



STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

A Memo from the New Jersey Department of Education

Date: September 28, 2024
To: Local Educational Agency Leads
From: Kevin Dehmer, Acting Commissioner of Education

Back to School 2024-2025: Highlights and Initiatives

As the new school year gets underway, the New Jersey Department of Education (Department) is highlighting some of the changes in store for the 2024-2025 school year.

While there are numerous resources, programs, and initiatives that are newly available to schools and school officials, the highlights below come from a recent [news release](#) the Department issued to spotlight some of the changes that students and parents may see in the 2024-2025 school year. Highlights include –

Literacy and Academics:

- **Reading: A Focus on the Fundamentals:** Students will benefit from significant revisions to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards for English Language Arts, which schools will implement this September. The Department sets overarching learning standards, and local schools implement the day-to-day curriculum that helps students master the standards. The newly revised English Language Arts standards integrate evidence-based literacy instruction that was absent from previous iterations, blending innovative, research-based approaches with the tried-and-true phonics instruction that many students' parents received when they were young.
- **High-impact tutoring:** The Department's High Impact Tutoring grant programs will continue in the 2024-2025 school year, helping schools accelerate learning in math and literacy. To date, the program has served over 42,500 students in nearly 300 districts. The program focuses on elementary-grade students, who struggled most with literacy during the pandemic. The initiative uses proven strategies, including frequent tutoring sessions, small groups or one-to-one tutoring, and requires highly qualified tutors who work in collaboration with students' teachers.

Technology-Rich Classrooms

- **Computer Science Instruction:** Expect more high-quality Computer Science education this Fall, as educators across the state access free professional training through three regional Computer Science Learning Hubs that help teachers bring computer science education into the classroom. An additional program will help 27 high schools infuse high-level computer science coursework into each school's curriculum, such as Cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence. Both programs are funded with \$1.8 million in [Computer Science Grants](#), which were established to help give New Jersey students a pathway to fill some of the 500,000 high-paying, unfilled computer science jobs in the nation.
- **Artificial Intelligence:** More and more New Jersey classrooms will incorporate cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence (AI) into learning, as \$1.5 million in State grants will help establish two initiatives: "AI in Education" grants will help educators infuse AI into classroom instruction and foster information literacy among students, while "AI Career and Technical Education Expansion Grants" will emphasize new AI-focused courses in vocational-technical programs. This summer, the Department also unveiled new [AI Resources](#) to help educators understand, prepare for, implement, and manage AI in the school setting.

Growing Preschool

- **Additional Pre-K Funding:** Expect more school districts to implement high-quality preschool programs this year. The Fiscal Year 2025 State budget contains \$1.2 billion to fund high-quality preschool programs, an increase of \$124 million from the previous year, including \$20 million to expand high-quality preschool programs into new school districts. Exactly which districts will be eligible for the expansion funding will be announced in the coming weeks. Because research has shown quality Pre-K programs are connected with positive academic benefits for students for years to come, preschool expansion has become a major point of focus in New Jersey. Prior to the Murphy Administration, the State of New Jersey had brought state-funded, high-quality preschool to 72 school districts during a two-decade span. Since taking office and setting the goal of universal access to preschool for the state, Governor Murphy has funded high-quality preschool programs to an *additional 211* school districts, opening seats for more than 14,000 children.

Caring for kids:

- **Mental Health Supports:** Students will have unprecedented access to mental health support in the coming school year, as the Department continues to invest in mental and emotional health services for students. The [Enhancing School-based Mental Health](#) program, facilitated in partnership with Rutgers University, will help 50 schools strengthen comprehensive mental health support systems to provide services to students and their families. In addition, New Jersey is increasing its workforce of school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers. Through the [School-Based Mental Health Services Program](#), an additional 69 school-based mental health professionals were hired and over 11,000 students in high-needs communities were afforded services through the program. That's on top of the nearly \$80 million that the Department dedicated from COVID relief funds that were used to help school districts implement mental health supports and services. Provided by the [New Jersey Department of Children and Families](#), students and families in the Garden State can receive additional school-based services via the [New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services \(NJ4S\)](#) network, a hub-and-spoke model to deliver youth mental wellness and evidence-based prevention supports to students, their families and school faculty, in schools and trusted locations within the community. Services are available on a tiered basis, with Tier 1 services representing universal supports for all students and their families; Tier 2 and Tier 3 services are limited to students in grades 6-12 and are made available at the request of representatives designated by schools.
- **School Lunch Access:** Recent [legislation](#) signed by Governor Murphy expanded the eligibility for students to receive school lunches, making over 60,000 New Jersey families newly eligible for free school lunch and/or breakfast for their children.

Aiding the Teaching Profession:

- **Reclaiming Teacher Time:** Through the Teacher Climate and Culture Innovation Grant [Program](#), teams of teachers and administrators from over 30 schools will explore ways to "reclaim teacher time" by reducing time spent on tasks that pull teachers away from the classroom. The participating schools will identify ways to reduce administrative bureaucracies, streamline operations, and give educators more time to focus on instruction – with the goal of allowing the Department to share the most effective practices with all school districts.

Innovative Curriculum

- **Climate Change:** Through the leadership of First Lady Tammy Murphy, the Department recently established [grants](#) to help ensure that climate change education will continue to be a prominent area of instruction in New Jersey schools. The Department established a statewide network to help schools create Interdisciplinary Learning Units and Community Resilience Projects, which are experiential learning opportunities such as creating rain gardens with plants that will ease flooding, restoring native

plant species, and planting dune grass to protect native habitats. In addition, the Department is partnering with four universities in New Jersey to offer teachers free training on how to infuse climate change into the curriculum.

- **Civic Engagement:** Under recent [legislation](#) signed by Governor Murphy, students in grades six through 12 are allowed one State-excused absence each school year, if they have parental permission, to attend a civic event.

Historic Funding for Schools

- **Fully Funded for the First Time:** The State of New Jersey is contributing historic levels of state aid to school districts in the 2024-2025 school year. The Fiscal Year 2025 State budget places an additional \$908 million for K-12 education, bringing the total of state education aid to nearly \$12.9 billion – 24 percent of the entire state budget. This is the first school year that New Jersey has fully funded its state-aid formula, the School Funding Reform Act of 2008, marking the final year of the seven-year phase-in to full funding under [S2](#), a 2018 law designed to address inequities that resulted from the multiple years of overfunding some districts while failing to adequately meet the needs of other growing districts.

c: Members, State Board of Education
NJDOE Staff
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Garden State Coalition of Schools
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