding to their annual school funding allocations.

²⁰ Flourish Agenda. *What is Healing Centered Engagement?* <https://flourishagenda.com/healing-centered-engagement-certification/>.

learn, lead, and thrive), capacity (developing systems of support and capacity for meaningful coherence and collaboration), and accountability (holding each other rigorously accountable for student success).²¹ The Foundation for Educational Administration, the professional learning division of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA), has been leading the implementation of HCE in New Jersey schools since 2020.²² More than 4,000 staff members in 80 schools have received training, and 90% found the training, which covers adverse childhood experiences, trauma informed care, and healing centered engagement, valuable.²³

Recommendation:

1. NJPSA's program has been primarily privately funded. The state should explore expanding the HCE model to every school so they can address students' needs in holistic ways, considering their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being. All future state budgets should include an appropriation for HCE.

VII. Integrate New Jersey's Segregated Public Schools

New Jersey's public school system is among the most segregated in the country. A 2023 study by the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies at Rutgers University Newark concluded that "Overall, among 1.4 million school children, leaving aside the 22,000 children in White Isolated situations, almost 32% of New Jersey students were being schooled in a context of segregation by color, economic standing, or both."²⁴ This is largely due to residential segregation and New Jersey's requirement that students attend schools within the district where they reside.²⁵ The study also finds that Black and Hispanic students in racially segregated schools have less access to rigorous educational experiences; a more negative school climate, resulting in higher absences and suspensions; and fewer opportunities to take higher-level courses.

In 2018, plaintiffs in *Latino Action Network v. New Jersey* filed a lawsuit calling for an end to New Jersey's segregated school system. In 2023, the State Superior Court ruled that the State of New Jersey has failed to protect many of its students of color by denying them an education free of racial segregation. Currently, the state and the plaintiffs are in mediation to identify potential remedies and possible next steps.

²¹ Stanford School of Graduate Education. *Foundational Practices of Healing-Centered Community Schools*. https://edpolicyinca.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/ig_kimner_aug21.pdf.

²² Higgins, D. *FEA Announces 26 Schools to Take Part in Healing-Centered Engagement to Address ACEs and Trauma*. New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association. March 24, 2021. <https://njpsa.org/fea-announces-26-schools-to-take-part-in-healing-centered-engagement-to-address-aces-and-trauma/>.

²³ Nugent, J. & Reece, M.M. *Op-Ed: Healing initiative for schools needs help to keep going*. NJ Spotlight. Oct. 2, 2023.

<https://www.njspotlightnews.org/2023/10/op-ed-nj-healing-centered-engagement-project-for-schools-needs-more-support/>.

²⁴ Campbell, V.A. & Payne, C.M. *Segregated Schooling in New Jersey: The Distribution of Opportunities to Learn by Race, Ethnicity and Class*. Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies. Rutgers University. Feb. 2023. <https://rutgers.app.box.com/s/wyzbzyrt42jabifa0fp7vqw9fg0rpmjb>.

²⁵ Under State law, New Jersey students can attend schools located in other school districts under a limited number of circumstances, such as if a student is accepted to a specific charter school whose State charter allows it to draw students from a larger region; if a student resides in a school district participating in the Interdistrict Public School Choice program; or if a student's family enrolls the student in a specialized school, such as county vocational-technical schools.

Recommendations:

1. OC/OS urges the state to engage in public conversations with diverse stakeholder groups about the benefits of school integration for all students and ways to ameliorate segregation in New Jersey's school system.²⁶
2. The state should also engage in research and data collection related to desegregation, spearhead planning and implementation of desegregation policies, and provide support and technical assistance to districts and localities in desegregation efforts.

VIII. Address Staff Shortages at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE)

The NJDOE has the crucial role of supporting New Jersey schools, districts, and educators, and ensuring that all students have access to equitable learning opportunities and the resources they need to be successful. Accomplishing these goals requires that all offices within the NJDOE maintain adequate staffing levels.

The NJDOE has experienced substantial staff loss. An OC/OS analysis finds that the number of high-level staff members (Managers, Directors, and Commissioners) dropped by 25%, while the number of Primary Level Supervisors decreased by 38%, and the number of Clerical, Administrative, HR, and Inspection staff decreased by 34% over the past five years. During this period, 336 staff members left the Department. In fact, nearly half of the staff present in 2018 have left the NJDOE.²⁷

Recommendation:

1. The NJDOE must prioritize hiring additional staff members and work to reduce turnover rates. New Jersey schools, districts, and students depend on and deserve a well-functioning Department of Education.

IX. Implement Culturally Responsive Curricula and Diversify the Teacher Workforce

New Jersey's public school system, while racially segregated, is growing in diversity. Almost 60% of the state's student population is Hispanic, Black, or Asian.²⁸ The state has made strides in passing legislation that requires the instruction of a culturally responsive curriculum in social studies for students in kindergarten through grade 12 as part of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards. This includes the contributions and histories of African Americans, Latino and Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. However, the NJDOE has fallen short of ensuring these mandates are fully implemented and the Commissions that support these efforts are properly funded.

²⁶ For a summary of the academic research highlighting the benefits of integrated schools for all school children, see: Mickelson, R.A. *School Integration and K-12 Outcomes: An Updated Quick Synthesis of the Social Science Evidence*. The National Coalition on School Diversity Research Brief No. 5. Oct. 2016. <https://www.school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo5Oct2016Big.pdf>. See also Johnson, R.C. & Nazaryan, A. *Children of the Dream: Why School Integration Works*, New York: Basic Books and Russell Sage Foundation, 2019.

²⁷ Our Children/Our Schools analysis of *YourMoney Agency Payroll*. Last Updated April 23, 2024. https://data.nj.gov/Government-Finance/YourMoney-Agency-Payroll/iqwc-r2w7/about_data.

²⁸ Kelley, K. *N.J. is becoming more diverse. So, why aren't there more teachers of color?* NJ Advance Media for NJ.com. Feb. 21, 2023. <https://www.nj.com/education/2023/02/nj-is-becoming-more-diverse-so-why-arent-there-more-teachers-of-color.html>.

For example, the Amistad Commission, which was established in 2002 to ensure that the history of Africans and African Americans is embedded in school curricula and that teachers are equipped to effectively teach this content to students, did not receive a separate line item in the State Budget until January 2024.²⁹ The New Jersey Office of Commissions in the NJDOE also includes the Asian American Heritage Commission, the Holocaust Commission, the Italian and Italian American Heritage Commission, and the Latino and Hispanic Heritage Commission.³⁰

In addition to ensuring that school curricula represent and uplift the ethnicities and cultures represented by New Jersey students, the state's educator workforce must also reflect a commitment to diversity. About half of New Jersey's public schools lack even a single Black teacher; nearly three in 10 do not employ a single Hispanic teacher; and more than half do not have any Asian teachers. As a result, New Jersey is tied with Delaware for the second largest diversity gap between teachers and students nationwide.³¹

Recommendations:

1. In order to uplift the incredible diversity of New Jersey students and families, we urge the Administration and the Legislature to fund every NJDOE Commission in all future state budgets to ensure the adoption of curricula that explain and celebrate, in all schools and courses, the experiences, contributions and rich heritage of the populations represented by these Commissions.
2. OC/OS encourages the NJDOE to prioritize all efforts to increase the recruitment and retention of students of color into teacher preparation programs and ensure funding is provided for these efforts.

X. Fill Expired Seats on the State Board of Education (SBOE)

The SBOE plays a vital role in education policy decisions that impact New Jersey schoolchildren, their families, and educators across the state, including regulations on statewide assessment, special education, educator preparation, bilingual education, and policies enforcing equity across schools. This important body must be composed of experienced, pro-public education supporters who understand the complexities of these issues.

A number of excellent nominees have been confirmed to the SBOE over the past two years. But as of August 2024, nine members sit in expired seats, and one additional seat is vacant. Our state's children deserve a fully appointed State Board that provides strong and stable leadership, promotes and protects equity, and supports the best interest of the state's public school students

²⁹ State of New Jersey. *The Amistad Commission*. Department of Education. <https://www.nj.gov/education/amistad/about/>.

³⁰ State of New Jersey. *Office of Commissions*. Department of Education. <https://www.nj.gov/education/about/divisions/commissions.shtml>.

³¹ Kelley, K. *N.J. is becoming more diverse. So, why aren't there more teachers of color?* NJ Advance Media for NJ.com. Feb. 21, 2023. <https://www.nj.com/education/2023/02/nj-is-becoming-more-diverse-so-why-arent-there-more-teachers-of-color.html>.

Recommendation:

1. OC/OS has been working for two years to ensure that the Governor appoints, and the Senate Judiciary Committee confirms, new members to the SBOE.³² We once again encourage the Governor to re-nominate current Board Members who are champions of public education and nominate additional State Board members. The Senate Judiciary Committee must then expeditiously work to confirm the nominees until all expired seats are filled.

For more information about OC/OS, visit <https://www.ourchildrenourschools.org/>. To speak to an OC/OS representative, email info@ourchildrenourschools.org.

³² See *OC/OS Message to Senate President Scutari and Senator Stack on SBOE Nominations*. Feb. 13, 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZZWc8CP13RbilldzvKOrtGVsXIOL1y16/view?pli=1>; *Time's Up! The Urgent Need to Appoint Members to Expired Seats on the NJ State Board of Education, A Virtual Forum*. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Osguy5qGMthGAt4Ij3IAIUWSHvr2oQLQ/view>; *OC/OS Letter to Governor Murphy on New Jersey State Board of Education Nominees*. Nov. 7, 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sjr2-r-M6cjQqTzL-4ZzODnh6zy1OrEL/view>.