

SENATE COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE FOR
SENATE, No. 3080

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
220th LEGISLATURE

ADOPTED JANUARY 19, 2023

Sponsored by:

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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 Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.



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

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) three superintendents of public school districts, one each
45 from an urban, suburban, and rural school district;

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.