



FOCUS AREA 9: Create a system of public education that prepares all students for the 21st-century economy ●

WHAT AND WHY New Jersey has always been a leader in public education and innovation. Our state consistently scores in the top 10 percent of states on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationally administered standardized test that assesses what students know and their ability to perform specific tasks in various subjects. Nearly three-quarters of high school students take at least one Advanced Placement exam. Our students graduate high school and obtain bachelor's degrees at a higher rate than the national average. At the same time, we have one of the country's highest rates of educational disparity in academic achievement. Simply put, in New Jersey, low-income students, particularly Black or Hispanic/Latinx students, are far less likely to perform well academically than wealthier peers.

One key explanation for this is the concentration of poverty and lack of housing mobility. Families of limited means often can afford to live only in areas served by poorly performing schools. For many students in lower-income areas, graduating from high school is a struggle. They will likely attend schools where most other students are also low-income and face significant challenges, including overcrowding, lack of resources, few extracurricular programs, limited or no Advanced Placement courses, and fewer experienced, highly qualified teachers.

The future of our region's economy depends on improving outcomes for these low-income students, and we must focus on preparing all of our children for the 21st-century economy. By updating the state's school funding formula, the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), to account for the additional costs school districts are incurring since the formula was introduced in 2008, and ensuring full funding to fulfill the SFRA promise of equitable funding, increasing access to high-quality schools, and preparing all of our children for college and careers, New Jersey will be able to maintain our position as an innovative state with a highly skilled labor force.

HOW This Focus Area recommends five strategies to support creating a public education system that prepares all North Jersey students to participate in the economy and civic life. By emphasizing equal access to education opportunity, creativity, innovation, cross-cultural communication, problem solving and other 21st century skills, we can leverage the existing public education system and push forward innovations in education policy that have proven to be successful in other parts of the country. These include rethinking school district boundaries, expanding STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) programs, establishing universal pre-kindergarten, and implementing community school programs.



STRATEGY 9.1: Address school funding disparities

With one of the most progressive school funding formulas in the nation, New Jersey already has a strong framework for providing equitable funding for all of our schools. Ensuring that all schools have the needed funding will allow, among other things, for schools to maintain smaller class sizes, retain highly effective teachers, and provide supplemental services to high-needs students. Although we have a progressive formula in place, the State of New Jersey has not executed that formula to the full extent, under-funding schools and failing to live up to the formula's potential to provide equitable funding. Furthermore, New Jersey's current state aid to schools remains insufficient to fully address additional costs associated with providing equal opportunity and achieving common outcome goals in schools with varying student population characteristics and need. The State should improve its methodology in evaluating school-level resource disparities. Additionally, the state should recalibrate the SFRA formula to address better the additional cost of providing equal opportunity in New Jersey's racially isolated schools and schools with disproportionate shares of children with disabilities and English language learners. Lastly, our region should encourage the development of outside funding sources to supplement public funding, including developing public-private partnerships and experimenting with other innovative ways of sharing costs across municipal/school district lines.

STRATEGY 9.2: Expand school programming for 21st-century economy

STEAM programming—science, technology, engineering, arts and math—helps to prepare students for the new high-tech, information-based economy by blending design and creativity into the hard sciences. Our region should expand access to STEAM programming to all students, with special consideration given to underserved districts and schools. Expanded programming will require strategic work-force development tactics to reduce long-standing teacher shortages, strengthening learning environments with educational technology, meaningful partnerships with area employers and colleges/universities, and financial and technical support for school districts to develop STEAM curriculum.

STRATEGY 9.3: Improve access to pre-K and early childhood education

Funding pre-K education for all low-income students in the region, as mandated by the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), would significantly reduce the region's performance disparities between districts. In addition, investing in early childhood education yields high long-term returns, both in financial and academic terms. It reduces the need for costly educational interventions in the future. To improve access to early childhood education, our region needs to demonstrate the value of early education and promote the state's Universal Pre-K Plan under the SFRA. Programs are also needed to help parents support young children in developing prerequisite skills such as language acquisition, number and pattern recognition, and developmentally appropriate command of spatial intelligence.

STRATEGY 9.4: Improve educational outcomes by implementing community schools, wraparound services for students and families, and school-community partnerships

The community schools model maximizes the use of existing school buildings—places familiar to community members—by using them as bases of operations to provide wraparound services for students, families, and communities. Our region should implement public-public and public-private partnerships that transform our public schools into community centers, where children, youth, families and community members can access a wide range of support services that improve the child's ability to perform in school. For example, community schools can offer adult education courses, on-site preventative health services, mental health counselors, food pantries, early childhood education, and citizenship and English language classes. Some community schools even include farmers' markets and laundromats. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased concerns about students' mental health, especially among students of color and students from low-income families where lack of access to quality school-based services is particularly prevalent. In addition to complying with the state's new requirement for public schools to administer mental health screenings, our region should research and implement school-based interventions that improve general mental health, education, and social and behavioral outcomes.

STRATEGY 9.5: Expand boundaries and access to high performing schools

Educational opportunities for poor and minority students are currently limited by where they live and their family's knowledge of school choice programs. Informing parents and helping students access quality education, regardless of their zip code, is critical to our region's long-term success. New Jersey has a fragmented system of school options that includes traditional public schools, charter schools, magnet schools and the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program. North Jersey needs a more coherent approach to school options, stronger partnerships geared towards shared services, and a thorough review of the current options available for improving access to high quality schools. This approach should include a feasibility study to evaluate district consolidation and regionalization options.