

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE FOR  
**ASSEMBLY, No. 398**

**STATE OF NEW JERSEY**  
**220th LEGISLATURE**

ADOPTED FEBRUARY 23, 2023

**Sponsored by:**

**Assemblyman RALPH R. CAPUTO**

**District 28 (Essex)**

**Assemblyman THOMAS P. GIBLIN**

**District 34 (Essex and Passaic)**

**Assemblywoman CLEOPATRA G. TUCKER**

**District 28 (Essex)**

**Co-Sponsored by:**

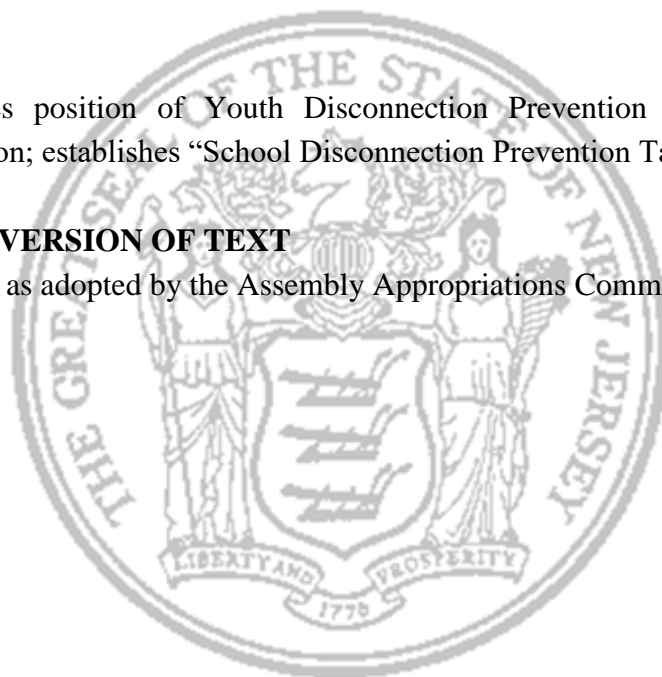
**Assemblywoman Jasey, Assemblymen Simonsen, McClellan,  
Assemblywoman McKnight, Assemblyman Atkins, Assemblywomen  
Matsikoudis, Haider, Assemblyman Sampson, Assemblywoman Reynolds-  
Jackson, Assemblyman Umba, Assemblywoman Park, Assemblyman  
Mukherji, Assemblywomen Piperno and Eulner**

**SYNOPSIS**

Establishes position of Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson; establishes "School Disconnection Prevention Task Force."

**CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT**

Substitute as adopted by the Assembly Appropriations Committee.



(Sponsorship Updated As Of: 2/27/2023)

1    **AN ACT** concerning disconnected youth and supplementing chapter  
2       4 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes.

3  
4       **BE IT ENACTED** *by the Senate and General Assembly of the State*  
5       *of New Jersey:*

6  
7       1.   The Legislature finds and declares that:

8       a. New Jersey and the nation have experienced an increase in the  
9       number of disconnected youth, which are young adults aged 16 to  
10      24 who are disconnected from both school and employment.

11      b. In New Jersey, more than 100,000 students were disconnected  
12      from school in 2021.

13      c. Disconnection from school can negatively impact a student  
14      and their family and can have an enduring economic and social  
15      impact on the local community and society at large.

16      d. Despite common misconceptions, youth disconnection is not  
17      consigned to a singular demographic region or racial or ethnic  
18      group, as youth disconnection rates are high across all counties and  
19      racial and ethnic groups.

20      e. While the challenge of reengaging disconnected youth has  
21      persisted for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated and  
22      exacerbated youth disconnection, making it an issue that should  
23      urgently be addressed.

24      f. It is altogether fitting and proper that the State ensure all  
25      young people receive the resources and support to achieve their  
26      educational and postsecondary goals by providing prevention and  
27      intervention strategies for reengaging disconnected youth across the  
28      State.

29  
30      2.   As used in this act, “disconnected youth” means youth and  
31      young adults aged 16 to 24 who are not currently attending school,  
32      participating in a training program, or employed.

33  
34      3.   a. There is hereby established in the Department of  
35      Education a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery  
36      Ombudsperson. The Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery  
37      Ombudsperson shall be appointed by the Governor and shall serve  
38      at the pleasure of the Governor. The Governor shall appoint the  
39      ombudsperson no later than the 90th day following the date of  
40      enactment of this act. The ombudsperson shall report directly to the  
41      Commissioner of Education and shall only be answerable to the  
42      commissioner. The ombudsperson shall maintain a collaborative  
43      relationship with the Secretary of Higher Education. The  
44      ombudsperson shall implement a Statewide strategic plan of action  
45      to prevent students aged 16 to 24 from disconnecting from school,  
46      address the need for the reengagement of disconnected youth, and  
47      develop strategies to increase reengagement.

1       b. The ombudsperson shall serve for a term of four years and  
2 until the appointment and qualification of a successor. A vacancy  
3 occurring in the position of the ombudsperson shall be filled in the  
4 same manner as the original appointment, except that if the  
5 ombudsperson dies, resigns, becomes ineligible to serve for any  
6 reason, or is removed from office, the Governor shall appoint an  
7 acting ombudsperson who shall serve until the appointment and  
8 qualification of the ombudsperson's successor. The ombudsperson  
9 shall be a person of recognized judgment, integrity, and objectivity,  
10 and shall be skilled in communication, conflict resolution, and  
11 professionalism. The ombudsperson shall have hands-on practical  
12 experience working with disconnected youth and demonstrated  
13 higher-level leadership in an agency, institution, or organization  
14 that directly or indirectly addresses the subject of disconnected  
15 youth.

16  
17       4. The duties of the Youth Disconnection Prevention and  
18 Recovery Ombudsperson established pursuant to section 3 of this  
19 act shall include, but not be limited to:

20       a. collaborating with school districts to develop and implement a  
21 Statewide strategic plan of action to prevent students aged 16 to 24  
22 from disconnecting from school;

23       b. collaborating with other agencies to address the challenges  
24 facing student dropouts, which agencies shall include the  
25 Department of Labor and Workforce Development, the Department  
26 of Human Services, the Department of Corrections, the Juvenile  
27 Justice Commission, and the Department of Children and Families;

28       c. addressing issues associated with the reengagement of students  
29 and developing programs to facilitate the return of disconnected  
30 students to the classroom;

31       d. developing and recommending to school districts programs  
32 and best practices, consistent with the recommendations of the  
33 School Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant  
34 to this act, to prevent students from disconnecting from school and  
35 strategies for reengaging students who have disconnected from  
36 school;

37       e. collaborating with the Secretary of Higher Education to  
38 develop and establish best practices for reengaging disconnected  
39 youth in institutions of higher education; and

40       f. advising the Commissioner of Education and making  
41 recommendations, consistent with the recommendations of the  
42 School Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant  
43 to section 6 of this act, to prevent students from disconnecting from  
44 school and strategies for reengaging students who have  
45 disconnected from school.

46  
47       5. a. The Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery  
48 Ombudsperson shall annually issue a written report to the

1 Commissioner of Education and the Secretary of Higher Education.  
 2 The report shall include a summary of the services the  
 3 ombudsperson provided during the year, a summary of progress  
 4 towards mitigating the rising number of disconnected youth, and  
 5 any specific recommendations the ombudsperson deems appropriate  
 6 and necessary concerning the State's provision of services and  
 7 support to disconnected youth.

8 b. The ombudsperson shall annually issue the report prepared to  
 9 subsection a. of this section to the Governor, and to the Legislature  
 10 pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1).

11

12 6. a. There is established the "School Disconnection Prevention  
 13 Task Force." The purpose of the task force shall be to analyze the  
 14 causes of school disconnection for high school students and  
 15 students at public institutions of higher education, recommend best  
 16 practices for reducing school disconnection to school districts and  
 17 public institutions of higher education, and support the development  
 18 of strategies to reengage disconnected youth as that term is defined  
 19 in section 2 of this act. In addition to serving as the chairperson of  
 20 the task force, the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery  
 21 Ombudsperson shall serve as the director of the task force and shall  
 22 ensure that the task force completes all duties required pursuant to  
 23 section 7 of this act.

24 b. The task force shall consist of 25 members as follows:

25 (1) the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery  
 26 Ombudsperson established pursuant to section 3 of this act, who  
 27 shall serve as chairperson of the task force;

28 (2) the Commissioner of Education, or a designee, who shall  
 29 serve ex officio;

30 (3) the Commissioner of Corrections, or a designee, who shall  
 31 serve ex officio;

32 (4) the Secretary of Higher Education, or a designee, who shall  
 33 serve ex officio;

34 (5) the Commissioner of Labor and Workforce Development, or  
 35 a designee, who shall serve ex officio;

36 (6) the Commissioner of Human Services, or a designee from the  
 37 Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services, who shall serve  
 38 ex officio;

39 (7) the Commissioner of Children and Families, or a designee,  
 40 who shall serve ex officio;

41 (8) the Executive Director of the Juvenile Justice Commission, or  
 42 a designee, who shall serve ex officio; and

43 (9) 17 members appointed by the Governor, who shall include:

44 (a) two superintendents of public school districts and one school  
 45 principal;

46 (b) the president of a county college, or a designee;

47 (c) two previously disconnected youth;

1 (d) a student who attends a public high school with a high  
2 student dropout rate;  
3 (e) the parent of a previously disconnected youth;  
4 (f) a teacher employed at a public high school with a high  
5 student dropout rate;  
6 (g) a guidance counselor employed at a public high school with a  
7 high student dropout rate;  
8 (h) two senior staff members of two different community-based  
9 organizations serving disconnected youth or engaging in  
10 disconnected youth prevention work from one of New Jersey's  
11 largest urban cities;  
12 (i) a senior staff member of Garden State Equality, or its  
13 successor organization;  
14 (j) a senior staff member of Disability Rights New Jersey, or its  
15 successor organization;  
16 (k) a senior staff member of YouthBuild Newark, or its successor  
17 organization;  
18 (l) a senior staff member of a youth homelessness organization;  
19 and  
20 (m) a member of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce  
21 Foundation.

22 c. Vacancies in the membership of the task force shall be filled  
23 in the same manner as the original appointments were made.  
24 Members of the task force shall serve without compensation, but  
25 shall be reimbursed for necessary expenditures incurred in the  
26 performance of their duties as members of the task force within the  
27 limits of funds appropriated or otherwise made available to the task  
28 force for its purposes.

29 d. The task force shall organize no later than the 90th day after  
30 the appointment of the Youth Disconnection Prevention and  
31 Recovery Ombudsperson pursuant to section 3 of this act. The task  
32 force shall choose a vice-chairperson from among its members. The  
33 chairperson shall appoint a secretary who need not be a member of  
34 the task force.

35 e. The Department of Education shall provide such stenographic,  
36 clerical, and other administrative assistants, and such professional  
37 staff as the task force requires to carry out its work. The task force  
38 shall also be entitled to call to its assistance and avail itself of the  
39 services of the employees of any State, county, or municipal  
40 department, board, bureau, commission, or agency as it may require  
41 and as may be available for its purposes.

42

43 7. It shall be the duty of the School Disconnection Prevention  
44 Task Force to study and analyze the causes of students leaving  
45 school prior to graduation and recommend best practices for  
46 reducing the rate of school disconnection and increasing the number  
47 of students who reengage in school. The task force shall, at a  
48 minimum:

- 1 a. examine current data, including the age, ethnicity, and gender
- 2 of disconnected youth;
- 3 b. research programs and initiatives addressing school
- 4 disconnection;
- 5 c. examine the reasons why students leave school, including
- 6 possible contributing factors such as household income, cultural or
- 7 language barriers, or being a child from a single parent household;
- 8 d. identify effective ways for school districts to reduce the
- 9 number of disconnected youth and increase student engagement;
- 10 e. develop mechanisms to increase the reengagement of students
- 11 who have disconnected from school;
- 12 f. develop recommendations on the most effective ways for
- 13 school districts to support students to prevent disconnection from
- 14 school; and
- 15 g. advise the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery
- 16 Ombudsperson established pursuant to section 3 of this act on the
- 17 task force's findings.
- 18
- 19 8. a. The School Disconnection Prevention Task Force shall
- 20 issue a final report to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant
- 21 to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), no later than nine
- 22 months after the task force organizes. If additional time is necessary
- 23 to complete the final report, the task force shall notify the Governor
- 24 and the Legislature of the reason for the delay. The report shall
- 25 contain the task force's findings and recommendations, including
- 26 any recommendations for legislation that it deems appropriate.
- 27 b. The task force shall also issue the report prepared to
- 28 subsection a. of this section to the Commissioner of Education and
- 29 the Secretary of Higher Education.
- 30 c. The task force shall expire on the 30th day after the issuance
- 31 of its final report.
- 32 d. One year after the issuance of the final report of the School
- 33 Disconnection Prevention Task Force pursuant to this act, the
- 34 Commissioner of Education shall appear before the Senate
- 35 Legislative Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight,
- 36 Reform, and Federal Relations Committee, or their successor
- 37 reference committees, or other reference committee, at the direction
- 38 of the presiding officer, to provide an update concerning the
- 39 progress of the department's implementation of the
- 40 recommendations of the task force including, but not limited to,
- 41 timelines and strategies for the future implementation of any
- 42 recommendations that have not been implemented.
- 43
- 44 9. If, one year after the effective date of this act, the Governor
- 45 has failed to appoint a Youth Disconnection Prevention and
- 46 Recovery Ombudsperson as required pursuant to section 3 of this
- 47 act, the Governor, or a designee, shall appear before the Senate
- 48 Legislative Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight,

1 Reform, and Federal Relations Committee, or their successor  
2 reference committees, or other reference committee, at the direction  
3 of the presiding officer, to explain why an ombudsperson has not  
4 been appointed and to describe actions taken by the Governor to  
5 appoint an ombudsperson.

6

7 10. This act shall take effect immediately.