



Continuing Concern for Vulnerable Students During the 2020-21 School Year and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Our Children/Our Schools is a statewide network of education, children's rights and civil rights organizations. OC/OS members work together to support a vision of public education that is child-centered and that provides all students with excellent and equitable opportunities to learn. More information about OC/OS is available [here](#).

This is a follow-up to the OC/OS statement: ["Protecting the Health and Safety of New Jersey's Children and the Adults Who Teach Them In Light of the Continuing COVID-19 Pandemic."](#)

Introduction

- Our Children/Our Schools acknowledges and appreciates the herculean effort put forth by all members of New Jersey's public school community to ensure that students are safe and learning during the 2020-21 school year, whether remotely, in a hybrid learning situation or in school buildings.
- We repeat here that we are not scientists, healthcare professionals, or education professionals, and our goal is not to criticize, but rather to highlight the need to focus most intently on the most vulnerable children and families.
- The purpose of this statement is to bring attention to continuing concerns about the health, safety and education of students who are:
 - From low-income families (eligible for free or reduced-price meals);
 - English language learners;
 - Special education students;
 - Children who may be living in unsafe or disruptive living situations, including situations where internet access is not reliable.

The Digital Divide:

- In order to close the digital divide, the NJ Department of Education must collect and make public up-to-date and comprehensive data from school districts about the number of: students who still do not have adequate devices and/or internet connectivity, staff device and connectivity needs, broken devices requiring replacement, school buildings not fully equipped with adequate devices and/or

sufficient connectivity for in-school and virtual learning, and any other information impacting the ability of teachers to instruct and students to learn remotely.

- Data must also be collected on broadband availability and sufficiency in school buildings and in student homes.
- Tech support must be available from the Department of Education to solve problems with virtual learning in school buildings and in homes.

Social-Emotional Support:

- The Department of Education, with assistance from experts and stakeholders, must survey school districts about school climate, even in cases where learning is entirely virtual. Survey results must be used to understand how students are handling the current unprecedented situation and what supports are needed.
- Social-emotional supports must be made available not only for students but also for any adult who interacts with students at home or in school.
- Coordination among state agencies, including the Department of Education, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Health, and the Department of Human Services, must be increased and improved, especially with regard to the most vulnerable students and families.

Unaccounted-For Students:

- The Department of Education must make every effort to find out which students have not been accounted for during remote, hybrid or in-school learning, including how school districts are attempting to contact such students and what the results have been so far.
- When a school district is unable to account for a student or students, the Department of Education must step in to help locate students and solve the problems that may be keeping these students from schooling. The Department may need to assist districts in locating students or families that have temporarily moved out of district during the pandemic.

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