

## Joint Committee on Public Schools February 9, 2021 Testimony

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Marie Blistan, a proud teacher of students with special needs in Washington Township and currently the elected president of the 200,000-member New Jersey Education Association. I thank this committee for taking up this important issue.

As you may know, for the last several months, education stakeholders from across New Jersey have been meeting to discuss what we as leaders need to do to help ensure that our students emerge from this pandemic strong and ready to face the future. We been working collaboratively and diligently to understand the support and resources they will need to overcome the challenges of this past year and the challenges that are going to persist even as the pandemic fades.

If you have not already read our open letter, which was sent to you yesterday, I encourage you to do so. Throughout our work together, we have been driven by a single, overarching question: what do our students need? But that question takes many forms:

- What do they need to make up for the educational opportunities that have been delayed because of the pandemic?
- What do they need to feel safe – and **be** safe! – in their school buildings?
- What do they need us to learn from the last year so that the schools we rebuild together are not just as good as the schools we had pre-pandemic, but better and more responsive to the needs of our students and our communities?

The pandemic has made one thing very clear: in addition to meeting our students' academic needs, we must also meet their social and emotional needs. In fact, we know that **before** we can meet their academic needs we must **first** meet their social and emotional needs.

That is one of the primary messages of Learning Policy Institute report called [Restarting and Reinventing School: Learning in the Time of COVID and Beyond](#) by Linda Darling-Hammond, Abby Schachner and Adam K. Edgerton that served as the starting point of much of our work. In that report, the authors wisely note that “[t]eachers will need to take stock of all of students’ experiences and needs—social, emotional, health-related, potentially trauma-related, and academic—as they build safe and welcoming communities.”

The authors also note that “[s]ocial and emotional skills, coupled with mental health supports and restorative practices, are critical for supporting children, youth, and adults as they cope with the challenges, uncertainty, and stress presented by the pandemic, the economic crisis, and systemic racism.”

I’m pleased to note that this approach is already beginning to take hold in New Jersey. The Clayton School District and Clayton Education Association members in Gloucester County have developed a model that is spreading elsewhere in the county. There is legislation co-sponsored by members of this committee to emulate that model around the state, which will benefit our students greatly if it is implemented correctly and backed up with the supports and resources needed for success.

With that background, much of what I am going to share with you today is focused on what we can do to mitigate everyone's stress, protect their health and safety, look out for the social, emotional **and** educational needs of students and prepare our students to thrive after this pandemic.

First, I must address the very concerning issue of standardized testing. As of this moment, the New Jersey Department of Education is still planning to administer statewide standardized tests this spring, despite being invited by the Biden Administration to apply for a waiver from the federal mandate that drives that testing.

There is simply no excuse for the state's failure to seek that waiver on behalf of our students. It is hard to imagine a worse use of precious instructional time than administering hour after hour after hour of standardized tests in the least standardized school year anyone has ever experienced. Given the disruptions in our schools, which have gone on for nearly a full year and will continue in too many places for the rest of the school year, there is no way to gather any reliable, usable data from those tests. That \$30 million expenditure, at a time when schools have so many other pressing needs, will do nothing to support students, help educators or guide the Department of Education.

Those tests will, however, add to the stress under which our students are already breaking. They will take away even more instructional time from a year that has already had that disrupted too much. They will exacerbate the inequities of a school year that has already privileged students with access to safe, modern school buildings and state-of-the-art technology while disadvantaging those without. We do not need a standardized test to tell us what our eyes can plainly see: our students are hurting, and they need our support more than ever.

That is why educators have offered to work with the Department of Education to gather reliable data that can be used in real time to meet real needs. Data that will help us understand the scope and extent of our students' needs and help us determine the supports and interventions necessary in the months and years to come. One key principle of the Learning Policy Institute Report is to "support locally relevant assessments, rather than selecting a single statewide assessment for all students."

In the words of the authors: "Formative assessment processes are an essential part of effective teaching and learning. While states may feel some pressure to provide a statewide measure of student learning early in the year, a summative test that delivers only a set of scores or proficiency levels will not help educators or students as much as tools that diagnose where students are in more fine-grained ways and inform decisions about teaching. Moreover, they distract teachers from valuable instruction time by introducing both testing and preparation time that could be better spent connecting with students, understanding their learning needs, and moving them forward."

That effort can take many forms, including implementation of **locally-determined** assessments to collect data on where students currently stand in relation to the curriculum standards. Districts have existing contracts with various tools and have been implementing their trusted assessment tools year after year. These tools are aligned with NJ-SLS (New Jersey Student Learning Standards) and provide immediate results, unlike the NJ-SLA. The NJ-SLA is a summative assessment and only provides a final view ("an autopsy") is it not designed for, nor can it accomplish, diagnostic or formative purposes. However, locally designed and well-balanced assessment systems provide districts with the data they need to support and strengthen students.

Districts must also be looking at their curriculum and engaging in ongoing collaborative discussions to continually monitor and respond to on-demand student needs. Curriculum standards are intentionally aligned and spiraled so that prerequisite knowledge and skills can be revisited and reinforced, as needed.

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Key standards are prioritized, as they have the biggest “bang for the buck.” Remember, that you do not need to know all of the parts of a car to effectively operate a vehicle. We must prioritize the key knowledge, skills, and understandings students need to be successful in life and not simply in a game of Jeopardy or Quizzo.

There is growing information surrounding “[opportunity to learn indicators](#)” presented by Scott Marion at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. According to the report, Opportunity-to-Learn Indicators are a “concept that has evolved from a focus on whether students have had sufficient access to instruction or content linked to particular concepts, to a more robust conception regarding the conditions and resources provided to schools to enable students to succeed.”

Marion recommends embedding these questions into the existing assessments. However, that does not solve the problem. It would be beneficial for the NJDOE to collect and analyze opportunity to learn indicator data in lieu of and outside of the assessment system to determine where need for support is greatest. The communities with the most limited access/opportunities would be prioritized to receive the greatest funding and support.

Examples of Opportunity to Learn Indicators include:

- Data on device access
- Data on internet access
- Data on student absences
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning for Students with disabilities and English Language Learners
- Time spent in remote learning vs in-person learning for historically marginalized communities

In short, there are many ways to meaningfully assess students, even during this pandemic year. There are also many ways beyond traditional assessment to determine the needs of individual students, subgroups, schools and districts, as well as New Jersey students as a whole.

Standardized tests, particularly this year, are not one of those ways. That is why the National Assessment Governing Board, the body that oversees the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has elected **not** to assess students this year. Haley Barbour, Chair of the NAGB and former Republican governor of Mississippi released a [statement](#) about the decision to suspend NAEP this year. It said, in part: “We have closely followed the trajectory of the virus to determine whether NAEP could be administered in 2021 in ways that would accurately report student achievement and progress. Given the important data NAEP provides to the public, we waited as long as possible to make a final decision, but the spread of COVID across our communities is getting worse—not better. Unfortunately, it is now clear that we cannot fulfill the mandate to assess reading and mathematics, given NAEP’s unique design and methodology.”

What is obvious to the people who administer NAEP should be just as obvious to those charged with statewide assessment in New Jersey: it is not possible to fairly administer assessments or to gather reliable data from them. So, I am urging all of you to add your voices to our voices, to the voices of parents, to the voices of administrators, to the voices of advocates for children like the Education Law Center, and demand that the Department of Education apply for a federal testing waiver immediately.

The sooner we do that, the sooner we can return our full focus to supporting our students' immediate and urgent social, emotional and educational needs. The sooner we can turn our collective attention to the future and work together to create the supports they will need even once the pandemic passes. The sooner we can begin rebuilding our public schools to be even better, stronger, more responsive and more relevant than the ones that were already the nation's best.

We also have to address the health and safety concerns that exist today and will continue to pose a danger to students even after the pandemic.

For example, there are 300 school buildings in New Jersey with no full-time nurses.

300!

That is a crisis during a pandemic, but it's a scandal that it existed before the pandemic and it cannot be allowed to stand after the pandemic. And it does not need to. Consider this: for the \$30 million the state is poised to pay to administer a pointless and invalid standardized test this spring, it could instead pay the full salary of a certified school nurse in every one of those buildings for the rest of this year and all of next year.

It's not about a lack of resources; it's about misplaced priorities that put bureaucrats' desire for data above the health, safety and educational wellbeing of students.

And beyond just a lack of school nurses, we have to address myriad other health and safety issues in our schools. After decades of underfunding and neglect, far too many schools have acute issues that need to be addressed. The Schools Development Authority has not addressed most of them. Local communities have not addressed them and in many cases cannot afford to. It must be noted that while concerns exist statewide, the areas of greatest need are too often in communities with the fewest resources. The disparate impact on students of color in particular is real, and it must not be allowed to continue.

Because New Jersey has 2,500 school buildings, there is no single solution to those challenges. But there are some common threads.

In the immediate term, every building needs to be physically safe. That means that the ventilation is not just adequate, but exceptional enough to help protect against a highly contagious and rapidly-mutating airborne infection. It means that the classrooms, hallways and other common areas are large enough to allow for full social distancing at all times. It means that the building can be kept immaculately clean, with all of the additional cleaning supplies, safety precautions and sanitation measures needed at this time. It means that all students and staff have access to the PPE they need to remain safe. It means that our communities are doing everything in their power to lower the rate of infection outside the schools, as the CDC says is necessary to make schools themselves safer. And it means that where those things are not possible or have not happened, we must continue to prioritize and protect everyone's health and safety by not forcing them into unsafe conditions.

It also means that we must do everything possible to prioritize vaccine access for educators. While we understand the challenges and hard choices facing the state as it distributes scarce supplies, we also know how essential is for schools to reopen -- and **stay** open -- for in-person instruction as soon as that is safely possible. Vaccinating educators is one of the most important steps we can take to make that possible.

With nearly 1.4 million students and more than 200,000 adults, one out of every six people in New Jersey is in a public school on any normal school day. Add in the people in the households they go home too and much of New Jersey is “in contact” with our public schools. That is a lot of people we can better protect by getting vaccines to educators as soon as possible. With numbers like that, the return on our investment in vaccinating educators will be invaluable to our entire state.

Longer term, of course, we need to focus on making all of our school buildings safer and better suited for teaching and learning. That is why we have long supported efforts to fund the Schools Development Authority and have always been so vocal about upgrading and replacing unsafe and inadequate school facilities across the state.

Had New Jersey done a better job of that in the last two decades, this pandemic might have played out very differently for hundreds of thousands of students. While it is too late for some of those major infrastructure projects to help us right now, this is exactly the right time to invest in much-needed repairs and rebuilding so we are never caught unprepared again.

That is my vision for this moment in time and for the future that awaits us. And that is the vision of the 200,000 extraordinary professionals I represent.

I look forward to working with you to achieve our shared vision for the students who are counting on us more than ever today.