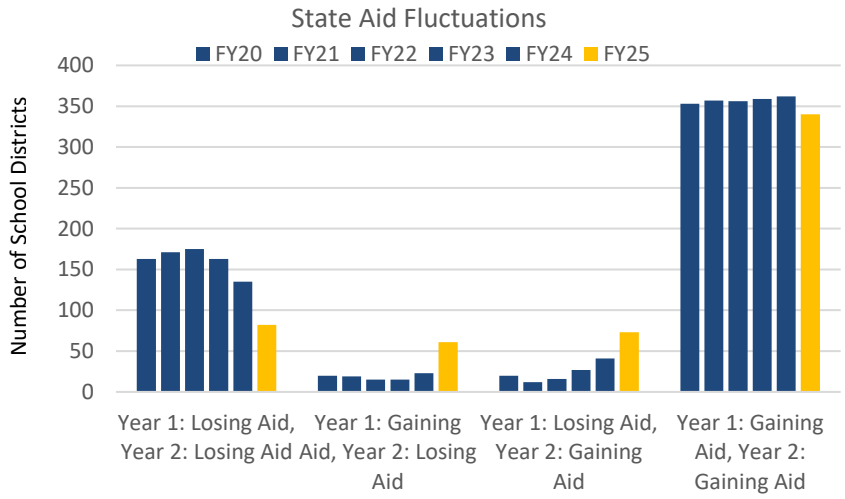
Discussion Points

State Aid to School Districts

1. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget proposes $11.5 billion in State school aid, an increase of $908.1 million from the $10.6 billion appropriation in FY 2024. FY 2025 marks the final year of the implementation of P.L.2018, c.67, commonly referred to as "S2." Throughout the course of S2, State aid has been reallocated among districts in an effort to fund all districts at the amounts of aid calculated by the School Funding Reform Act, P.L.2007, c.260. As a result of this reallocation, many districts have experienced reductions in State aid from year to year, while others experienced increases.

Several school districts have indicated that their proposed State aid in FY 2025 is not what they had anticipated. In each year of S2, there have been some districts that have shifted from aid reductions in one year to increases in the next, or vice versa. However, in FY 2025, there appears to be increased volatility in State aid designations. Some 61 districts are proposed to receive decreases in State aid in FY 2025 after receiving increases in FY 2024, which is 38 more districts than in FY 2024.



- ***Questions:*** **What factors are contributing to aid changes that school districts may not be expecting? Are there any factors within the districts' control that could help to better anticipate aid amounts? What resources does the department provide to support school districts in anticipating aid changes?**

While the underlying causes may vary by district, there are two main factors contributing to aid changes – student enrollment/demographics, and local community factors related to ability to raise school taxes. Changes in a district's enrollment (decreased overall enrollment, changes in demographics, etc.), or increases in either equalized property valuation or total aggregate district income, will impact a district's adequacy budget or its local fair share. Any changes to these factors may reduce the amount of equalization aid to which the district would be entitled. A district's local fair share is based on the district's equalized property valuation and total aggregate income in the community relative to other districts throughout the State. As such, a district's local

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fair share will vary not only based on changes within the community, but how those changes compare across all other communities in the State. A feature of the school funding formula is to allocate State resources based on each district's relative local factors and to prioritize funding to those districts that are least able to raise local funds.

Although a district's data trends may change from year to year, the Department provides each school district with a detailed State aid notice that outlines each of the calculations and the data points relative to their district. These notices are available for many years and can be compared by districts for internal planning and trend analysis. Further, each district works closely with County Office staff and others from the Department on any questions that arise from the calculations of aid – this includes routine meetings like roundtable discussions, or more specific questions as they arise.

- **What guidance is the department providing to school districts that are experiencing significant increases in State aid to ensure that funds are being used effectively and efficiently?**

The same accountability rules and requirements that apply to existing revenues also apply to new revenues. School districts are in the best position to determine their local needs, but County Office staff are available to assist with planning as needed, and the districts' budgets are subject to County Office review and approval.

- **What support is the department providing to school districts that are experiencing funding reductions of more than 5 percent in FY 2025?**

At any time, but particularly as district budgets are being constructed and finalized, County Office and other Department staff are available to assist districts as needed through their budgeting deliberations. Going into the fiscal year, the Governor has proposed funding of $5 million in Stabilization Aid in FY2025 to provide some additional support to those districts that apply and demonstrate a need. Using only the percent decrease in State aid may not accurately measure the impact of a State aid reduction on a district's ability to provide educational services, however, as the share of State aid relative to each district varies. For all districts, including those with aid increases, the Department makes available resources to assist with budget planning and ongoing support during the fiscal year.

- **Barring any legislative changes to the funding formula, and assuming that the formula is fully funded in each year going forward, what is the likely volatility in State aid post-S2? By how much could districts see their aid change in FY 2026?**

Assuming that the formula continues to be fully funded and that no additional Legislative changes are made to the formula, each district will receive State funding based upon the characteristics of the district and its community, recalculated each year. To the extent that a district's enrollment or other factors in the formula change year to year, there will be changes to the amount of aid each district will receive. Any changes to a district's FY2026 aid compared to FY2025 will be dependent on variations on these key variables. A key area of focus going forward will be to assess aspects of the formula that will improve predictability.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

2. Currently, school districts first see their proposed State aid for an upcoming school year when the department releases State aid notices within two days of the Governor's budget address, or around March 1 in a typical year. School districts then have until March 4 or March 20, depending on whether the district holds its annual school election in April or November, to submit district budget components to the department. Given the short timeframe, school districts may have limited options to adjust their budgets in a manner that minimizes adverse consequences to stakeholders, especially when the amount of State aid falls below expectations.

- ***Questions:*** **What is the feasibility of developing an online resource that would allow districts to estimate State aid in an upcoming year before the release of official State aid notices?**

An online tool for estimating State school aid is likely difficult to implement. The school funding formula includes several interrelated factors that make it difficult to project State school aid when future data points (i.e. enrollment, or community property values) can vary more than expected, particularly for districts that receive equalization aid.

- **What is the timeline for the department to receive other input values for the funding formula (including tax and property values) from other sources? What is the department's capability to inform school districts of projected State aid figures earlier than is currently the case, were a statutory change to occur to require State aid notices to be released earlier?**

To the extent that one considers changing the date on which State school aid notices are released, this would introduce extreme complexity to the budget process if attempting to provide these notices prior to the date of the Governor's Budget Message. The total amount of formula aid and preschool education aid included in the proposed FY2025 budget, alone, accounts for nearly one-quarter of the Statewide total appropriation. The aid included in the annual notices is likely too closely linked to the overall budget development process to disconnect the two.

The timing of when key data elements are available include the following:

- Current statute requires that districts' equalization aid incorporate the impact of revisions made by the tax court by January 15. This year, these revisions were made available to the Department on January 29.
- While districts are required to submit enrollment data by early December, the process of correcting data typically extends through the end of January. It would be feasible to have an earlier cut-off date for corrections to accommodate an earlier release date for State school aid, but that would risk errors going uncorrected and being incorporated into the State aid calculations.
- The process for determining the number of approved seats for districts' early childhood programs requires a significant amount of interaction between the NJDOE and school districts. The total number of approved seats is typically finalized in early February.
- Although the above represent the largest components of calculating State aid, there are numerous other smaller pieces, such as tax rates and charter school applications, that need to be considered as well. In general, these components are available to the Department in early February each year.

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3. P.L.2007, c.260 requires the department to review education costs and issue a new Educational Adequacy Report by September 1, 2025. The report is intended to determine the costs of providing a thorough and efficient education to New Jersey students. The most recently issued report from March 2022 examined such factors as: resources, staffing levels, average salaries, and employee benefits.

- ***Questions:*** **Does the department anticipate that there will be any new elements to consider in the determination of a thorough and efficient education in the next Educational Adequacy Report?**

The recommendations to be included in the Educational Adequacy Report are specifically identified in N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-46. The law does not include provisions for the Department to recommend changes to the school funding statutes that are outside of the specified parameters.

- **Is the department aware of data that indicate a correlation between a district's wealth and the amount it spends on educational expenses beyond the base requirements for a thorough and efficient education? To what extent does the school aid formula penalize districts that provide resources beyond the base requirements, as set forth in the Educational Adequacy Report? To what extent does the formula reward districts that exceed these requirements?**

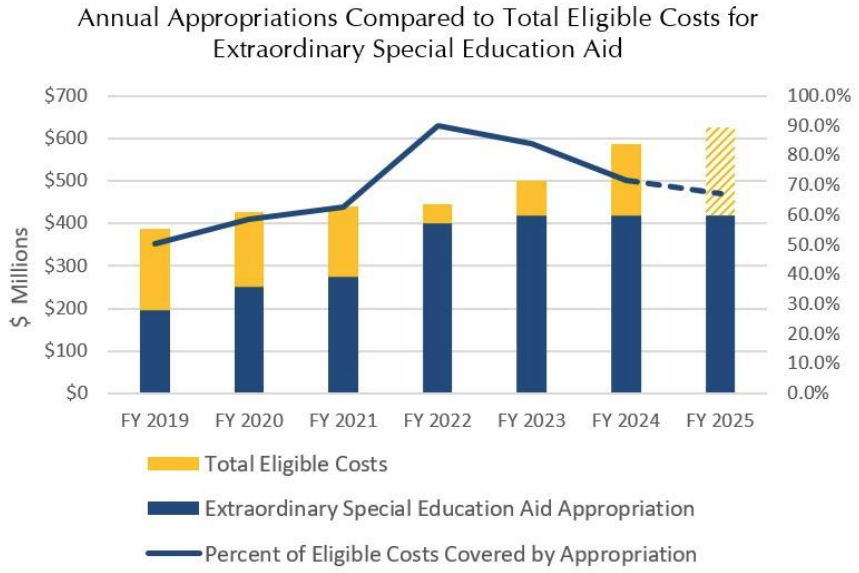
The funding formula does not include any calculations that factor in a district's spending relative to adequacy other than determining hold harmless provisions during the phase-in outlined in P.L.2018, c.67 (commonly known as S2). Since FY2025 is the last year of the phase-in, a district's spending relative to adequacy will have no impact on the amount of funding the district receives. There is no penalty for districts that are spending above or below adequacy as calculated according to the funding formula.

4. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget proposes flat funding at $420 million for Extraordinary Special Education Aid for the third consecutive year, despite an increase in actual costs of providing special education services to students. The FY 2023 appropriation amount covered approximately 83.9 percent of $500.6 million in total eligible costs from the 2021-2022 school year, down from 90.1 percent in FY 2022. The same $420 million appropriation amount in FY 2024, meanwhile, only covered 71.7 percent of $585.4 million in total eligible costs from the 2022-2023 school year. Based on growth in total eligible costs over the past five years, eligible special education costs could approximate at least $625 million in FY 2025.

School districts may apply for reimbursement for certain costs of educating special education students when the costs exceed $40,000 if the student is educated in a public school program or $55,000 if the student attends an approved private school for students with disabilities. In the case of a student educated in a public school program with other students who do not have disabilities, a district would receive Extraordinary Special Education Costs Aid equal to 90 percent of the amount of the excess cost. In the case of a student educated in a public school program

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with only students with disabilities or in an approved private school for students with disabilities, a district would receive aid equal to 75 percent of excess costs.



- ***Questions:*** **Why are costs eligible for Extraordinary Special Education Aid rising? What factors are driving the cost increases? What percentage of the increase since FY 2021 is due to a greater number of children for whom Extraordinary Special Education Aid may be claimed? What percentage is due to an increase in the per-pupil cost of providing special education services, including general inflation that may increase costs to the point that more students newly qualify for a district to claim Extraordinary Special Education Aid? Is the department considering updating the extraordinary special education cost thresholds in the upcoming Educational Adequacy Report?**

As the cost for services rises (for all students), more services have crossed the thresholds that used to be considered "extraordinary." While these costs are rising, the thresholds for what makes costs eligible for extraordinary aid have not been increased to reflect inflation in at least 15 years, the start of the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA). The Department has been monitoring the changes and described changing trends in the Educational Adequacy Report 2023. In the first year of SFRA approximately 4.4% of students who were classified for special education required services that met the cost threshold for extraordinary aid reimbursement. By FY2023, the percentage grew to 9.2%. The average cost per pupil for special education services has increased by 67% during the course of the SFRA.

Consistent with the process for previous reports, the Department will again review costs for special education and will make appropriate recommendations in the upcoming Educational Adequacy Report 2026 based on that review.

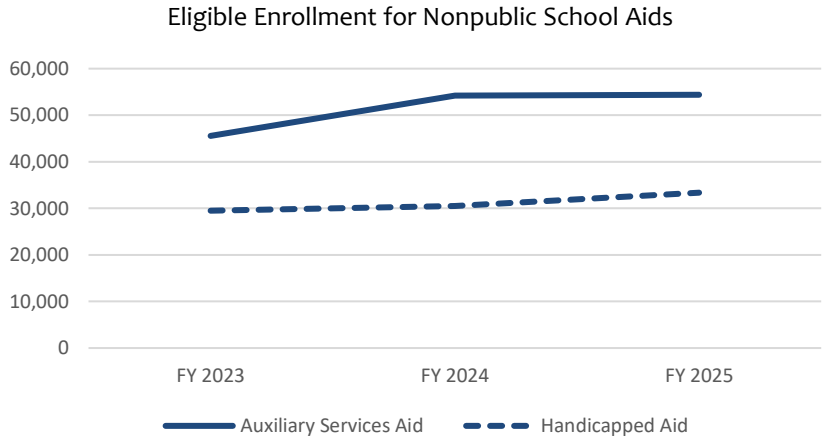
- **Given the increase in extraordinary special education costs over time, what is the rationale for maintaining flat funding of this aid category? What percentage of eligible**

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

costs does the department estimate will be reimbursed by a $420 million appropriation in FY 2025?

Extraordinary Aid has increased considerably in recent years – rising from less than $200 million in FY2018 to a proposed funding level of $420 million for FY2025. Additionally, the Governor's proposed budget includes nearly $200 million in additional Special Education Categorical Aid for FY2025 compared to FY2024. In the most recent year, districts received a prorated amount of 71.735% in Extraordinary Aid. As previously noted, while costs have increased across the board due to inflation, the threshold for defining "extraordinary" has not increased for 15 years. Since reimbursements for this program are based on applications down to the student level, any necessary prorations for FY2025 are not known until all applications of actual costs during the school year are submitted.

5. Each category of nonpublic school aid is being held constant under the FY 2025 Governor's Budget, despite continued increases in projected enrollment. The result is lower per pupil costs, particularly for Nonpublic Handicapped Aid and Nonpublic Auxiliary Services Aid. Nonpublic Handicapped Aid provides aid for identification, examination, classification, supplemental, and speech correction services to nonpublic school students with disabilities. Nonpublic Auxiliary Services Aid, meanwhile, provides aid for compensatory education, English as a second language, and home instruction services to nonpublic school students with disabilities.



Per-pupil aid amounts for Nonpublic Auxiliary Services Aid and Nonpublic Handicapped Aid are prescribed in budget language each year. These amounts, however, can be prorated by the department based on the nonpublic school student population and the need for services, as well as the actual amount appropriated for each of the two programs. This proration often results in actual aid disbursed to districts that is often lower than should be the case, given the per-pupil amounts specified in budget language. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget sets the per-pupil amounts for the 2024-2025 school year as:

- $1,326.17 for an initial evaluation or reevaluation for examination and classification for handicapped aid;
- $380 for an annual review for examination and classification for handicapped aid;
- $930 for speech correction services for handicapped aid;

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- $826 for supplementary instruction services for handicapped aid;
- $1,070.33 for compensatory education for auxiliary services aid; and
- $1,090 for services to children of limited English-speaking ability for auxiliary services aid.

- ***Questions:*** **Given the projected increase in nonpublic school enrollment in FY 2025, what is the rationale for maintaining flat funding for nonpublic school aid? For each nonpublic school aid category, please indicate the per-pupil aid amount actually provided in FY 2024 and the estimated amount to be provided in FY 2025. How much would it cost to fully fund each aid category according to the amounts specified in proposed language in the FY 2025 Governor's Budget?**

In recent months, the Department has engaged in numerous conversations with stakeholders regarding the increase in the number of auxiliary services reported in recent years. Based on these discussions, it is not clear whether the increases reflect data reporting errors, short-term anomalies related to the aftereffects of COVID-19, or real changes in the long-trend of the number of services to be provided. Until this dynamic is more clearly understood, increasing the appropriation amount risks having larger sums of these funds going unspent and being returned to the Department.

	FY2024 Actual Per Pupil	FY2025 Projected Per Pupil	FY2025 Projected Appropriation Needed for Full Funding
Auxiliary Services			
Compensatory Educ.	$899.08	$845.56	$54,431,632
ESL	$915.60	$861.10	$3,853,150
Total			$58,284,782
Handicapped Services			
Initial Exam	$1,326.17	$1,326.17	$7,308,523
Annual Exam	$380.00	$380.00	$3,338,680
Corrective Speech	$930.00	$930.00	$8,257,470
Supp. Instruction	$826.00	$826.00	$8,408,680
Total			$27,313,353

- **Please comment on the adequacy of the per-pupil nonpublic handicapped aid and auxiliary services aid amounts. Are the per-pupil amounts sufficient to procure the necessary supply of nonpublic handicapped aid and auxiliary services aid to meet demand for the services? Is there a known shortage of service providers and would higher rates alleviate the shortage? Does the department expect that nonpublic schools will make up for any shortfall in State aid to nonpublic schools? To what extent might school districts be obligated to support additional costs?**

The statutes and regulations for auxiliary and remedial services prescribe limited services and State funding for nonpublic school students.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- Auxiliary services provide nonpublic school students with compensatory education that is supplemental to the schools' regular programs for the improvement of math and language arts literacy skills, English language services for multilingual learners, and home instruction.
- Remedial services provide nonpublic school students with limited services that are supplemental to federal IDEA programs: evaluation and classification for determination of eligibility for special education services, supplementary instruction and speech-language services.

Based on regular communications with school districts, the availability of service providers has not been an issue. Pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:14-6.3, "Each board of education of the district in which the nonpublic school is located shall provide programs and services under this subchapter at a cost not to exceed the amount of State aid funds." Although some nonpublic schools provide their own resources for students in various categories beyond the State resources, there is no requirement that they do so.

6. The Lakewood Public School District has been experiencing unique financial difficulties for several years, owing to the unique composition of the municipality, which sees a substantially larger population of students attending nonpublic schools than the average school district. For several years, the district has used loans from the State to supplement its budget and provide a thorough and efficient education. The district budget approved by the board of education on March 15, 2024 includes a request for a loan from the State of $104.1 million. Given that the district has continued to rely on loans to fund its operating budget, the increasing loan balance may pose a threat to the district's ability to provide a thorough and efficient education.

In March 2023, the Appellate Division of the Superior Court of New Jersey ruled in the case of Alcantara v. Allen-McMillan, No. A-3693-20, that the department had erred in determining that the Lakewood Public School District provided a thorough and efficient education and directed the department to re-examine the case. On November 27, 2023, the court directed the department to complete the review of Lakewood's case by April 1, 2024. If the State's school funding law is found to be unconstitutional as it is applied to the Lakewood Public School District, it would necessitate additional State aid payments to the district.

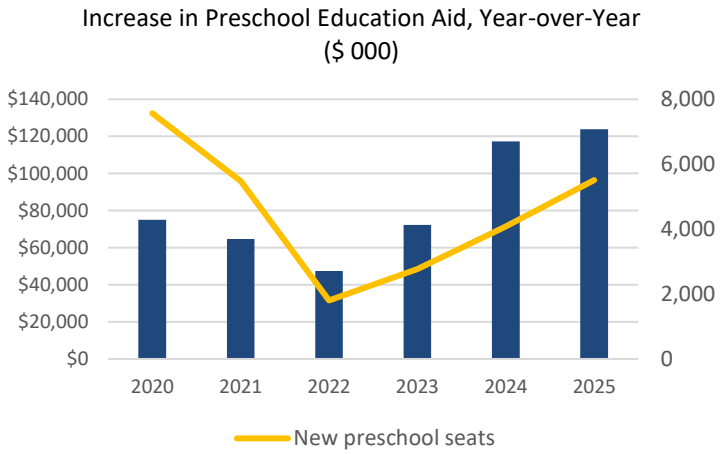
- ***Questions:*** **Has the department completed its review of the Alcantara v. Allen-McMillan case? If so, please describe the conclusions reached, and if the department proposes revisions to the school aid formula as it applies to the Lakewood Public School District, please detail the proposed revisions and discuss the cost of the revisions. If the review has not been completed, please indicate whether the department will seek an extension of the court-ordered deadline and explain why additional time is needed.**

The Appellate Division of the Superior Court set a deadline of April 1, 2024, for the completion of the Departments final decision in Alcantara v. Allen-McMillan. The Commissioner issued his final decision on April 1, 2024.

Preschool Education

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

7. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget proposes a total of $1.2 billion in Preschool Education aid, representing an increase of $123.8 million from FY 2024. Of this amount, $20 million would be provided to districts seeking to offer preschool for the first time or expand existing programs. According to the department, the increase would fund an additional 5,515 preschool seats, for a total of 75,614 preschool seats in the 2024-2025 school year.



In response to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point, the department stated that it was working with the National Institute for Early Education Research to "determine a strategic plan and timeline in accomplishing universal access to preschool." The department also noted that a mixed delivery model involving licensed child care centers would be necessary for most school districts to achieve universal access to preschool.

- ***Questions:*** **What progress has the department made with respect to establishing a strategic plan and timeline for accomplishing universal access to preschool? If the strategic plan has been completed, please share a copy of the report. If the strategic plan has not been completed, please indicate by what date the department expects the plan's completion. What is the department's estimate for the time to achieve universal access to preschool?**

The Department has completed phase 1 of its two-part strategic plan. Released in October 2022, the New Jersey Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase I: The Foundation, outlines the benefits, options, and considerations for universal preschool policy decisions in key areas such as scaling up enrollment, funding, facilities, workforce, and mixed-delivery partnerships. Following the release of the Phase I plan, the Department worked with NIEER to discuss these foundational considerations with stakeholders to help inform Phase II of the plan, which will provide a blueprint for implementation of the priorities identified in Phase I.

The road to universal access to full-day, high-quality preschool is impacted by numerous factors including but not limited to available funding, community interest, and available facilities space. Given the variability of these factors over time and across unique community settings, it can be difficult to predict when New Jersey will reach universal access.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- **Please explain the key elements of the envisioned mixed delivery model for universal access to preschool. Would school districts financially support licensed child care centers that provide preschool services within the school district? Would the centers become contractors of the school district and would school districts in effect acquire the power to influence the curriculum of nonpublic day care centers? Is it assumed that licensed day care centers would continue to operate preschool programs independently of school districts and that the nonpublic preschool services would remain financially viable when a school district offers preschool services that would be paid for by taxpayers.**

Universal access to high quality preschool requires maintaining a mixed-delivery model. Key elements of the mixed delivery model include partnering with local licensed childcare centers and Head Start programs. This model honors parental choice, offers additional services such as wrap around care, increases preschool facility capacity across the state, and supports private childcare provider businesses. To support the State's mixed-delivery approach to preschool, the FY2024 Preschool Education Aid (PEA) expansion grant application allowed for priority points to be given to applicants that demonstrated a partnership with licensed childcare providers and/or Head Start. Additionally, PEA contracts include a "due diligence" clause to promote the health and sustainability of local childcare providers.

PEA funding is provided to local education agencies (LEAs), which then contract with licensed childcare centers and Head Start providers to deliver high-quality preschool services. Childcare centers and Head Start programs operate autonomously from the LEA. However, the preschool classrooms that are contracted for PEA operate in partnership with the LEA. This process promotes consistency and alignment among providers and the LEA-operated program regarding curricula, facilities, and other required components that meet New Jersey's preschool standards.

8. The FY 2024 Appropriations Act broadened the allowable uses of Preschool Expansion Aid to include, for example, training and workforce development related to preschool. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget recommends the continuation of the expanded uses.

- ***Question:*** **What percentage of districts used their allotment of Preschool Expansion Aid to provide workforce development or support other expansion needs? Please provide examples of the uses of these funds for purposes other than the direct provision of preschool services to children.**

As emphasized in Phase I of New Jersey's universal preschool strategic plan, New Jersey's ability to achieve universal preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in the state depends on many factors. One such factor is expanding the workforce of preschool providers and in order to meet demand, New Jersey must increase its preschool workforce capacity. With the completion of two rounds of preschool expansion grants in FY2024, the Department will use the remaining funds to address ancillary needs related to the expansion of high-quality, full-day preschool programs, which may include workforce development.

9. The FY 2023 Appropriations Act includes a $120.0 million appropriation from the State's flexible $6.24 billion Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund grant award under the American Rescue Plan Act to expand preschool facilities in regular operating districts, which are school

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

districts other than the 31 SDA (former Abbott) districts. The Governor announced the awarding of $51.9 million in funding to 23 school districts to support 30 projects that will enable the creation, expansion, and renovation of preschool facilities Statewide.

- *Questions:* **Please provide an overview of the projects that received funding for preschool facilities, including a list of the districts that received grant awards and the amount of funds for each district. How long will the selected projects take to complete? How many seats will be created or otherwise supported due to the construction of these school facilities projects?**

The Department received 35 project applications from 27 school districts for preschool facilities grants. The Office of School Facilities Projects (OSFP) has issued Final Eligible Cost (FEC) approval letters for 32 projects in 26 school districts. The FEC provides districts with the approval to move forward with the project, and the amount of funding that is available to support the project. The Department is awaiting additional project information to approve the remaining 3 projects in one school district. The details for each school project, by district, is listed in the table included in Appendix A. The time needed to complete each project will vary, however, each school district has until September 30, 2026, to complete the awarded projects.

A total of 3,541 preschool seats will be impacted by the completion of these projects. Of these, 1,114 seats are related to rehabilitation and school improvement projects that will make the spaces suitable for preschool students. The remaining 2,427 seats are related to new construction and are a net increase in capacity. Note that these figures anticipate approval of the pending projects in Hamilton Twp.

- **To what extent will the department support awardees in ensuring funds are obligated and spent in accordance with federal spending deadlines?**

The Department provides support to all grantees throughout the grant period by providing Technical Assistance sessions and automated grant system reminders of due dates for reports. Additionally, the Department regularly works with grantees to provide individualized assistance at any time during the grant period.

- **How many school districts were denied funding? For what reasons were the districts denied and what other opportunities do these districts have to secure funding to support their preschool facilities projects?**

No districts were denied funding.

- **When does the department expect to make available, and award, remaining funds under the program?**

The Department is in the process of finalizing the Round 2 application and will open the grant period in April 2024.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

Teacher Shortage

10. Public schools are facing a shortage of teachers with the severity of the shortages varying by school district. The scarcity is widely believed to be the result of both decreasing enrollment in educator preparation programs and lower retention of teachers from year to year, particularly early career teachers. In FY 2024, the department implemented some new initiatives aimed at easing the teacher shortage, including a fee holiday for certification fees, stipends for student-teachers, and various grant programs.

FY 2024 Initiatives to Address the State's Teacher Shortage		
	FY 2024	FY 2025
Student Teacher Stipends	$10,000,000	$10,000,000
Teacher Certification Fee Holiday (Estimated Revenue Loss)	$5,000,000	$0
Culture and Climate Innovation Grants	$2,000,000	$1,600,000
Paraprofessional Training Program	$1,000,000	$1,000,000
Teacher Media Campaign	$1,000,000	$0
Teacher Leader Network	$500,000	$400,000

- ***Questions:*** **How have the department's initiatives performed in the past year? On what metrics is the department basing its assessment of the success of the initiatives? What new initiatives is the department implementing to address the teacher shortage?**

- **Student Teacher Stipends:** This program is administered by the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA). The Department supports HESAA as needed by coordinating responses to educator preparation programs for HESAA and assisting in the development of guidance for the educator preparation program to identify eligible student teachers. HESAA allocated $3,000 per student teacher identified by the educator preparation program.

- **Teacher Certification Fee Holiday:** Since July 1, 2023, a total of $8 million in certification fees has been waived for New Jersey certification candidates. This funding covered more than 6,000 initial teacher certifications and nearly 16,000 substitute teacher credentials. Since the fee holiday began, more than 33,000 total applications have been approved by the Department.

- **Culture and Climate Innovation Grants:** The Teacher Climate and Culture grant application closed on March 14, 2024. Applications are currently under review and the Department anticipates that promising approaches will be shared and replicated statewide as a result of this program.

- **Paraprofessional Training Program:** This grant program will provide up to four awards for the maximum amount of $250,000 each to local education agencies (LEAs) to provide tuition assistance for education support professionals seeking a teaching certificate in one of the critical teacher shortage areas identified by the teacher shortage task force. This grant opportunity is anticipated to launch in spring 2024.

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- **Teacher Media Campaign:** The public awareness campaign is in the final stages of development. The campaign highlights the profound impact and benefit of a career in teaching, showcasing the positive impact educators have on students and communities.

- **Teacher Leader Network Expansion:** Currently in the early stages of implementation, the Department will be partnering with up to three interested institutions of higher education to explore teacher leadership collaborations with a cohort of LEAs. Promising practices from the first cohort can be applied to other LEAs should funding for this project continue in FY2025.

In addition to these programs, the Department offers monthly professional learning, training, and consulting opportunities for educator preparation programs to strengthen teacher candidate recruitment and retention. Later this year, the Department plans to launch its expanded VETeach initiative to support returning veterans through the teacher certification process. Relatedly, the Regional Educational Laboratory Program is underway, using data to help increase the number of teachers of color employed across the state. The Department also offers certification flexibility through the statutory limited CE/CEAS pilot program, in which teaching candidates can waive a certification requirement. Finally, the Department continues to refine its new certification system to ensure that applications for new candidates are expedited and review times are kept at a minimum.

- **Please provide data concerning the current number of teachers and open teaching positions, disaggregated by county and grade level. How does this compare to previous years?**

The Department currently collects data related to reasons why teachers are exiting the field, as required by P.L.2021, c.394. Additionally, as the licensing authority for teachers in New Jersey, the Department maintains data regarding educator certificates across the state. The most recent data available is from the 2022-2023 school year. The Department does not collect school district workforce information regarding the current number of teachers and open teaching positions, disaggregated by county and grade level.

- **In each year, how many individuals are receiving instructional certificates on the basis of reciprocity for equivalent teaching credentials from other states?**

The Department allows for certification reciprocity through N.J.A.C. 6A:9B-8.8 and the Alternate Route Interstate Reciprocity Pilot Program, pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:9A-5.7. The Department is currently working on an enhancement to its certification system, NJEdCert, to better capture the number of certifications issued based on reciprocity. However, this data is not currently available.

- **Has the teacher shortage impacted the availability of substitute teachers? Please provide the number of registered substitute teachers in each of the last five years. How does the number of substitute teachers available meet the need for substitutes?**

Below is a table showing the number of substitute credentials being granted from 2019 through 2023. Each year, except 2020 (impacted by COVID-19), demonstrates an increase in the number of available substitutes in the state. Although the Department does not have specific data on the

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

need for substitutes across districts, the recent increase in substitute credentials is encouraging that demand is being met.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Instructional Substitute	10,704	7,098	10,714	14,213	17,734
School Nurse Substitute	305	167	399	611	680
Career & Technical Education Substitute	1	1		12	30
Totals	**11,010**	**7,266**	**11,113**	**14,836**	**18,444**

11. In response to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point, the department indicated that a significant reason for low retention of early career teachers is the lack of preparedness for the realities of the classroom.

- ***Questions:*** **How can the department, in concert with school districts and educator preparation programs, ensure that teachers entering the workforce are better prepared for the realities of the classroom? What aspects of the classroom cause the most problems for new teachers?**

The Department works with school districts and educator preparation programs (EPPs) to ensure that teachers are prepared for the realities of the classroom in several ways, including:

- Offering monthly office hours to discuss implementation of recently adopted amendments to the New Jersey Administrative Code for professional standards, EPPs, certification, and professional development. The Department also provides technical assistance through EPP and teacher candidate stakeholder groups regarding New Jersey Administrative Code revisions and new or revised policies for teaching candidates.
- Working with EPPs through the RAPID and RAPID-Plus programs to further develop the pedagogical knowledge for reading and literacy instruction to preschool and elementary students.
- Establishing a Collaborative for Diversifying the Teacher Workforce with EPPs to provide recruitment, preparation, and retention strategies that will strengthen the teacher workforce.
- Increasing the ethno-racial diversity of the teacher workforce and ensuring all educators engage in culturally responsive practices through the New Jersey Diverse Learner-Ready Teacher committee. The committee meets monthly and includes representation from the Department, educator preparation programs, educational organizations, school, and district level administration.

The February 2023 initial recommendations from the Task Force on Public School Staff Shortages in New Jersey cited the COVID-19 pandemic and all its attendant consequences as exacerbating difficulties for teachers in the classroom. Educators spend many hours outside of the classroom on grading and other afterhours tasks and they face growing strain on student mental health while also trying to navigate their own mental health needs.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

The Department's $2 million Teacher Climate and Culture innovation grant program was established to highlight policies and procedures that reduce administrative paperwork and other tasks that pull teachers away from classroom instruction. The grant program is designed to support up to 30 LEAs to examine how administrative functions can be streamlined, reduced, or eliminated to continue the ongoing support of teachers. The application period for this grant closed on March 14, 2024, and applications are currently under review.

12. Executive Order No. 309 of 2022 established within the Office of the Governor the 25-member "Task Force on Public School Shortages in New Jersey" to address the challenges facing New Jersey's educational workforce and to increase the quantity of school staff in the State. Of the recommendations released by task force in February 2023, several related to culture and climate shifts, including supporting policies and practices that:

- promote work/life balance for educators;
- focus on safety, physical, and mental health; and
- create a work environment that is free of bias.

Efforts to implement some of these changes include a $2.0 million appropriation in FY 2024 for Culture and Climate Innovation Grants, which the Governor recommends to reduce to $1.6 million in FY 2025. According to a department response to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point, these grants were intended to increase teacher satisfaction by focusing on safety, physical health, and mental health.

- ***Questions:*** **What efforts has the department made to provide guidance to school districts to help achieve culture and climate shifts that make teaching a more attractive professional choice?**

The Department regularly provides a variety of trainings that include reinforcing the importance of climate and culture in all aspects of the education process by including administrators, teaching staff, bus operators, athletic directors, and coaching staff. The threat assessment trainings the Department offers include conversations about strengthening policies and fostering positive climate and culture and the impact on school safety. The school safety specialist academy includes a session on harassment, intimidation and bullying, bias incidents, and climate and culture training for school safety specialists. The guest lecture series has provided opportunities for school staff to learn more about this topic from nationally recognized experts in the field.

The Department has a history of providing support to schools to promote positive climates even before a mandate was set forth by the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act in 2011. The Department of Education has been proactive in offering guidance and providing a suite of resources to schools and districts, aimed at fostering supportive and positive atmospheres conducive to teaching and learning.

A pivotal initiative in this endeavor is the launch of the New Jersey School Climate Improvement Platform (NJ-SCI). NJ-SCI encompasses a detailed survey distributed among staff, caregivers, and students to gauge the health of various dimensions of school climate. By streamlining the administration and analysis of these surveys, NJ-SCI alleviates a significant portion of the administrative overhead, allowing educators and administrators to focus more on instructional

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

quality and less on bureaucratic processes. Beyond mere assessment, NJ-SCI recommends tailored, evidence-based strategies that resonate with the needs unveiled through data analysis.

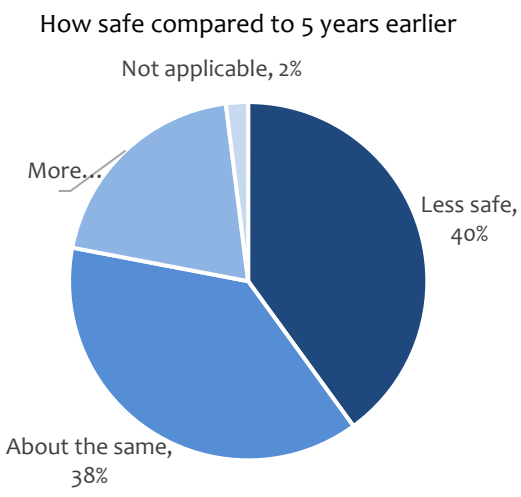
- **Which districts received Culture and Climate Innovation Grants and for what specific initiatives? Can the department already share any successful strategies implemented by these districts to achieve culture and climate shifts? Have the districts that received these grants experienced higher teacher retention than other districts around the State?**

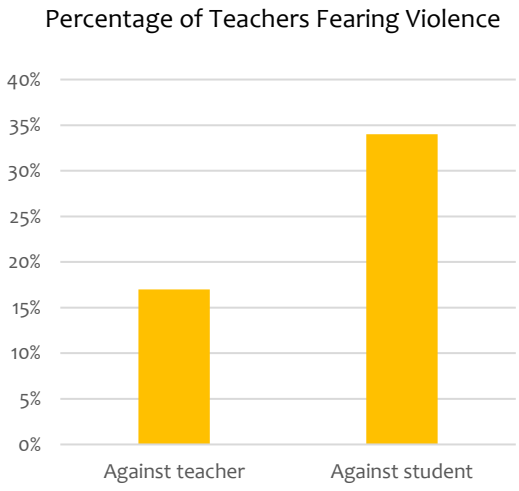
The FY2024 Teacher Climate and Culture grant application period closed on March 14, 2024. Applications are currently under review. As a pending competitive grant opportunity, the Department cannot speak to the specifics of any applications or awards at this time. Once grants are awarded, the Department anticipates sharing the innovative strategies funded through the grant program so they may be replicated statewide.

- **For what reasons is the appropriation for Culture and Climate Innovation Grants recommended to be scaled back from $2.0 million in FY 2024 to $1.6 million in FY 2025? Has the number of grant applications underperformed expectations?**

The FY2024 Teacher Climate and Culture grant application period closed on March 14, 2024. As applications are currently under review, the Department isn't able to provide additional details on the final applications at this time. The reduction in annual funding recommended for FY2025 compared to FY2024 is part of a broad-based reduction in discretionary grant programs across the State budget meant to reflect the State's capacity for spending in a tighter fiscal environment.

13. A contributing factor to low teacher retention may be changing perceptions of safety in schools. Multiple reports demonstrate that many teachers feel less safe at school compared to five years earlier.





- ***Questions:* To what extent do school districts make mental health services available to district employees?**

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

Many school districts offer Employee Assistance Programs, which often include confidential counseling services, stress management programs, and referrals to mental health professionals. Additionally, in the spirit of collaboration, school-based mental health staff have created programs to support the well-being of their school communities. The availability and scope of these services can vary significantly from district to district, depending on need, resources, and specific agreements with employee unions.

- **Has the department conducted any studies of teacher attitudes towards school environments and what actions could be taken to improve perceptions of workplace safety? Please provide any best practices for addressing concerns that teachers may have about workplace safety.**

While the Department has not conducted a study measuring teachers' perceptions of workplace safety, the Department provides a wide array of training directed toward school staff to better inform them on measures to improve school safety as well as tools for improving school climate. These professional development sessions are tailored for a variety of school staff like administrators, teaching staff, counselors, cafeteria workers, buildings and grounds staff, bus operators, security officers, etc. The Department has observed that when school staff are provided rich professional development opportunities and when they are included in conversations about school safety and have opportunities to provide input into local safety decisions, educators tend to report feeling safer in schools.

The Department has provided in-person professional development to over 100,000 school staff in the area of school safety and security. In addition, the Department conducts drill observations (nearly 2,000 for Active Shooter response alone), table-top exercises, evacuation drilling and training, and reunification training. Since the school-based threat assessment team legislation (P.L.2022, c.83) was signed by Governor Murphy in August 2022, training has been implemented for school staff to recognize, assess, support, and manage students engaged in concerning and threatening behaviors to improve school safety. The Department has trained approximately 20,000 members assigned to school-based teams and has provided nearly 700 training opportunities to reach these audiences.

14. The FY 2024 Appropriations Act included $1 million for a public media campaign aimed at recruiting individuals to the education field. In response to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point, the department stated that it would contract with "a full-service public relations agency to create a state-wide public awareness campaign regarding positive messaging surrounding the teaching profession as a life-long career." The appropriation is not renewed in the FY 2025 Governor's Budget.

- ***Questions:*** **Did the department execute a contract with a public relations agency to carry out the Statewide campaign? If so, please detail the terms of that contract, including the specific services to be provided by the selected vendor and the amount of funds to be paid to the vendor for each provided service.**

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

The Department is partnering with Princeton Partners to provide campaign strategy, creative development, campaign execution, and post-campaign evaluation using a variety of evaluative metrics. The total cost of this campaign is $1 million.

- **To what extent has the public awareness campaign been implemented across the State?**

The public awareness campaign is in the final stages of development. As part of this process, the Department will seek targeted stakeholder input on elements of the campaign to ensure that the messaging resonates with the intended audience.

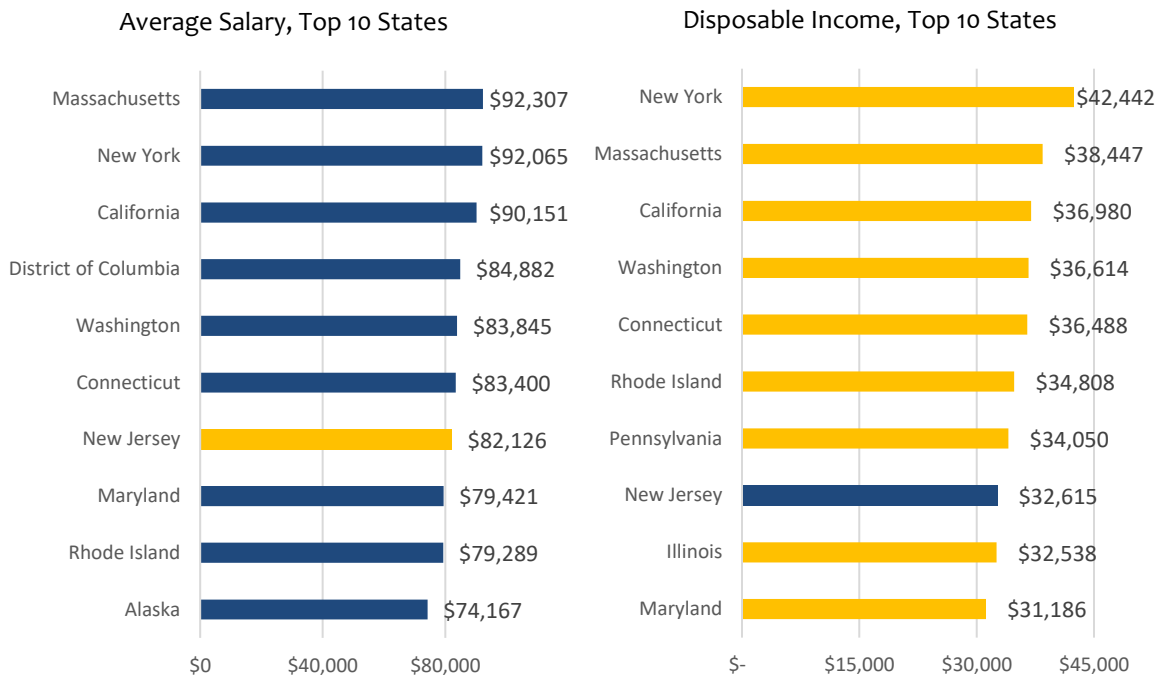
In addition to the public awareness campaign, the Department maintains a one-stop resource on its webpage in which job seekers can review open positions at local education agencies (LEAs) in each county across the state. Each link re-routes the job seeker to the LEA's website for additional details on submitting an application.

- **Please discuss the effects that the public awareness campaign has had, or that the department expects it to have, on addressing the teacher shortage in the State and attracting more individuals to the teaching profession. What metrics is the department using to determine the effectiveness and measure the outcomes of the campaign?**

To measure the effectiveness of the campaign and its outcomes, the Department will utilize several key metrics, with support from Princeton Partners. In addition to common metrics including engagement on web-based portions of the campaign, the Department will be provided with expected audience size for more traditional broadcast advertising approaches that will be employed. In addition to those directly related to the awareness campaign, the Department will work with the New Jersey EPPs to evaluate increases in program applications, seek targeted input from school districts regarding increased recruitment and retention rates at the local level, track increased applications the Department's teaching certification system, and monitor social media, website, and advertisement engagement.

15. According to data from the National Education Association, the average salary for teachers in New Jersey in the 2022-2023 school year was $82,126. Even when adjusting for cost of living, New Jersey ranks among the highest in the country. Despite this, salaries are reported to remain a barrier to teacher recruitment and retention. Districts may face challenges in attempting to increase salaries for educators, however, as a result of the tax levy cap imposed by P.L.2007, c.62 which limits the amount a district is able to increase its tax levy in each year.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)



- ***Questions:*** **Has the department been able to provide districts with any strategies that may help to increase teacher salaries?**

While teacher recruitment and retention efforts inclusive of salary increases remain the responsibility of a school district board of education and chief school administrator in consultation with local collective bargaining units, the Department offers consultative support through County Offices of Education. School districts have engaged in a variety of efforts to recruit and retain teachers including but not limited to; increased marketing campaigns, hiring bonuses for new hires, referral bonuses for current certified staff, and in some cases retention bonuses. Additionally, school districts have provided stipends for teacher development of tools and resources for students and offer additional stipend positions for certified staff including before- and after-school tutoring, curriculum revision efforts, co-curricular club activities, and sports. The Department has created a resource for school districts that provides them general guidance on maximizing the use of federal funds, including salary related strategies to recruit and retain teachers. Executive County Business Officials and Executive County Superintendents facilitate county roundtable meetings with chief school administrators throughout each county to share evidence-based practices that have yielded positive outcomes for school districts that have made efforts to increase teacher salaries.

- **What is the average salary of teachers in the first year of employment? What is the average salary of teachers at retirement? Has the department seen any correlation, at the district level, between teacher salaries and the number of teaching positions unfilled?**

The table below demonstrates the average salary of teachers in the first year of employment and at retirement spanning the school years 2019-2020 through 2023-2024. These data are based on

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

school district self-reporting. The Department does not have any specific research on the correlation of teacher salaries and filled positions.

EXPERIENCE	AVG SALARY SY19/20	AVG SALARY SY20/21	AVG SALARY SY21/22	AVG SALARY SY22/23	AVG SALARY SY23/24
First year of employment	$57,487.00	$58,426.00	$59,845.00	$62,918.00	$66,214.00
Retirement	$77,860.00	$87,850.00	$72,547.00	$93,497.00	$94,608.00

- **To what extent do teacher salaries differ based on the grades and subject areas in which individuals teach? Are teacher shortages the most pronounced in subject areas in which schools compete most directly with the private sector for employees?**

The table below shows the average salary of teachers per grade level spanning the school years 2019-2020 through 2022-2023. These data are based on school district self-reporting.

GRADE	AVG SALARY SY19/20	AVG SALARY SY20/21	AVG SALARY SY21/22	AVG SALARY SY22/23
PK	$68,231.00	$69,084.00	$71,355.00	$73,984.00
KG	$71,753.00	$73,715.00	$74,488.00	$77,367.00
01	$72,058.00	$73,582.00	$74,795.00	$78,241.00
02	$72,948.00	$74,382.00	$75,564.00	$78,382.00
03	$72,013.00	$73,743.00	$74,762.00	$77,901.00
04	$72,415.00	$73,982.00	$75,158.00	$78,269.00
05	$72,963.00	$74,471.00	$75,539.00	$79,860.00
06	$74,008.00	$75,521.00	$76,834.00	$79,846.00
07	$74,325.00	$76,266.00	$77,387.00	$80,783.00
08	$75,081.00	$77,039.00	$78,471.00	$81,607.00
09	$75,404.00	$77,350.00	$78,860.00	$82,832.00
10	$77,110.00	$79,046.00	$80,613.00	$84,743.00
11	$78,066.00	$79,762.00	$81,425.00	$85,379.00
12	$79,206.00	$81,216.00	$82,512.00	$86,610.00
PG	$76,126.00	$87,644.00	$83,885.00	$92,635.00

The table below shows the average salary of teachers per subject matter, spanning the school years 2019-2020 through 2022-2023. These data are based on school district self-reporting.

SUBJECT AREA	AVG SALARY SY19/20	AVG SALARY SY20/21	AVG SALARY SY21/22	AVG SALARY SY22/23
AGRICULTURE, FOOD, AND NATURAL RESOURCES	$73,499.00	$73,982.00	$77,182.00	$81,344.00
ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION	$80,416.00	$82,259.00	$83,611.00	$86,760.00
BUSINESS AND MARKETING	$77,303.00	$79,195.00	$79,689.00	$83,720.00

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIO/VISUAL TECHNOLOGY	$76,681.00	$78,596.00	$80,506.00	$84,631.00
COMPUTER AND INFORMATION SCIENCES	$77,323.00	$80,002.00	$81,412.00	$84,379.00
ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY	$77,231.00	$78,407.00	$80,303.00	$83,180.00
ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE	$73,691.00	$75,424.00	$76,611.00	$80,339.00
HEALTH CARE SCIENCES	$80,633.00	$81,323.00	$81,985.00	$86,652.00
HOSPITALITY AND TOURISM	$77,331.00	$78,992.00	$78,497.00	$81,317.00
HUMAN SERVICES	$76,122.00	$78,099.00	$78,303.00	$80,594.00
LIFE AND PHYSICAL SCIENCES	$74,941.00	$76,712.00	$78,075.00	$81,466.00
MANUFACTURING	$80,134.00	$78,878.00	$81,013.00	$85,006.00
MATHEMATICS	$74,118.00	$75,892.00	$77,380.00	$81,268.00
MILITARY SCIENCE	$90,336.00	$91,914.00	$92,229.00	$98,409.00
MISCELLANEOUS	$75,129.00	$77,331.00	$79,971.00	$81,127.00
NONSUBJECT SPECIFIC	$70,299.00	$71,136.00	$72,113.00	$76,211.00
PHYSICAL, HEALTH, AND SAFETY EDUCATION	$74,007.00	$77,022.00	$78,413.00	$82,320.00
PUBLIC, PROTECTIVE, AND GOVERNMENT SERVICE	$74,250.00	$76,896.00	$78,256.00	$81,494.00
RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THEOLOGY	$78,987.00	$77,772.00	$81,007.00	$73,295.00
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HISTORY	$74,431.00	$76,234.00	$77,660.00	$81,242.00
TRANSPORTATION, DISTRIBUTION AND LOGISTICS	$80,159.00	$82,231.00	$83,399.00	$86,373.00
VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS	$73,863.00	$74,064.00	$74,757.00	$77,762.00
WORLD LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE	$76,459.00	$75,481.00	$77,924.00	$80,473.00

According to research from the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University, teacher shortages in New Jersey are greater in subject areas such as science, mathematics, special education, world languages, career and technical education, and ESL and Bilingual education. Although some individuals in any subject area may look to the private sector for employment, this is most pronounced in career and technical education, science, and mathematics.

16. P.L.2023, c.180 allows teachers to obtain an alternate teaching certificate without taking the Praxis test -- an exam designed to measure academic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics to provide comprehensive assessments of candidates entering teacher preparation programs. This exemption is provided as long as teachers have a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution and pass subject tests relevant to their certification area.

- ***Questions:*** **How does the department anticipate the elimination of the basic skills test requirement will impact teacher recruitment and retention in New Jersey?**

P.L.2023, c.180 removes a barrier for those interested in becoming educators and may lead to more prospective educators in the workforce pipeline. P.L.2023, c.180 created a new certification

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

pathway that eliminated the requirement for educator candidates to take the Praxis Core (Basic Skills) to obtain Alternative Certificate of Eligibility. However, the law still requires four consecutive years of teaching to obtain a provisional certification.

Alternatively, the statutorily created Limited CE/CEAS certification pathway provides flexibility by allowing a candidate to choose to waive one of the requirements to obtain certification.

- **What specific measures does the department have in place to ensure that candidates receiving alternate teaching certificates still possess the necessary skills and qualifications to be effective educators?**

Individuals pursuing the alternate certification will be required to attend an educator preparation program for a certificate of eligibility (CE) while being employed, which is the same requirement for all CE candidates. This is how the Department ensures all candidates possess the necessary skills and qualifications to be effective.

Additionally, recent amendments to N.J.A.C. 6A:9C regarding professional development have strengthened mentoring practices throughout New Jersey. These updates include the following: requiring more frequent and regular meetings between mentors and new teachers, as well as requiring a more collaborative and transparent development and sharing of each LEA's district mentoring program. Chief School Administrators are now required to make the district's mentoring plan available to all nontenured teachers and their mentors, as well receiving input from each school improvement panel in the development of the district plan. The Department has supported these changes through the release of guidance and subsequent training sessions.

- **Can the department share any data or projections regarding the expected increase in the number of teachers entering the profession as a result of this policy change?**

P.L.2023, c.180 requires implementation planning by the Department, including the development and adoption of regulations by the New Jersey State Board of Education. At this time, the Department cannot project the impact of P.L.2023, c.180.

- **To what extent is the department informing teacher candidates about alternate teaching certificates? Please indicate the steps the department has taken to increase awareness of alternate teaching certificates and the amount expended.**

The Department is committed to ensuring that its certification homepage is updated to reflect the most current information about certification requirements, including all new endorsements adopted by the State Board of Education in May 2023. Customer Service for certification hours have been extended to 8:00 am to 7:30 pm Monday through Friday to accommodate the large volume of callers and the educator's workday. The Customer Service Team provides information about all available certificate pathways to educators along with the requirements for each pathway.

More broadly, the Department has contracted with a public relations firm to assist with a public relations campaign to attract more teachers to the field. The campaign intends to highlight the many avenues an individual can pursue to become a certified teacher in New Jersey.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

17. Studies, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, have concluded that there is a positive impact of well-stocked school libraries with certified librarians on reading scores. A report published from the School Librarian Investigation – Decline or Evolution? project, however, found that about one-fifth of all school districts in New Jersey are missing a full-time librarian.

- ***Questions:*** **How does the department plan to incorporate certified school librarians in statewide literacy initiatives?**

In the Summer of 2022, members of the New Jersey Association of School Librarians (NJASL) were invited to participate in the revision process of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Several members provided feedback on the proposed standards and recommendations of support needed for implementation.

In the Summer of 2023, the Department began to collaborate with a committee of school media specialists, librarians, and other educators to develop Information Literacy standards and associated resources, including instructional guidance materials. This work is on-going and will help inform the next iteration of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

In addition, representatives from the Department meet monthly with a working group comprised of the New Jersey State Library, NJASL, LibraryLinkNJ, and the New Jersey Library Association to collaborate on projects funded by a federal grant to elevate and support information literacy in New Jersey.

- **Does the department have specific strategies or plans to address the number of school districts without certified school librarians?**

The Department has a longstanding, engaged partnership with the NJASL and continues to elevate the importance of school librarians in the educational landscape. The Department will continue to support LEAs in expanding school library media specialist (SLMS) recruitment strategies, including leveraging our partnership with NJASL for connections to the larger network of qualified professionals, connecting LEAs with educator provider programs that offer approved programs to develop SLMS, as well as offering technical assistance in leveraging federal funds to increase starting salaries for SLMS.

- **How are school districts that are missing a full-time librarian providing library services to students?**

School districts that are missing a full-time librarian often use other certified staff members to offer library media services to students. Other certified staff members receive support from certified librarians through inter- or intra-district collaborative efforts to ensure students receive full-time library services.

Learning Loss

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

18. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant focus of education nationwide has been centered on learning loss. By some measures, students impacted by longer hybrid or remote learning periods may have lost as much as 16 to 22 weeks' worth of learning. The department has implemented several programs to try to study the impact of learning loss on students in New Jersey, rectify learning loss, and provide additional support to students.

In response to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point, the department indicated that it was using data from the New Jersey Student Learning Assessments, Dynamic Learning Map, ACCESS exam for English language learners, Start Strong Assessment, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and relevant climate and culture data to assess learning loss. The department indicated that it hoped that the most recent data would begin to show a return to pre-pandemic student growth rates.

- ***Questions:*** **Please discuss key findings from the learning loss studies and assessments listed above. Where do New Jersey students stand with respect to learning loss? Have student growth rates returned to pre-pandemic levels? What demographics of students are most affected by learning loss? What demographics have most benefitted from Statewide learning loss recovery efforts?**

In New Jersey, the students that experienced the greatest decrease in assessment scores were our students that scored lowest prior to the pandemic. Consistent with reports published utilizing the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 2022, higher performing students experienced a smaller decrease in scores than did lower performing students. On the 2022 NAEP assessment, New Jersey experienced varying degrees of loss.

The Department does not yet have sufficient data to determine if the growth rates have returned to pre-pandemic levels, as New Jersey has only one year of assessments (2023) since the baseline performance was established in the spring of 2022. Following the 2023-2024 school year administration of the NJSLA, the Department will have a better understanding of the impacts of the initiatives implemented by districts to address learning loss.

Overall, the 2022-2023 school year results found increases across the state-aggregated results in all subjects and across all grades. The data from 2023 also showed that students with disabilities and multilingual learners experienced less growth in their scores than other groups, and less than the all-student average.

To assist in a more sophisticated trend analysis, and using funds from the FY23 Appropriations Act, the Department engaged the New Jersey State Policy Lab at Rutgers University to study the complex landscape of learning loss in New Jersey. The resulting study, the Promising Practices Project, focuses on the schools that performed better than predicted on the 2022 NJSLA compared to their pre-pandemic performance on the 2019 NJSLA. The study proposed that, during the pandemic, schools became incubators of innovation and developed promising practices to improve student outcomes that could be replicated throughout New Jersey. A research report will be finalized in the summer of 2024, and the findings communicated through a searchable database of promising practices, and informative case studies will be hosted on the NJDOE

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

website, so that district and school leaders, educators, and the public can access these resources easily.

19. The FY 2024 Appropriations Act included a $35 million appropriation from the State's flexible $6.24 billion Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund grant award under the American Rescue Plan Act for learning acceleration in New Jersey schools. The funding was used for grants to school districts in the 2023-2024 academic year to strengthen learning acceleration as a means of addressing learning loss from the COVID-19 pandemic. The deadline to apply for grants was September 13, 2023. To date, $1.5 million in grants have been disbursed while $23.2 million has been encumbered.

- ***Questions:*** **Please provide an update on the number of schools that have applied for and received grant funding through this program. How does the department intend to use the uncommitted and unexpended $11.9 million balance in the program account.**

Funds awarded through the New Jersey Learning Acceleration Program: High-Impact Tutoring grant program must be used to develop high dosage, intensive tutoring for students through contracted vendors or the LEA's own established, research-based criteria. The goal of this grant opportunity is to prioritize high-impact tutoring interventions for students that have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Thus, grant awards were prioritized for LEAs with elementary schools and students in grades three (3) and four (4) but awarded LEAs may serve additional students as needed.

In the first round of the grant program, which is funded through a combination of $52 million in ARP SFRF and GEER funds,243 LEAs (out of 340 applications) received $41.4 million. A second round of this grant program was launched in late 2023 and an additional 57 awards (out of 81 applications) were announced on March 19, 2024, totaling over $7 million. The Department is considering options to expend the remaining $3.5 million in funding allocated for this program.

- **How are school districts using their grants? What restrictions has the department placed on the use of the grant funds by grantee school districts? Does the department have any early indicators that the grants have mitigated learning loss?**

Eligible costs for the NJ Learning Acceleration Program: High-Impact Tutoring grant include, but are not limited to the following costs:

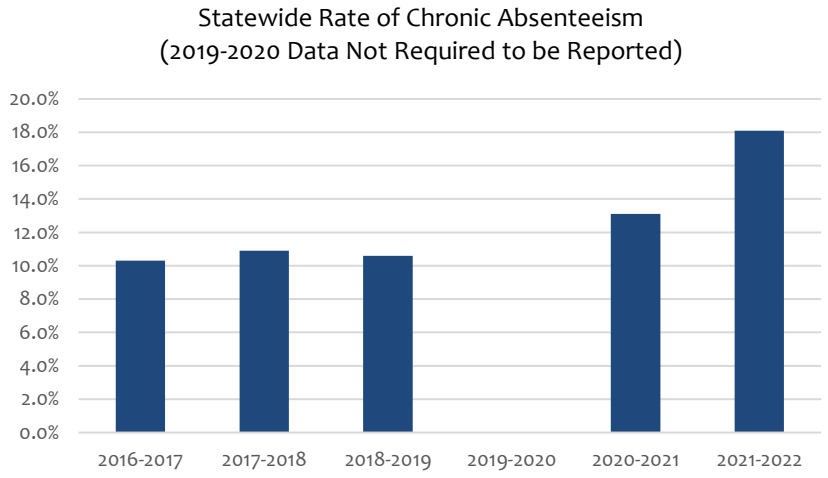
- Obtaining tutors for implementing high-impact tutoring services;
- Compensating existing LEA staff for implementing high-impact tutoring services;
- LEA staff participation in professional development opportunities focused on supporting the implementation of high- impact tutoring services;
- Obtaining instructional materials, tutoring platforms, and other resources for high-impact tutoring purposes; and
- Developing and implementing strategies that can be used to assess the effectiveness/impact of tutoring services on student learning.

On March 15, 2024, grantees from the first round of the grant were required to submit their initial interim report, and some grantees shared early evidence of increases in student performance. LEAs are required to use metrics to capture student learning, and several reported early gains in

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

the first few months of high impact tutoring implementation. The Department expects a more complete picture of the impact on student learning after the first grant term closes in late Summer 2024.

20. Learning loss recovery depends in part on in-class attendance; however, the department replied to an FY 2024 OLS Discussion Point that chronic absenteeism has been rising. A student is considered chronically absent if the student is absent for 10 percent or more of the days that the student is enrolled during the school year. Data from the school performance reports indicate that the rate of chronic absenteeism increased from 13.1 percent to 18.1 percent Statewide from 2020-2021 to 2021-2022, after a fairly stable rate of chronic absenteeism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. School performance reports for the 2022-2023 school year are due to be released in April 2024.



- ***Questions:*** **Has the rate of chronic absenteeism continued to increase in the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years? Can the department identify any particular reasons for the rise in chronic absenteeism? What steps has the department taken to address chronic absenteeism? To what extent is chronic absenteeism affecting learning loss recovery?**

Chronic absenteeism rates from the 2022-2023 school year (16.6%) decreased compared to 2021-2022 (18.1%). Statewide chronic absenteeism rates for 2023-2024 will be available next fall. Compared to other states that have reported for the same year, New Jersey's 2022-2023 rates are the lowest in the country.

Post-pandemic, the increase in absenteeism has been a challenge nationwide. Absenteeism can stem from a variety of causes and vary across and within the over 2,500 school communities in New Jersey.

To address these negative effects, the Department continues to enhance its guidance and resources designed to support schools and districts. For example, tools available on the Department's website are designed to help schools identify the specific reasons behind their students' absenteeism. This tailored approach is crucial for developing effective strategies to improve regular attendance. To enforce better attendance, the Department is focusing on

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

enhancing the oversight of district compliance with N.J.S.A. 18A:38-25.1. This legislation mandates that schools must create data-driven corrective action plans if chronic absenteeism affects 10% or more of their students.

It is generally acknowledged that absenteeism negatively affects learning, and research shows that irregular attendance can be a predictor of dropouts or lower-than-expected test performance. Students who miss significant amounts of school lose valuable instructional time, which can hinder their academic progress. For this reason, the Department is committed to supporting districts so we can collectively take meaningful steps toward understanding and mitigating chronic absenteeism.

21. Many learning loss interventions, such as before- and after-school programming and summer learning programs, involve additional time and effort on the part of educators.

- ***Questions:*** **How are the efforts to address learning loss affecting teachers? To what extent are teachers giving up free periods, preparation periods, or lunch breaks to accommodate learning loss initiatives? How many teachers are taking on unpaid work beyond their contracted duties for these initiatives?**

The Department anticipates that the pending Teacher Climate and Culture Innovation grant will provide qualitative evidence of the impact of learning loss efforts on educators. This $2 million competitive grant opportunity supports LEAs in the development of policies, programming, guidance, and/or equivalencies aimed at reclaiming teacher time through the reduction of administrative paperwork and other tasks, which exacerbate stresses already experienced by educators. The Department's grant application requires LEAs to complete a Statement of Need, where applicants describe how and why efforts and funds are currently needed to improve school climate and culture for teachers. The application period for this grant closed on March 14, 2024, and applications are currently under review. Application information will be extracted for analysis after the competitive process is complete.

22. In FY 2023, the Governor announced two new programs known as the Reading Acceleration and Professional Integrated Development (RAPID) program and its counterpart, RAPID-Plus. RAPID targets pandemic-induced learning loss in historically underserved populations across New Jersey, specifically focusing on elementary literacy from kindergarten through grade three. Since last year, the Department of Education has selected nine vendors to provide free professional development opportunities to educators in every county. The department also stated that the program was designed to close 12 months after project award but that it may be continued with additional funding. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget recommends continuing the $2 million program appropriation.

RAPID Plus, supported by $3 million in federal funding in FY 2024, expands on the RAPID program by providing support for elementary literacy in grades four and five. The RAPID-Plus program involves collaborations between elementary schools and institutions of higher education to equip educators with effective strategies to improve literacy skills in students.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- *Questions:* **Considering that the RAPID program was initially conceived as a 12-month program, please explain the reasons for recommending the renewal of the $2 million program appropriation in FY 2025. Based on what metrics is the program recommended to be continued? If applicable, please explain changes to the program in FY 2025. Does the department now view the RAPID program as permanent?**

There is continued interest in the professional development provided by the RAPID and RAPID Plus programs. Between October 2023, when RAPID launched, and January 2024, nearly 1,200 educators attended the full professional development series, while 453 school leaders attended the three-hour webinar training. The attendance increased significantly with each consecutive offering in each county, which indicates growing demand for the program. Additional information about the demand and overall feedback about the program will be available later this year when the grant's contracted vendors submit reports to the Department.

The RAPID Plus program launched statewide in early March 2024, and initial enrollment and participation rates will be collected via the interim report in late Spring 2024.

Given the revisions to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts, adopted in early October 2023 by the New Jersey State Board of Education, and the established focus on foundational literacy education, increasing access to high quality professional learning in this area is essential. An additional year of funding is proposed to increase the reach of the programs, which have met with early and promising success.

- **Do the vendors selected to participate in the RAPID program have the capacity to serve all schools in the counties in which they are located?**

Not all vendors for the RAPID program have comparable capacity, and their unique contracts differ significantly in size and scope. However, several vendors may be able to serve all schools in one or more counties under different contract terms. The program was not designed to link a vendor directly to each of the LEAs in a county, but rather to provide open enrollment to county-wide sessions that were offered over a period of several months. Some LEAs encouraged and supported teams of teachers to attend, and others preferred their educators attend voluntarily and without LEA support.

- **To what extent can the department illustrate the success of the program in terms of participation and enrollment? How many school districts have participated in the professional development opportunities offered through the program? How many teachers? How many professional development opportunities have been offered?**

Complete data on this program is not available. The program is on-going and final reports from each of the RAPID vendors will not be submitted until late Spring 2024. As of March 1, 2024, 213 distinct professional sessions have been offered across the 21 counties by the nine vendors. Between October 2023, when RAPID launched, and January 2024, nearly 1,200 educators attended the full professional development series, while 453 school leaders attended the three-hour webinar training. The second report with participation numbers from February 2024 through the project close will be submitted in late Spring 2024.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- **To what extent is the department tracking feedback from educators on the success of the program?**

Participation in the RAPID program requires the submission of a formal program evaluation by June 2024, which includes a comprehensive report for the details for each session. The vendor reports will also include evaluation findings from teacher feedback, including perceptions of program quality and resulting increases in content knowledge.

- **To what extent have discussions on the participation of institutions of higher education in the RAPID-Plus progressed since last year? Which institutions of higher education were selected to participate in the program?**

The Department has partnered with five institutions of higher education to deliver the RAPID Plus series. The RAPID Plus initiative features four educator modules as well as one school leader webinar that focuses on designing and supporting high-quality literacy instruction in schools. The series will be offered both in-person and virtually, and content modules will be available on the Department website after the synchronous sessions end. The synchronous sessions will be offered statewide from March through August 2024.

Student Mental Health

23. According to a National Center for Education Statistics study, in April 2022, 70 percent of public schools reported that the number of students who had sought mental health services had increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if the school had been able to effectively provide mental health services to all students in need, only 12 percent strongly agreed and 44 percent moderately agreed.

The FY 2024 Appropriations Act included $1 million for the Mental Health Screening in Schools Grant Program, $500,000 for the School-Based Mental Health Training Grant Program, $300,000 for a mental health pilot program run by 360 Smarter Care, and a total of $2.15 million in grants to individual districts to support mental health programs, in addition to the portion of each school district's American Rescue Plan Act Elementary and Secondary School Education Relief funds which were dedicated to providing mental health services to students.

- ***Questions:*** **How many students in New Jersey are seeking mental health services in the school setting? Has this number increased or decreased in each year since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic? Are school districts able to effectively provide mental health services to students in need? What areas of mental health services do districts find most difficult to provide to students?**

The Department does not collect data on the number of students who seek mental health services at school. However, based on inquiries from school districts, the use of different funding sources (including ESSER), and participation in Department-sponsored programs related to mental health, it is clear that the demand for mental health services in schools is greater than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

To help mitigate school districts' challenge in meeting this need, the Department received a five-year, $15 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand the number of school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers in school districts with the greatest need as well as address disparities in mental health staffing by increasing the diversity of school-based mental health professionals. The allocation of $500,000 for the School-Based Mental Health Training Grant Program further supports these efforts to recruit, train, and retain school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers. The federal program requires an annual State match of 25%. The funds allocated to School-Based Mental Health Training Program accounts for a portion of the State match.

The efforts described above build on unprecedented investments in youth mental health. Nearly, $80 million in State set-aside ESSER and ARP funds were expended or obligated to support schools and districts to provide high quality mental health services. Many schools and districts have established partnerships with community providers to supplement the offerings they can provide through district staff and through professional development have increased their own capacity to support youth mental health.

Building upon this foundation, New Jersey has initiated the New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S) within the Department of Children and Families. Mirroring the collaborative approach of leveraging both internal and community resources in educational settings, NJ4S established 15 regional hubs tasked with delivering preventative services and tiered intervention services directly to schools. These hubs are staffed by teams of mental health counselors, standing ready to augment the mental health services provided by schools and districts.

24. In response to FY 2024 OLS Discussion Points, the department stated that it would use $3.3 million from the American Rescue Plan Act's Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund grant to support certain youth mental health and education initiatives.

Program	Allocation
Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative	$500,000
Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Professional Development Series	$250,000
Coaching and Supports for Implementing School-Based Mental Health Systems	$2,500,000

The Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative was intended to assist educators and the public in recognizing risk factors of youth suicide and improve awareness of resources available to prevent youth suicide by designing a training series that would be available to all teachers. The Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development Series was intended to supplement the existing Social and Emotional Learning Modules for Educators on the department's website. Finally, the Coaching and Supports for Implementing School-Based Mental Health Systems program was supposed to provide intensive coaching to staff from 50 schools on how to establish and operate comprehensive school-based mental health services.

- ***Questions:*** **Please provide an update on the Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative and the Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development Series. Have the training**

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

programs been developed and made available? How many educators have used the training programs? What metrics is the department using to determine the efficacy of these programs?

In implementing the Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative, the Department recognized the critical importance of suicide prevention and designed a grant opportunity to contract with an entity with experience in facilitating a large-scale suicide prevention conference, awareness campaign, and developing professional development modules. The grant opportunity will be released in Spring 2024 with the intent of the program beginning on July 1, 2024.

For the Social and Emotional Learning Professional Development Series, the Department is collaborating with national experts in social and emotional learning to develop five online professional development modules for school leaders. As of March 2024, the module content is under development with plans to conduct focus groups with school leaders in Summer 2024 and piloting of the modules in Fall 2024. Once the modules are released, the modules will include a mechanism to collect data from users about their experiences and needs to inform the development and dissemination of statewide supports and technical assistance.

- **Please provide an update on the Coaching and Supports for Implementing School-Based Mental Health Systems program. Which schools received training under the program? Have these schools implemented new mental health services or expanded the mental health services available to students since completing the program?**

The Department contracted with the Center for Comprehensive School Mental Health at Rutgers University to provide coaching and technical assistance to 50 schools as well as provide statewide training available to all school districts. Throughout the first year, the Coaching and Supports for Implementing School-Based Mental Health Systems program hosted statewide trainings on understanding school mental health needs, establishing community partners, engaging families, and applying functional contextual thinking in school mental health while onboarding 50 project schools.

Project schools represent elementary, middle, and high school students in suburban, urban, and rural areas. Below is a list of the school districts that participate in this program.

County	School District/Charter School
Bergen	Hackensack Public Schools
Bergen	Moonachie School District
Burlington	Burlington County Special Services School District
Burlington	Burlington Township School District
Burlington	Medford Township Public Schools
Camden	Pine Hill School District
Camden	Waterford Township School District
Cape May	Dennis Township School District
Cape May	Middle Township Public Schools
Cumberland	Bridgeton Public Schools

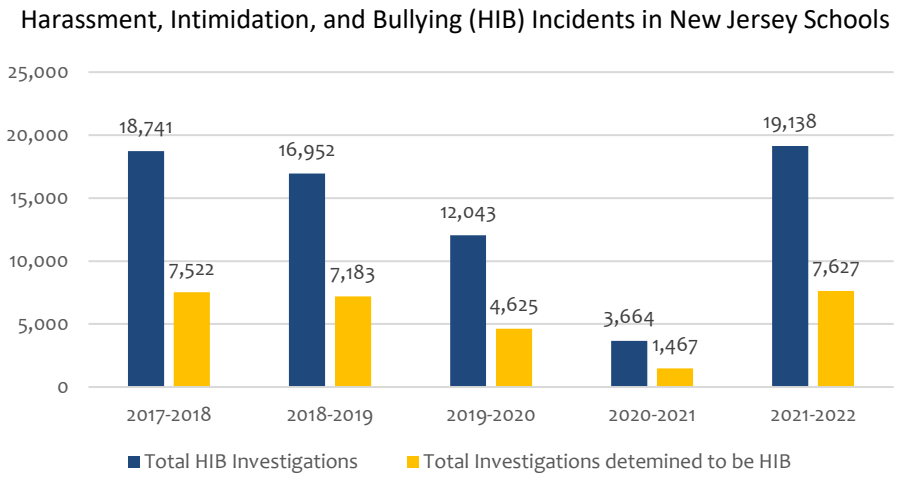
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Cumberland	Deerfield Township School District
Essex	Irvington School District
Essex	Newark Board of Education
Gloucester	East Greenwich Township School District
Gloucester	Glassboro Public Schools
Hudson	Secaucus School District
Hudson	The Ethical Community Charter School
Hudson	Union City Board of Education
Hunterdon	Flemington-Raritan School District
Hunterdon	Hunterdon Central Regional School District
Mercer	Mercer County Special Services School District
Middlesex	Monroe Township School District
Middlesex	New Brunswick Public Schools
Middlesex	Old Bridge Township Public Schools
Monmouth	Matawan-Aberdeen Regional School District
Ocean	Central Regional School District
Ocean	Lakewood Public Schools
Passaic	Passaic County Technical Vocational Schools
Passaic	Passaic Valley Regional High School District
Passaic	Prospect Park School District
Union	Hillside Public Schools
Union	Union County Educational Services Commission
Union	Westfield School District
Warren	Lopatcong Township School District

As part of this program, project schools conduct an assessment using a tool developed by the National Center for School Mental Health to increase the quality and sustainability of comprehensive school mental health systems (School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation). This information will assist schools in developing individualized targeted action plans based on data to meet the needs of their school community. At the conclusion of the two-year program (December 2025), the Department will be able to share information on the full impact of the program, including whether project schools implemented new mental health services or expanded current services.

25. The Anti-Bullying Task Force released their 2023 State Report highlighting an increase in reported Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying incidents since 2016. The report emphasizes the need for dedicated funding, increased training, and improved support for students and staff to create inclusive and safe schools. With a record number of 19,138 incidents reported in the 2021-2022 school year, the task force urged proactive measures, including addressing hate speech, bias incidents both online and offline, and providing funding to enhance school climate and culture.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)



- ***Questions:*** **Please provide an overview of the department's current efforts to provide training and resources to educators and school staff on Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying prevention and intervention strategies?**

New Jersey has long been at the forefront of addressing and mitigating bullying in schools, establishing a robust history of proactive measures to ensure safe and inclusive learning environments for all students. This commitment was notably embodied in the landmark Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (ABR), enacted in 2011, which was hailed as one of the most comprehensive anti-bullying laws in the United States. The legislation set forth stringent requirements for schools to prevent, report, investigate, and respond to incidents of bullying. In support of this legislative framework, the Department has continually offered resources, training, and guidance to school districts, emphasizing the importance of a positive school climate as a deterrent to bullying behaviors. Initiatives have included the development of self-assessment tools to measure compliance with the ABR, the establishment of school safety teams, and the implementation of reporting mechanisms to track and address bullying incidents effectively. As these practices and policies have matured, these efforts have not only aimed at compliance with legal mandates but also at fostering a culture of empathy, respect, and understanding that transcends the classroom.

More recently, the Department released a Model Policy and standardized incident reporting form to promote consistent reporting and alleviate confusion amongst families on how to report allegations of harassment, intimidation, and bullying. The Department is currently revising and developing resources, including Guidance for Families, Guidance for Schools, and Frequently Asked Questions for release prior to the 2024-2025 school year.

While the Department currently provides presentations on preventing and intervening in incidents of harassment, intimidation, and bullying, the Department is developing more comprehensive training opportunities for facilitation in the 2024-2025 school year. These trainings will be designed to support school staff who are most directly involved in responding to allegations of bullying, including the anti-bullying specialist and school safety/school climate team.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- **How does the department ensure that schools provide adequate support and resources for students who have experienced Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying incidents, including counseling and other interventions?**

The Department currently supports school districts in implementing statutes and regulations related to harassment, intimidation, and bullying by providing resources and working directly with districts when needed. If there is an allegation that a school district is not accurately implementing the *Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act*, which includes requirements to provide supports and resources to students who experienced harassment, intimidation, and bullying, the Department's County Offices of Education have the authority to initiate an investigation of noncompliance. School districts are required to take specific action to address any finding of noncompliance.

Additionally, the Department's School Climate State Coordinator is a resource for families who have questions about district responsibilities and supports. The coordinator responds to inquiries from families via email and phone calls. Should families convey that the school district is not providing adequate support and resources for students who experienced harassment, intimidation, and bullying, the coordinator can provide the family with information, resources, and potential next steps to address the concerns.

- **Please discuss any upcoming initiatives or funding from the department aimed at addressing Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying and promoting a safe environment in New Jersey schools?**

The Department's upcoming initiatives include:

- Providing training sessions for school districts regarding implementation of the *Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act*;
- Releasing professional development modules for school leaders regarding social and emotional learning; and
- Providing training session detailing the ways in which school teams can use a comprehensive school climate survey and online platform to implement strategic plans to address school climate improvement goals.

Artificial Intelligence in Schools

26. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget recommends a $1.0 million appropriation for a new Artificial Intelligence Innovation in Education Grants program. The appropriation would support the development by public school districts of programs, curricula, resources, and best practices for education on topics related to generative artificial intelligence in the 2024-2025 school year.

- ***Questions:*** **Has the department already determined priority uses of the recommended $1.0 million appropriation for Artificial Intelligence Innovation in Education Grants for school districts? Has the department already determined specific program objectives? Please elaborate.**

Broadly, the Department anticipates that this grant will support innovations in literacy and hands-on AI education, use cases for generative AI to augment teaching and learning, and ethical considerations for AI use in teaching and learning contexts. Critically, innovative approaches taken

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

by grantees will provide future opportunity for sharing of the most promising approaches in integrating AI in schools.

- **How many districts are estimated to receive grants? Will the department develop a priority ranking in choosing school districts to participate in the program? If so, please detail any relevant priority criteria.**

Specific program details such as priority ranking criteria will be developed and incorporated into a competitive process, as described in proposed budget language.

- **What is the current landscape of artificial intelligence education in New Jersey schools? Are there any existing programs or initiatives that serve as models for integrating artificial intelligence into the curriculum?**

While the Department has not formally surveyed existing programs or initiatives that may serve as models for integrating artificial intelligence into school curricula, the Department recognizes that artificial intelligence plays an increasingly prevalent role in our daily lives, and educators and students must be prepared to effectively implement such tools as digital citizens. The Department is currently researching the landscape of artificial intelligence technology development and identifying potential best practices and key considerations for its use in education, with a specific emphasis on implementation approaches in other states.

27. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget recommends a $1.0 million appropriation for a new Artificial Intelligence Career and Technical Education Expansion competitive grant program. This program would provide grants to vocational technical schools to create programs, curricula, and career pathways centered around artificial intelligence.

- ***Questions:*** **How will the eligibility criteria be determined for selecting vocational-technical schools to participate in the Artificial Intelligence Career and Technical Education Expansion grant program?**

Broadly, this competitive grant program would be open to the 21 county vocational school districts to partner with an institution of higher education that offers artificial intelligence programs and/or participates in artificial intelligence research. Specific program details such as selection criteria will be developed and incorporated into a competitive process, as described in proposed budget language.

- **Please elaborate on the program goals and requirements for participating schools. How will these goals contribute to preparing students for careers in the field of artificial intelligence and related industries?**

Broadly, the program would aim to increase artificial intelligence literacy education in New Jersey schools, particularly as it relates to vocational programs of study. It may also aim to provide greater access to and understanding about career pathways in or related to artificial intelligence.

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

- **How will the success of the grant program be measured? What metrics will be used to assess the effectiveness of artificial intelligence-related initiatives implemented by participating vocational technical schools?**

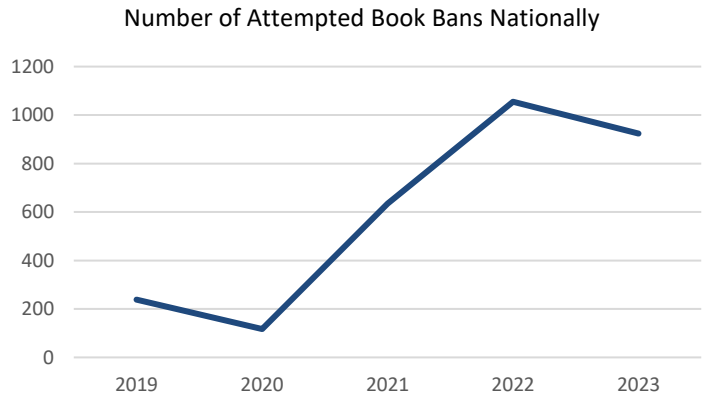
Metrics for success will be developed as the details of the grant program develop, but they may include increased student enrollment in innovative career and technical education (CTE) programs of study, increased educator interested and participation in artificial intelligence CTE programs of student and identifying and strengthening industry valued credential(s) in artificial intelligence.

- **How does this grant program align with the priorities outlined by the State for the use of federal Perkins V funds? Is the State shifting the emphasis of its career and technical education programs to artificial intelligence?**

The design and scope of the proposed Artificial Intelligence Career and Technical Education Expansion competitive grant program is not yet finalized, though we do not anticipate the grant program to be incongruent with our federal Perkins V state plan.

Book Bans

28. According to several national organizations, in the past few years, the incidence of book bans has been on the rise. New Jersey ranks relatively low compared to other states when it comes to the number of attempted book bans. The American Library Association documented 13 attempted book bans involving 28 unique titles in New Jersey in 2022.



- ***Questions:*** **To what extent is the department aware of and involved with book ban attempts that occur around the State? What advice does the department provide to districts regarding book ban attempts? Does the department intend to issue any guidelines or restrictions concerning book bans?**

Both the Diversity and Inclusion statute N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.36a and the LGBT and Individuals with Disabilities statute N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.35-6 require boards of education to have policies and

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

procedures in place pertaining to the selection of inclusive instructional materials that portray the cultural and economic diversity of society. Additionally, the Department also provides resources and guidance for school districts in the development of diverse and inclusive curricula and in evaluating educational materials. The Department will address the failure of a school district or board of education to fulfill its statutory requirements on a case-by-case basis.

Community Schools Pilot Grant Program

29. The FY 2024 Appropriations Act made a $3 million appropriation for a new Community Schools Pilot Program Fund, which provides grants for the expansion of community schools in New Jersey. Community schools are defined as educational institutions that provide a holistic approach to learning by integrating academic instruction with a range of social, health, and community services to support students, families, and the broader community. The Governor recommends continuing the $3 million appropriation in FY 2025. To date, the initial $3 million appropriation from FY 2024 has not been expended.

- ***Questions:*** **Please provide an update on the status of the Community Schools Pilot Program Fund. Is the program operational? Given that the $3 million appropriation from FY 2024 has not been expended, when does the department anticipate grants to be awarded and disbursed?**

The FY2024 $3 million appropriation for the Community Schools Pilot Program was intended to implement legislation pending during the 2022-2023 legislative session upon enactment (e.g., A1168/S2771; A5576/S4029). However, no community school legislation has been enacted, and the appropriation is currently unexpended.

- **Have any evaluations or assessments been conducted to measure the impact of community schools on student outcomes, family engagement, and community well-being? What metrics is the department using to track the effectiveness of community schools?**

Metrics to determine the impact and effectiveness would be included as part of any proposed future grant program. The U.S. Department of Education's "Data Collection and Reporting Guidance for the Full-Service Community Schools Program" provides insights into useful data-driven accountability measures for the administration of community school programs.

- **Are there plans to expand the Community Schools Pilot Program? If so, what criteria will be used to select additional participating districts? How would the recommended $3.0 million program appropriation for FY 2025 be used?**

The Department expects that the program will be based on legislation that has yet to be enacted. New bills, A3124/S2528 and A4107/S2243 have been introduced in the 2024-2025 session.

School Meals Programs

30. Assembly Bill No. 616 of 2024 would transfer authority over all school meals programs in the State from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Education. Advocates

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

contend that the transfer would recognize the importance of access to nutritional meals to student academic success and would be consistent with the Department of Education's mission to focus on programs geared toward schools and students.

- ***Questions:*** **Has the department developed a contingency plan to prepare itself for the assumption of responsibility for the State's school meals programs? Please indicate how the department would integrate the administration of school meals programs into its organizational structure.**

The Department cannot speculate on pending legislation.

- **Please explain the department's cooperation with the Department of Agriculture in the delivery of the schools meals programs. Would housing the programs under the Department of Education improve the efficiency and effectiveness of program operations as well as, in the long-run, student outcomes? What would be the additional costs, efficiencies, and savings associated with the jurisdictional transfer?**

The Department maintains open communication in partnership with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA). While school meal programs in New Jersey are overseen and implemented by the NJDA, which contracts directly with schools to administer school nutrition programs, the Department works closely with NJDA and other sister agencies to ensure that students and their families are aware of available food assistance programs and have access to the nutrition they need to thrive.

The Department is unable to speculate on a potential jurisdictional transfer.

COVID-19 Relief Funds

31. In 2021, New Jersey was awarded $1.2 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II) Funds from the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA). These funds were required to be obligated by September 30, 2023. The department's federal funding dashboard shows that 99.8 percent of the ESSER II funds have been obligated and expended to date.

In 2022, New Jersey was awarded $2.77 billion in American Rescue Plan Act ESSER Funds. These funds are required to be obligated by September 30, 2024. With approximately six months remaining to the deadline, the department's federal funds dashboard shows that only 57.1 percent, or $1.58 billion, has been obligated and expended.

- ***Questions:*** **How much of the ESSER II funds did the department return to the federal government? Why were these funds not obligated by the deadline? Of the funds that were returned, how much was from the State allocation of ESSER II funds versus the local education agency allocations?**

New Jersey has opted to pursue late liquidation for ESSER II funds as offered by the U.S. Department of Education. This allows for liquidation to continue for an additional 14 months after

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the obligation date of September 30, 2023. As a result, no grant funds have been returned to the federal government as the grant is not formally closed. The Department advised districts of the opportunity to seek late liquidation of ESSER II funds in a June 8, 2023 broadcast memo.

- **How much of the remaining American Rescue Plan ESSER funds does the department anticipate will be obligated by the September 30, 2024 deadline? Are there any factors that are impeding the expenditure of these funds?**

The goal is to obligate all funds available prior to the September 30, 2024 deadline. Local school districts continue to expend funds to support COVID-19 recovery. The Department provides ongoing outreach and support to school districts through office hours, monthly roundtables, technical assistance sessions, ESSER helpdesk and individual assistance to support them in expending these funds within the established deadline. The Department also monitors its ESSER dashboard to ensure school districts are regularly drawing down obligating and drawing down these funds.

School Facilities

32. The FY 2025 Governor's Budget recommends a $3.5 million appropriation for Lead Testing for Schools. Funding was last appropriated for this purpose in FY 2022, at $5 million. Unexpended balances from the FY 2022 appropriation supported the program in FY 2023 and FY 2024.

State Board of Education regulations require that entities under its jurisdiction test for the presence of lead at all water outlets that are used for drinking or food preparation. Entities under the State board's jurisdiction include: public school districts, charter schools, renaissance schools, jointure commissions, educational services commissions, approved private schools for students with disabilities, State-funded early childcare facilities, and receiving schools. The tests are required to recur on a three-year cycle beginning with the 2024-2025 school year and cost reimbursements for the testing would be available for testing that occurs after July 1, 2024.

- *Questions:* **How many entities under the State Board of Education's jurisdiction will be required to test for the presence of lead in drinking water outlets during the 2024-2025 school year?**

In the 2024-2025 school year, 1,279 entities, including 455 early childcare centers, will be required to test for the presence of lead in drinking water.

- **Please describe any trends that the department has observed from past cycles of testing for lead in drinking water outlets. Are students in certain communities more likely to be exposed to lead in drinking water outlets? To what extent is the department assisting schools, which have consistent histories of showing the presence of lead, in remediating the lead? What resources does the department provide, or make available, to school districts to remediate the presence of lead in drinking water outlets?**

Discussion Points (Cont'd)

The lead in drinking water program requires public school districts, charter/renaissance schools, approved private schools for students with disabilities, and childcare centers to test for lead in drinking water, post test results on their website, and remediate if necessary. The Department requires entities to submit a statement of assurance (SOAs) that testing requirements are met. Based on the SOAs received, about 50% of entities reported an exceedance of the lead action level from at least one drinking water outlet. Older facilities constructed before 1988 are more likely to have lead pipes, fixture components, and/or pipe solder. The total number of entities reporting exceedances has increased slightly from 2017 to the 2021-2022 testing years. This is likely due to an increase in the number of entities testing and reporting.

Department regulations require districts to turn off outlets that exceed allowable levels, provide a letter of notification to the school community, and propose remediation. The Department assists in providing remediation resources when contacted. Links to the NJDEP guidance documents and EPAs 3Ts for Reducing Lead in Drinking Water are available on the Department's lead testing website.

The Department is also planning to reopen the water infrastructure grant from the Securing Our Children's Future Bond Act to allocate to school buildings serving grades K through 12 to remediate conditions with detectable lead levels.

33. The FY 2022 Appropriations Act allocated $10 million from the State's flexible $6.24 billion Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund grant award under the American Rescue Plan Act for County Special Services Schools. County special services schools are established under State law to provide education and treatment for students with disabilities, who may be sent by the student's school district of residence. The full amount of the appropriation has been expended.

- *Questions:* **Please provide the list of the county special services schools that received funding from the $10 million Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund allocation, as well as the amounts each school received. For what purposes did each county special services school expend the funds?**

The County Special Services School Districts that are eligible to apply for this NGO include Atlantic County, Bergen County, Burlington County, Cape May County, Gloucester County, Mercer County and Salem County. Each district can apply for the full amount of $1,428,560 and the anticipated start date is June 1, 2024. Purposes of the grant include hiring staff to support students with disabilities, providing training opportunities to staff, families, and students, and developing sustainable partnerships with their communities to ensure positive outcomes for students with disabilities who are likely to continue their education through 21 years of age.

APPENDIX A - Preschool Facilities Expansion Grant Projects

Preschool Expansion Projects - Approved Projects

County Name	District Name	School Name	Total Estimated Project Costs	State Share	Local Share	Improvements, # Seats	New Contruction, # Seats
01 - Atlantic	Egg Harbor Twp	Egg Harbor Twp Davenport ES Int Alterations	$4,278,000	$2,156,339	$2,121,661	75	
01 - Atlantic	Linwood City	Linwood City Seaview Elementary School PK Addition	$1,833,313	$733,325	$1,099,988		30
03 - Bergen	Elmwood Park	Elmwood Park- Gantner Ave. School PK Addition	$4,826,031	$1,930,412	$2,895,619		60
03 - Bergen	Elmwood Park	Elmwood Park-Gilbert Ave. School PK Addition	$5,004,625	$2,001,850	$3,002,775		60
03 - Bergen	Elmwood Park	Elmwood Park-16th Ave. PK addition	$5,432,050	$2,172,820	$3,259,230		75
03 - Bergen	Glen Rock Boro	Glen Rock MSHS interior alterations	$2,174,618	$869,847	$1,304,771	45	
03 - Bergen	Teaneck	Teaneck Bryant School PK addition	$7,065,602	$2,826,241	$4,239,361		75
03 - Bergen	Teaneck	Teaneck Bryant School Interior Alterations	$416,000	$166,400	$249,600	30	
05 - Burlington	Riverside	Riverside New Early Childhood Center	$3,750,000	$2,678,006	$1,071,994		120
07 - Camden	Cherry Hill	Cherry Hill-Malberg ECC addition	$6,250,000	$2,500,000	$3,750,000		128
07 - Camden	Cherry Hill	Cherry Hill Malberg Construct toilet rooms	$1,500,000	$600,000	$900,000	195	
07 - Camden	Cherry Hill	Cherry Hill Kilmer PK addition	$6,550,000	$2,620,000	$3,930,000		128
09 - Cape May	lower Twp	Lower Twp Douglas School Interior Renovations	$1,500,000	$600,000	$900,000	135	
11 - Cumberland	Upper Deerfield	Upper Deerfield Seabrook School PK addition	$9,056,748	$5,044,473	$4,012,275		168
13 - Essex	West Orange Town	St. Cloud Renovations	$2,535,000	$1,014,000	$1,521,000	45	
23 - Middlesex	Jamesburg	JFK Addition and Alterations	$13,311,584	$7,458,627	$5,852,957		128
23 - Middlesex	Piscataway	Eisenhower ES PK Addition	$10,497,500	$4,199,000	$6,298,500		198
23 - Middlesex	South River Boro	PK addition to Admin Bldg	$3,986,195	$1,966,306	$2,019,889		54
25 - Monmouth	Holmdel Twp	Village ES Interior Alterations	$340,990	$136,396	$204,594	36	
25 - Monmouth	Keyport Borough	Keyport Central School PK Playground	$316,550	$126,620	$189,930	0	
25 - Monmouth	Matawan-Aberdeen Regional	Cambridge Park Renovaitons	$4,325,000	$1,730,000	$2,595,000	150	
29 - Ocean	Manchester Twp	Ridgeway ES PK additon	$3,744,799	$1,497,920	$2,246,879		48
29 - Ocean	Plumsted Twp	Woehr Interior Alterations	$112,925	$45,170	$67,755	40	
29 - Ocean	Lacey Twp	Lacey Twp	$1,450,000	$580,000	$870,000	270	
35 - Somerset	North Plainfield Boro	East End ES PK addition	$3,943,730	$2,549,830	$1,393,900		45
35 - Somerset	Somerville Boro	Van Derveer PK Addition	$3,005,146	$1,202,058	$1,803,088		45
35 - Somerset	Somerville Boro	Van Deveer Interior Alterations	$2,063,728	$825,491	$1,238,237	45	
37 - Sussex	Montague Twp	Montague Twp School PK addition	$3,416,401	$1,366,560	$2,049,841		60
41 - Warren	Washington Twp	Brass Castle School Interior Alterations	$255,375	$102,150	$153,225	48	
07 - Camden	Voorhees Twp	Voorhees Twp	$15,000,000	$6,000,000	$9,000,000		135
33 - Salem	Penns Grove-Carney's Point	Carleton School	$10,300,000	$7,663,684	$2,636,316		180
31 - Passaic	Little Falls Twp	Little Falls Twp	$8,691,727	$3,476,691	$5,215,036		60
		Total Approved Projects	$146,933,637	$68,840,217	$78,093,420	1,114	1,797

Preschool Expansion Projects - Pending Review

21 - Mercer	Hamilton Twp-Robinson	Hamilton Twp-Robinson	$35,452,916	$14,181,166	$21,271,750		300
21 - Mercer	Hamilton Twp-Park Ham Sq.	Hamilton Twp-Park Ham Sq.	$4,878,913	$1,951,565	$2,927,348		180
21 - Mercer	Hamiton Two Hamilton Sq.	Hamiton Two Hamilton Sq.	$4,923,081	$1,969,232	$2,953,849		150
		Total Pending Projects	$45,254,910	$18,101,964	$27,152,946		630