



# Bridge Year Pilot Program (P.L. 2020, c. 41) Implementation Guidance

January 2021

## Bridge Year Pilot Program Overview

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On June 26, 2020, Governor Murphy signed into law [P.L. 2020 c. 41](#) establishing the Bridge Year Pilot Program (Bridge Year). The purpose of this program is to provide students in the graduating classes of 2021 and 2022 with the opportunity to offset disruptions to learning opportunities and participation in extracurricular activities that might have resulted from the closure of schools to in-person instruction in Spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under the Bridge Year, certain students in the classes of 2021 or 2022 who have met all their state and local graduation requirements may defer graduation from high school for one year to participate in an additional year of academic courses and extracurricular activities immediately following their senior year. This additional year will be known as the “bridge year.” During the student’s bridge year, the student must remain enrolled in the high school they attended as a junior (host high school).

Bridge Year sets forth a series of academic and extracurricular requirements and opportunities for participating students. In each semester of the bridge year, participating students must take between nine and 12 credits. During the fall semester, those credits may be host high school credits, credits from the county college of the county in which the host high school is located, or a combination thereof. In the spring semester, participating students must receive all credits from the county college of the county in which the host high school is located. However, during either semester, participating students may also take up to three credits offered by a four-year institution of higher education at any high school in the State or at any other location to fulfill the student’s credit requirement. Under the law, public institutions of higher education are required to accept all applicable credits that a student who completes Bridge Year earned during their bridge year.

Participating students may also participate in extracurricular activities at their host high school, including a spring sport sanctioned by the New Jersey Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA). The law prohibits Bridge Year students from participating in any fall or winter sports sanctioned by the NJSIAA. Bridge Year students participating in extracurricular activities must pay applicable student athletics and activities fees and are subject to the host high school’s student code of conduct, athletic code of conduct, and any other applicable codes, rules, or policies that other students participating in the spring sport or extracurricular activity are required to follow. Bridge Year requirements do not supersede the governance or eligibility rules that are applicable to that activity established by a local, state, or national organization with bona fide authority over a particular extracurricular activity.

All public school districts, including charter and renaissance schools, that enroll high school students must offer all eligible students the opportunity to participate in Bridge Year. Participation is optional for nonpublic schools.

To participate in Bridge Year, eligible students must notify their host high school's Bridge Year liaison of their intent to participate by **February 15** of their senior year.

## Bridge Year Liaison

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To facilitate compliance with these requirements, each public high school in a school district must designate a school staff member as a Bridge Year liaison. The school's Bridge Year liaison will serve as the school's point of contact for students interested in participating in Bridge Year, facilitate planning of Bridge Year students' academic services, and regularly communicate with the respective county college regarding students' academic progress. Specifically, Bridge Year liaisons must develop, in consultation with Bridge Year students, an individual learning plan (ILP) for each student. Additional information on ILP development can be found below.

Additionally, the Bridge Year Liaison:

- Consistent with N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.6, should collect and report attendance in accordance with the district's policy for those students participating in classes not at the host high school. Attendance for classes at the host high school should be collected and recorded in the normal course;
- Must receive reports from the institution of higher education that a Bridge Year student attends at least quarterly. Reports must demonstrate, in a manner specified by the student's ILP, the student's academic progress and performance; and
- Must ensure that at the conclusion of each semester of the bridge year, the student's high school transcript reflects any high school and college credits earned during the bridge year in accordance with district policy.

## Student Eligibility

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To be eligible to participate in Bridge Year, a student must:

- Be in the graduating classes of 2021 or 2022;
- Meet all applicable high school graduation requirements by the end of their senior year of high school;
- Be 19 years old or younger during the entirety of the bridge year; a student that would turn 20 years old before the end of their bridge year is not eligible to participate.
  - Exception: A student with disabilities is eligible to participate if the student will turn 20 years old during the bridge year due to services provided under the student's IEP.
- Maintain a grade point average of 2.0 during the bridge year.

Students with disabilities who receive special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be granted the opportunity to participate in a district's Bridge Year in accordance with federal and state special education requirements. Regarding Bridge Year's age requirements described above, the New Jersey Department of Education (Department) reminds districts that students with disabilities who have satisfied their state and local graduation requirements but may need an extra year of services, and will not turn 21 years old before June 30, may receive services for another year as determined by the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes the student and the student's parent(s)/guardian(s). The district's Bridge Year liaison should collaborate with the student's IEP team as the services provided to students with disabilities should be focused on transition services. Services should be delivered via the IEP.

## Academics

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### Individual Learning Plans

Each Bridge Year student's academic and co-curricular goals for the bridge year must be defined in an individual learning plan (ILP). A student's ILP must detail the activities and strategies for accomplishing these goals, including but not limited to, counseling, academic support, coursework, and co-curricular or athletic participation. The Department has developed an ILP template for districts, which will be available on the Department's [Schools & Districts COVID-19 webpage](#) through the Bridge Year link.

The credits taken by a Bridge Year student must together form a coordinated sequence of academic content that prepares the student for high-skill, high wage, or in-demand occupations.

In developing ILPs, please consider the following:

- Districts are encouraged to think innovatively about designing a program that meets their students' individual needs and interests. Learning opportunities should be based on specific instructional objectives and be based on student interest and career goals and include demonstration of student competency.
- In addition to coursework, learning opportunities to meet students' credit requirements may include independent study, online learning, and structured learning experiences (N.J.A.C. 6A:19-4.1 et seq. provide the requirements for structured learning experiences).
- In developing ILPs, Bridge Year liaisons should consider conferring with a multidisciplinary team of professionals with knowledge of the student's educational, behavioral, emotional, social and health needs. For students with a disability, such a team should include the student's IEP team.
- ILPs must specify the manner in which the Bridge Year student's institution of higher education must report to the Bridge Year liaison on the student's academic progress and performance.
- ILPs should be updated and modified throughout the student's participation in the Bridge Year Pilot Program. Schools should utilize the quarterly reports that the Bridge Year student's institution of higher education must submit to the Bridge Year liaison as an opportunity to modify ILPs to ensure the student is meeting academic and performance expectations.

To ensure ample time to plan for the implementation of services outlined in the ILP, each Bridge Year student's ILP should be completed **by May 15 but no later than June 1** of the student's senior year.

### **Academic and Course Requirements**

Students participating in the Bridge Year shall meet the following academic and course requirements:

- During the fall semester, students shall take between nine and 12 credits at the host high school, county college in the county in which the host high school is located, or a combination thereof;
- During the spring semester, students shall take between nine and 12 credits at the county college in the county in which the host high school is located;
- During either semester, students may take up to three credits offered by a four-year institution of higher education at any high school in the State or any other location to fulfill the student's credit requirements described above;
- Students who pursue a bridge year and participate in a spring sport sanctioned by the NJSIAA shall enroll in less than 12 college credits, or otherwise be enrolled in a number of college credits as to not be considered a full-time college student, in each of the fall and spring semesters during the student's bridge year;
- During the bridge year, students do not need to participate in health, safety, and physical education as required by N.J.S.A. 18A:35-5, 7, and 8 (N.J.A.C. 6A:8-5.1(a)1.vi); and
- A Bridge Year student shall be considered a non-matriculated student of the respective county college.

Districts that do not operate on the basis of fall and spring semesters should meet the spirit of the above academic and course requirements and ensure that Bridge Year students meet their total credit requirements for the entirety of the Bridge Year.

### **Graduation**

As stated above, all students must meet all applicable high school graduation requirements by the end of their senior year of high school before participating in Bridge Year. The Bridge Year student may participate in the graduation ceremony at the end of his or her senior year or the end of his or her bridge year. The student's diploma will be withheld and formal matriculation from high school will be deferred until completion of the Bridge Year. In addition, participating students are only held to the graduation requirements of their senior year and are not required to meet the graduation requirements of their bridge year in order to receive their high school diploma. For example, 12<sup>th</sup> graders in the graduating class of 2021 – whose bridge year would take place during the 2021-2022 school year – will be held only to the graduation requirements applicable to the class of 2021, as modified pursuant to [Executive Order 214](#) (Murphy) (2020), and not to the graduation requirements for the class of 2022.

At the conclusion of each semester of the bridge year, the host high school shall update the student's high school transcript to reflect any high school credits earned during the bridge year. If a student

decides to pursue a bridge year in the fall semester but does not continue the bridge year in the spring semester, the student's host high school shall release all final transcripts and other records as necessary and as may be requested.

## Tuition

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A county college shall charge students participating in a bridge year a maximum of \$145 per credit, inclusive of all fees, except that fees associated with specific courses or with the use of on-campus science laboratories may be charged at a maximum of \$45 per course. Subject to the availability of funds in the annual appropriations act, Bridge Year students will be eligible for a financial aid grant under the [Community College Opportunity Grant Program \(CCOG\)](#) if they meet all applicable eligibility requirements. Notably, Bridge Year students are waived from the CCOG requirement to be enrolled in a course of study or a curriculum leading to a degree or certificate.

For additional information on higher education grant and scholarship opportunities, please visit the [New Jersey Higher Education Student Assistance Authority \(HESAA\) Grants and Scholarships](#) webpage.

## Data Reporting

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### **NJSMART**

The Department will add a new field in NJ SMART SID Management to indicate whether 12<sup>th</sup> graders are planning to participate in the Bridge Year in the following year (beginning in the 2020-2021 school year) or whether a 12<sup>th</sup> grader is currently participating in a bridge year (beginning in the 2021-2022 school year). Districts will be required to begin entering this information for all 12<sup>th</sup> graders beginning with the June 2021 snapshot.

### **School and District Accountability**

Students participating in the Bridge Year will continue to be included in accountability calculations for both ESSA school accountability and NJQSAC district accountability during their bridge year.

- This would include graduation rate and chronic absenteeism calculations for both school and district accountability.
- Students participating in Bridge Year will not count as graduates for graduation rate calculations until they receive a diploma at the end of the bridge year.

## Athletic Requirements

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Students participating in the Bridge Year are eligible to participate in NJSIAA sanctioned sports at their host high school – and only at their host high school – during the spring season of their bridge year. They are not eligible to participate in fall or winter sports during their bridge year. Students must meet the eligibility requirements outlined by the NJSIAA. A student who decides not to continue the bridge year in the spring semester shall not be eligible to participate in a spring sports program or extracurricular activities.

Bridge Year students participating in spring athletics are subject to the athletic code of conduct, and any other applicable codes, rules, or policies that other students participating in the spring sport. All other questions concerning the Bridge Year Program and sports eligibility should be referred to the NJSIAA.

## Contact Information

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For questions, please contact [bridgeyear@doe.nj.gov](mailto:bridgeyear@doe.nj.gov). The Department shortly intends to release supplemental guidance to address additional frequently asked questions.