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Assemblyman Sampson, Assemblywoman Reynolds-Jackson,  
Assemblyman Umba, Assemblywoman Park, Assemblyman Mukherji,  
Assemblywomen Piperno and Eulner

SYNOPSIS

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT
As amended by the Senate on March 20, 2023.

(Sponsorship Updated As Of: 2/27/2023)
AN ACT concerning disconnected youth, supplementing chapter 4 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes, and making an appropriation.

BE IT ENACTED by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1. The Legislature finds and declares that:
   a. New Jersey and the nation have experienced an increase in the number of disconnected youth, which are young adults aged 16 to 24 who are disconnected from both school and employment.
   b. In New Jersey, more than 100,000 students individuals were disconnected from school in 2021.
   c. Disconnection from school can negatively impact a student and their family and can have an enduring economic and social impact on the local community and society at large.
   d. Despite common misconceptions, youth disconnection is not consigned to a singular demographic region or racial or ethnic group, as youth disconnection rates are high across all counties and racial and ethnic groups.
   e. While the challenge of reengaging disconnected youth has persisted for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated and exacerbated youth disconnection, making it an issue that should urgently be addressed.
   f. It is altogether fitting and proper that the State ensure all young people receive the resources and support to achieve their educational and postsecondary goals by providing prevention and intervention strategies for reengaging disconnected youth across the State.

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

3. a. There is hereby established in the Department of Education a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson. The Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson shall be appointed by the Governor and shall serve at the pleasure of the Governor. The Governor shall appoint the ombudsperson no later than the 90th day following the date of enactment of this act. The ombudsperson shall report directly to the Commissioner of Education and shall only be answerable to the commissioner. The ombudsperson shall maintain a collaborative relationship with the Secretary of Higher Education. The ombudsperson shall implement a Statewide strategic plan of action to prevent students individuals aged 16 to 24 from

EXPLANATION – Matter enclosed in bold-faced brackets [thus] in the above bill is not enacted and is intended to be omitted in the law.

Matter underlined thus is new matter.
Matter enclosed in superscript numerals has been adopted as follows:
1 Assembly AAP committee amendments adopted February 23, 2023.
2 Senate floor amendments adopted March 20, 2023.
disconnecting from school, address the need for the reengagement of
 disconnected youth, and develop strategies to increase reengagement.

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

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

a. collaborating with school districts to develop and implement a
Statewide strategic plan of action to prevent \( \text{individuals} \) aged 16 to 24 from disconnecting from school;

b. collaborating with other agencies to address the challenges
facing \( \text{disconnected individuals} \), which agencies
shall include the Department of Labor and Workforce Development,
the Department of Human Services, the Department of Corrections,
the Juvenile Justice Commission, and the Department of Children and
Families;

c. addressing issues associated with the reengagement of
\( \text{individuals} \) and developing programs to facilitate the
return of disconnected \( \text{individuals} \) to the classroom;

d. developing and recommending to school districts programs and
best practices, consistent with the recommendations of the School
Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant to this act,
to prevent \( \text{disconnected individuals} \) from disconnecting from school
and strategies for reengaging \( \text{individuals} \) who have
disconnected from school;

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

f. advising the Commissioner of Education and making
recommendations, consistent with the recommendations of the School
Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant to section 6
of this act, to prevent \( \text{disconnected individuals} \) from disconnecting
from school and strategies for reengaging \( \text{individuals} \) who have
disconnected from school.
5. a. The Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson shall annually issue a written report to the Commissioner of Education and the Secretary of Higher Education. The report shall include a summary of the services the ombudsperson provided during the year, a summary of progress towards mitigating the rising number of disconnected youth, and any specific recommendations the ombudsperson deems appropriate and necessary concerning the State’s provision of services and support to disconnected youth.

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

6. a. There is established the “School Disconnection Prevention Task Force.” The purpose of the task force shall be to analyze the causes of school disconnection for [high school students and students at] individuals from high schools and public institutions of higher education, recommend best practices for reducing school disconnection to school districts and public institutions of higher education, and support the development of strategies to reengage disconnected youth as that term is defined in section 2 of this act. In addition to serving as the chairperson of the task force, the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson shall serve as the director of the task force and shall ensure that the task force completes all duties required pursuant to section 7 of this act.

b. The task force shall consist of [25] 23 members as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(9) 17 members appointed by the Governor, who shall include:
(a) three superintendents of public school districts, one each from an urban, suburban, and rural school district and one school principal;
(b) the president of a county college, or a designee;
(c) two previously disconnected youth;
(d) a student who attends a public high school with a high student dropout rate of disconnected individuals;
(e) the parent of a previously disconnected youth;
(f) a teacher employed at a public high school with a high student dropout rate of disconnected individuals;
(g) an individual who is a guidance counselor employed at a public high school with a high student dropout rate of disconnected individuals;
(h) one senior staff member of two different community-based organizations serving disconnected youth or engaging in disconnected youth prevention work from one of New Jersey’s largest urban cities;
(i) a senior staff member of Garden State Equality, or its successor organization;
(j) a senior staff member of Disability Rights New Jersey, or its successor organization;
(k) a senior staff member of YouthBuild Newark, or its successor organization;
(l) a senior staff member of a youth homelessness organization; and
(m) a member of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce Foundation.

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

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

e. The Department of Education shall provide such stenographic, clerical, and other administrative assistants, and such professional staff as the task force requires to carry out its work. The task force shall also be entitled to call to its assistance and avail itself of the services of the employees of any State, county, or municipal department, board, bureau, commission, or agency as it may require and as may be available for its purposes.
7. It shall be the duty of the School Disconnection Prevention Task Force to study and analyze the causes of students leaving school prior to graduation, conduct a landscape analysis to understand the scope of school disconnection in the State, and recommend best practices for reducing the rate of school disconnection and increasing the number of students who reengage in school. The task force shall, at a minimum:
   a. examine current data, including the age, ethnicity, and gender of disconnected youth;
   b. research programs and initiatives addressing school disconnection;
   c. examine the reasons why students leave school, including possible contributing factors, such as household income, cultural or language barriers, or being a child from a single parent household; parental engagement;
   d. identify effective ways for school districts to reduce the number of disconnected youth and increase student engagement;
   e. develop mechanisms to increase the reengagement of students who have disconnected from school;
   f. develop recommendations on the most effective ways for school districts to support students to prevent disconnection from school;
   g. research and analyze the potential to create and implement an early warning system to prevent disconnection from school; and
   h. advise the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson established pursuant to section 3 of this act on the task force’s findings.

8. a. The School Disconnection Prevention Task Force shall issue a final report to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), no later than nine months after the task force organizes. If additional time is necessary to complete the final report, the task force shall notify the Governor and the Legislature of the reason for the delay. The report shall contain the task force’s findings and recommendations, including any recommendations for legislation that it deems appropriate.
   b. The task force shall also issue the report prepared to subsection a. of this section to the Commissioner of Education and the Secretary of Higher Education.
   c. The task force shall expire on the 30th day after the issuance of its final report.
   d. One year after the issuance of the final report of the School Disconnection Prevention Task Force pursuant to this act, the Commissioner of Education shall appear before the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight, Reform, and Federal Relations Committee, or their successor reference committees, or other reference committee, at the direction of the presiding officer, to

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provide an update concerning the progress of the department’s implementation of the recommendations of the task force including, but not limited to, timelines and strategies for the future implementation of any recommendations that have not been implemented.

1[9. If, one year after the effective date of this act, the Governor has failed to appoint a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson as required pursuant to section 3 of this act, the Governor, or a designee, shall appear before the Senate Legislative Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight, Reform, and Federal Relations Committee, or their successor reference committees, or other reference committee, at the direction of the presiding officer, to explain why an ombudsperson has not been appointed and to describe actions taken by the Governor to appoint an ombudsperson.]

2[9. There is appropriated from the General Fund to the Department of Education the sum of $200,000 to effectuate the provisions of this act.]

10. This act shall take effect immediately.