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STATE OF NEW JERSEY
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ADOPTED JANUARY 19, 2023

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SYNOPSIS

Establishes position of Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson; establishes "School Disconnection Prevention Task Force"; appropriates \$200,000.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT

As amended by the Senate on March 20, 2023.

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

1 AN ACT concerning disconnected youth ²**[and]** ² supplementing
2 chapter 4 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes ², and making
3 an appropriation² .
4

5 **BE IT ENACTED** by the Senate and General Assembly of the State
6 of New Jersey:
7

8 1. The Legislature finds and declares that:

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

12 b. In New Jersey, more than 100,000 ²**[students]** individuals²
13 were disconnected from school in 2021.

14 c. Disconnection from school can negatively impact ²**[a student]**
15 an individual² and their family and can have an enduring economic
16 and social impact on the local community and society at large.

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

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

25 f. It is altogether fitting and proper that the State ensure all young
26 people receive the resources and support to achieve their educational
27 and postsecondary goals by providing prevention and intervention
28 strategies for reengaging disconnected youth across the 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 Education
35 a Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson. The
36 Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson shall
37 be appointed by the Governor and shall serve at the pleasure of the
38 Governor. The Governor shall appoint the ombudsperson no later than
39 the 90th day following the date of enactment of this act. The
40 ombudsperson shall report directly to the Commissioner of Education
41 and shall only be answerable to the commissioner. The ombudsperson
42 shall maintain a collaborative relationship with the Secretary of Higher
43 Education. The ombudsperson shall implement a Statewide strategic
44 plan of action to prevent ²**[students]** individuals² 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.

1 disconnecting from school, address the need for the reengagement of
2 disconnected youth, and develop strategies to increase reengagement.

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

17

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

21 a. collaborating with school districts to develop and implement a
22 Statewide strategic plan of action to prevent ²**[students]** individuals²
23 aged 16 to 24 from disconnecting from school;

24 b. collaborating with other agencies to address the challenges
25 facing ²**[student dropouts]** disconnected individuals², which agencies
26 shall include the Department of Labor and Workforce Development,
27 the Department of Human Services, the Department of Corrections,
28 the Juvenile Justice Commission, and the Department of Children and
29 Families;

30 c. addressing issues associated with the reengagement of
31 ²**[students]** individuals² and developing programs to facilitate the
32 return of disconnected ²**[students]** individuals² to the classroom;

33 d. developing and recommending to school districts programs and
34 best practices, consistent with the recommendations of the School
35 Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant to this act,
36 to prevent ²**[students]** individuals² from disconnecting from school
37 and strategies for reengaging ²**[students]** individuals² who have
38 disconnected from school;

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

42 f. advising the Commissioner of Education and making
43 recommendations, consistent with the recommendations of the School
44 Disconnection Prevention Task Force established pursuant to section 6
45 of this act, to prevent ²**[students]** individuals² from disconnecting
46 from school and strategies for reengaging ²**[students]** individuals²
47 who have disconnected from school.

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

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

13
14 6. a. There is established the "School Disconnection Prevention
15 Task Force." The purpose of the task force shall be to analyze the
16 causes of school disconnection for ²~~high school students and students~~
17 ~~at~~ individuals from high schools and² public institutions of higher
18 education, recommend best practices for reducing school
19 disconnection to school districts and public institutions of higher
20 education, and support the development of strategies to reengage
21 disconnected youth as that term is defined in section 2 of this act. In
22 addition to serving as the chairperson of the task force, the Youth
23 Disconnection Prevention and Recovery Ombudsperson shall serve as
24 the director of the task force and shall ensure that the task force
25 completes all duties required pursuant to section 7 of this act.

26 b. The task force shall consist of ²~~[25]~~ 23² members as follows:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

45 (9) ²~~[17]~~ 15² members appointed by the Governor, who shall
46 include:

- 1 (a) ¹~~three~~ two¹ superintendents of public school districts ¹~~], one~~
2 each from an urban, suburban, and rural school district] and one
3 school principal¹;
- 4 (b) the president of a county college, or a designee;
- 5 (c) ²~~two~~ one² previously disconnected youth;
- 6 (d) ²~~a student~~ an individual² who attends a public high school
7 with a high ²~~student dropout~~² rate of disconnected individuals² ;
- 8 (e) the parent of a previously disconnected youth;
- 9 (f) a teacher employed at a public high school with a high
10 ²~~student dropout~~² rate of disconnected individuals² ;
- 11 (g) a ²~~guidance~~ school² counselor employed at a public high
12 school with a high ²~~student dropout~~² rate of disconnected
13 individuals²;
- 14 (h) ²~~two~~ one² senior staff ²~~members~~ member² of ²~~two~~
15 different] a² community-based ²~~organizations~~ organization² serving
16 disconnected youth or engaging in disconnected youth prevention
17 work from one of New Jersey's largest urban cities;
- 18 (i) a senior staff member of Garden State Equality, or its successor
19 organization;
- 20 (j) a senior staff member of Disability Rights New Jersey, or its
21 successor organization;
- 22 (k) a senior staff member of YouthBuild Newark, or its successor
23 organization;
- 24 (l) a senior staff member of a youth homelessness organization;
25 and
- 26 (m) a member of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce
27 Foundation.
- 28 c. Vacancies in the membership of the task force shall be filled in
29 the same manner as the original appointments were made. Members of
30 the task force shall serve without compensation, but shall be
31 reimbursed for necessary expenditures incurred in the performance of
32 their duties as members of the task force within the limits of funds
33 appropriated or otherwise made available to the task force for its
34 purposes.
- 35 d. The task force shall organize no later than the 90th day after the
36 appointment of the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery
37 Ombudsperson pursuant to section 3 of this act. The task force shall
38 choose a vice-chairperson from among its members. The chairperson
39 shall appoint a secretary who need not be a member of the task force.
- 40 e. The Department of Education shall provide such stenographic,
41 clerical, and other administrative assistants, and such professional staff
42 as the task force requires to carry out its work. The task force shall
43 also be entitled to call to its assistance and avail itself of the services of
44 the employees of any State, county, or municipal department, board,
45 bureau, commission, or agency as it may require and as may be
46 available for its purposes.

- 1 7. It shall be the duty of the School Disconnection Prevention
2 Task Force to study and analyze the causes of ²【students】 individuals²
3 leaving school prior to graduation ², conduct a landscape analysis to
4 understand the scope of school disconnection in the State,² and
5 recommend best practices for reducing the rate of school
6 disconnection and increasing the number of ²【students】 individuals²
7 who reengage in school. The task force shall, at a minimum:
8 a. examine current data, including the age, ethnicity, and gender of
9 disconnected youth;
10 b. research programs and initiatives addressing school
11 disconnection;
12 c. examine the reasons why ²【students】 individuals² leave school,
13 including possible contributing factors ^{2,2}such as household income,
14 cultural or language barriers, or ²【being a child from a single parent
15 household】 parental engagement² ;
16 d. identify effective ways for school districts to reduce the number
17 of disconnected youth and increase student engagement;
18 e. develop mechanisms to increase the reengagement of
19 ²【students】 individuals² who have disconnected from school;
20 f. develop recommendations on the most effective ways for school
21 districts to support ²【students】 individuals² to prevent disconnection
22 from school; ²【and】²
23 g. ²research and analyze the potential to create and implement an
24 early warning system to prevent disconnection from school; and
25 h.² advise the Youth Disconnection Prevention and Recovery
26 Ombudsperson established pursuant to section 3 of this act on the task
27 force’s findings.
28
29 8. a. The School Disconnection Prevention Task Force shall issue
30 a final report to the Governor, and to the Legislature pursuant to
31 section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-19.1), no later than ²【nine】 12²
32 months after the task force organizes. If additional time is necessary to
33 complete the final report, the task force shall notify the Governor and
34 the Legislature of the reason for the delay. The report shall contain the
35 task force’s findings and recommendations, including any
36 recommendations for legislation that it deems appropriate.
37 b. The task force shall also issue the report prepared to subsection
38 a. of this section to the Commissioner of Education and the Secretary
39 of Higher Education.
40 c. The task force shall expire on the 30th day after the issuance of
41 its final report.
42 d. One year after the issuance of the final report of the School
43 Disconnection Prevention Task Force pursuant to this act, the
44 Commissioner of Education shall appear before the Senate Legislative
45 Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight, Reform, and Federal
46 Relations Committee, or their successor reference committees, or other
47 reference committee, at the direction of the presiding officer, to

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

6
7 ¹9. If, one year after the effective date of this act, the Governor
8 has failed to appoint a Youth Disconnection Prevention and
9 Recovery Ombudsperson as required pursuant to section 3 of this
10 act, the Governor, or a designee, shall appear before the Senate
11 Legislative Oversight Committee or the Assembly Oversight,
12 Reform, and Federal Relations Committee, or their successor
13 reference committees, or other reference committee, at the direction
14 of the presiding officer, to explain why an ombudsperson has not
15 been appointed and to describe actions taken by the Governor to
16 appoint an ombudsperson. ¹

17
18 ²9. There is appropriated from the General Fund to the
19 Department of Education the sum of \$200,000 to effectuate the
20 provisions of this act. ²

21
22 10. This act shall take effect immediately.