



STATE OF NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

For Immediate Release

Contact: [Michael Yaple](#)

Date: June 4, 2026

(609) 376-9072

Eleven New Jersey Students Recognized for Community Service, Heroism, and Academic Achievement

Trenton, NJ – The State Board of Education (State Board) and Dr. Lily Laux, Commissioner of Education, on Wednesday recognized 11 outstanding New Jersey students for their school and community service, heroic efforts and academic achievements.

State Board President Kathy Goldenberg, State Board members and Commissioner Laux honored the students as part of the State Board’s annual student recognition program held at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE).

“Whether through a single act of bravery or long-term service and advocacy, the students recognized this year have made a lasting impact on their schools, local communities and the world around them,” **said President Kathy Goldenberg**. “It is an honor to bring the students together to celebrate their accomplishments and their deep commitment to making a difference.”

“This year’s honorees exemplify how the actions of one student – no matter how young – can have a profound effect on families, neighbors, and student peers locally and throughout the country,” **said Dr. Lily Laux, Commissioner of Education**. “As today’s students will soon be shaping New Jersey’s future, these 11 students are remarkable examples of the effort, resilience, and commitment demonstrated daily by young people across our state.”

Wednesday’s event marks the 12th time that the State Board and the NJDOE have hosted an in-person private recognition ceremony to honor students for the significant contributions they make every day to their schools and communities. The NJDOE’s Executive County Superintendents select students after receiving recommendations from superintendents in their respective counties. Counties that are not represented this year will have students recognized as part of next year’s program.

The following students were recognized at this year’s ceremony:

Bergen County

Melanie Mejia, Lodi High School, Lodi School District

Melanie Mejia was recognized for her academic achievements and service to her school and community. Despite challenges caused by a rare autoimmune condition, Melanie is a member of the high school’s drama club. She has acted in several roles that include choreographing dance routines, which she

performs from her wheelchair seamlessly alongside a large ensemble. Along with an exceptional academic record, Melanie is a member of the high school's surf club and participates in adaptive athletics such as swimming, track and field, and archery. Melanie also has become a voice for students with disabilities. During the remodeling of a school bathroom, she took it upon herself to advocate for improved accessibility so that all students using a wheelchair would have appropriate facilities available.

Cumberland County

Cecilia Woolson, Millville High School, Millville School District

Cecilia Woolson was recognized for her academic achievement and service to her school and community. Cecilia is an aspiring history teacher who is actively involved in her high school's extracurricular activities such as the Greenhouse and Horticulture Club and the Film Club. Cecilia is an anchor for her school's morning announcements, and has earned numerous recognitions, including student of the month, three years of Academic Varsity, Highest Honors, and induction into the National Honor Society. Cecilia also has completed more than 120 hours of volunteer service through Pedals for Police, which is a nonprofit organization that supports local law enforcement and community initiatives. Additionally, Cecilia has promoted environmental awareness and community engagement as a volunteer at the annual ECO Fair hosted by the Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center.

Essex County

Patrick Bryant, Livingston High School, Livingston School District

Patrick Bryant was recognized for outstanding service to his local community. Patrick is a student in the 18-to-21 transition program who actively volunteers at multiple job sites throughout the school day. At Play It Again Sports, Patrick supports the business's daily operations by independently completing tasks such as scanning and organizing receipts, uploading data into the store's system, and photographing merchandise for online listings. Patrick also volunteers at several local restaurants, where he takes great pride in greeting customers, engaging in friendly conversation, and completing assigned responsibilities with enthusiasm. In addition, Patrick volunteers at a local senior living center, where he assists in the kitchen while meaningfully interacting with residents.

Gloucester County

Karen Cao, Washington Township High School, Washington Township School District

Karen Cao was recognized for her academic achievements, extracurricular activities, and commitment to her family's small business. Karen is poised to graduate this year as her high school's valedictorian. Karen also is involved in selective enrichment programs such as the Youth Leadership Summit at Princeton University and the Penn Early Exploration Program at the University of Pennsylvania. A National Merit Scholar, Karen works at her family's restaurant every day after school as a cashier, waitress, and bookkeeper. Karen balances her family responsibilities with her intense academic schedule and extracurricular commitments.

Hudson County

Lucas Daly, Hoboken High School, Hoboken Public School District

Lucas Daly was recognized for his service to his school and local community by using his musical talents. Lucas is the co-founder of RhythmRise, a national initiative that helps bring the therapeutic and community-building benefits of drum circles to students facing socioeconomic adversity. Lucas designs and builds low-cost percussion instruments from everyday materials such as flowerpots, paper plates, and balloons. Through the program, which reaches up to 6,000 students each year, the instruments are

donated to severely under-resourced public schools and community centers. Lucas developed a drum circle curriculum supplement that educators can use to facilitate inclusive, collaborative music experiences for students. Lucas has been teaching private guitar and ukulele lessons since the age of 13 and has donated half of his lesson proceeds to support music accessibility initiatives. He also volunteers as a guitar instructor with the Hoboken Housing Authority, where he leads group lessons and created a summer music day camp to provide neighborhood youth with access to music instruction and creative expression.

Middlesex County

Dylan Chiera, Colonia High School, Woodbridge Township School District

Dylan Chiera was recognized for his academic and athletic achievements, as well as service to his school community. A member of the National Honor Society, Dylan is a varsity athlete in football, basketball and baseball and will continue his athletic career as part of the University of Charleston's football team. A role model to younger students, he also participates in several clubs and organizations and has represented his high school for the past two years as a member of the Superintendent's Advisory Council. In his role on the council, Dylan's input and perspective has helped shape the school district's mission and vision.

Monmouth County

Blake Robinovitz, Colts Neck High School, Freehold Regional High School District

Blake Robinovitz was recognized for his advocacy for improved school safety nationwide and for his recent heroic efforts to help a stranger suffering a heart attack. As the National Youth Legislative Correspondent for "Make Our Schools Safe," Blake is an advocate for Alyssa's Law, which requires schools to install silent panic alarms to ensure law enforcement is instantly notified of a potential threat. His cousin, Alyssa Alhadeff, was killed in the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Fla. Through Blake's efforts, the law has been enacted in New Jersey and 11 other states – and he is actively working to achieve passage in more states. Blake also serves as his high school's representative on the Superintendent's Executive Advisory Board and as a Captain in the Civil Air Patrol and in the Marlboro Police Cadets, as well as a Lieutenant Junior Grade in the Colts Neck NJROTC.

While recently at a local grocery store, Blake witnessed a man suffer a heart attack. Blake used his training and performed CPR for eight straight minutes to maintain the man's vitals until paramedics arrived. For this act of heroism, Blake was awarded the Naval JROTC's Cadet Meritorious Achievement Award – a distinction given to only two to three individuals annually nationwide.

Ocean County

Landon Hoberman, Point Pleasant Beach High School, Point Pleasant Beach School District

Landon Hoberman was recognized for his successful efforts to bring about environmental change by uniting small business owners, state legislators, and K-12 students. Landon is the founder of the Student Environmental Ambassador (SEA) program, which provides free toolkits for classroom education, community cleanups, restaurant engagement, and policy advocacy. Landon also served as a Student Environmental Advocate and testified before two committees of the New Jersey Senate to address economic impacts on small businesses, which led to the enactment in January of a law restricting single-use plastic utensils at full-service restaurants and casual dining establishments in the state. He also created the "ReduceByRequest" initiative, which aligns environmental goals with economic incentives to address plastic pollution at the source. Landon has received multiple awards, including a New Jersey

Governor’s Environmental Excellence Award, a New Jersey Governor’s Volunteerism Award, and the national Diller Teen Tikkun Olam Award.

Salem County

Payton Cook, Pennsville Memorial High School, Pennsville Public School District

Payton Cook was recognized for helping to build a positive school culture and for her service as the high school’s student council secretary, a member of various student clubs and the varsity cross country and winter track teams, and as part of the Pennsville Athletic Department. Payton heads the student section “Nest Nation,” organizes theme nights, manages social media promotions, and volunteers her time as the Hall of Fame photographer. Driven by her dream to work in sports media for the National Football League, Payton serves as a manager for the football team, works diligently to edit and distribute pictures to school athletes, and volunteers as photographer for the local police academy and Little League. She has sought out networking opportunities to learn from photographers for the Wilmington Blue Rocks and Philadelphia Eagles. Payton also serves on Pennsville Board of Education committees.

Somerset County

Noah Sutton-McMillan, Stony Brook Elementary School, Branchburg Township School District

Fourth-grader Noah was recognized for the extraordinary courage he exhibited on March 18 when a fire tore through the apartment complex where he and his family lived. After being awakened by his mother before dawn, Noah went door to door, knocking to alert neighbors and ensure they were aware of the rapidly spreading fire. Through his quick thinking and heroic actions, many families were safely evacuated. As a result of the fire, 23 families, including Noah’s, were left homeless. Despite the devastating loss, no one was injured, due in large part to Noah’s bravery and courage.

Union County

Sayuri Nakanishi, McManus Middle School, Linden Public School District

A seventh-grade honors student, Sayuri Nakanishi was recognized for her service to her school community. As a member of the Superintendent’s Student Leadership Team, Sayuri identified a need within the school community and created the “Quote Box” initiative to support students’ emotional well-being. Recognizing that many students experience moments of stress, sadness, or discouragement throughout the school day, she began distributing uplifting and inspirational quotes to students and staff. Sayuri also creates historical-themed illustrations, such as the Mayflower, the Statue of Liberty, and the Anasazi dwellings. Students regularly use the illustrations, which are displayed in Sayuri’s history classroom, to enhance their understanding of key historical concepts.

To request photos of individual students at the recognition ceremony, contact the NJDOE’s Office of Communications at (609) 376-9072.



[Facebook](#)



[X](#)



[Instagram](#)



[LinkedIn](#)



[YouTube](#)