

Guidance for Schools on

Student Use of Internet- Enabled Devices

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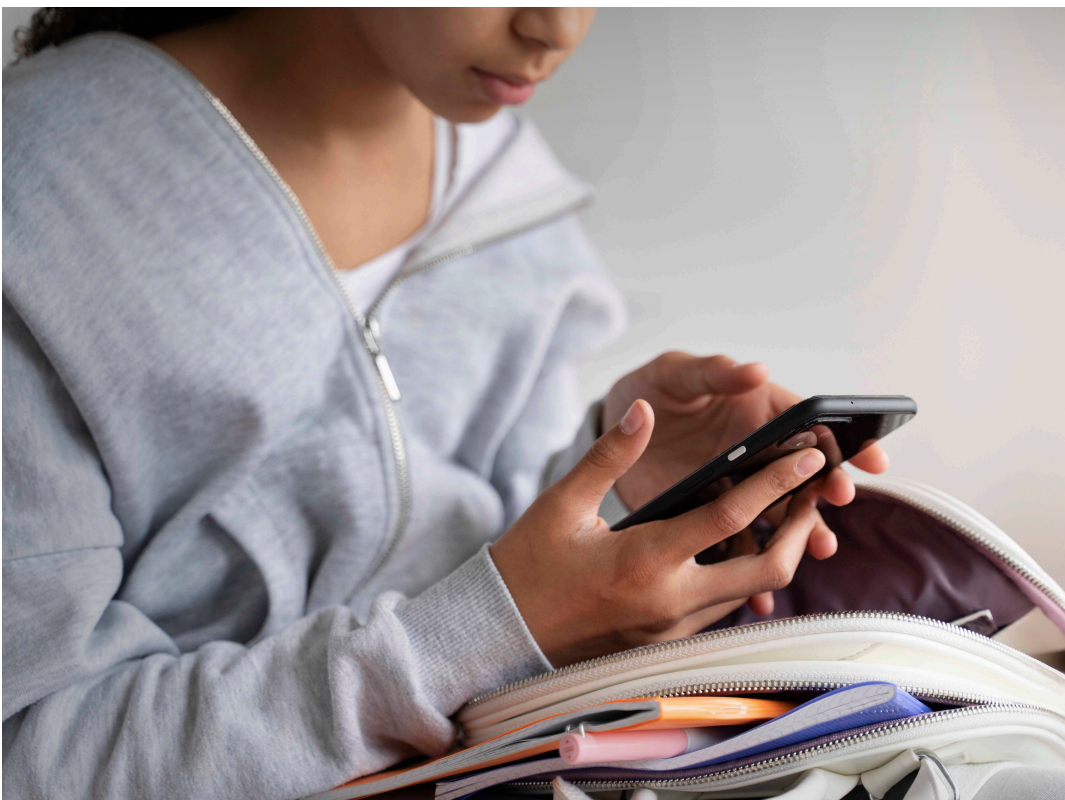
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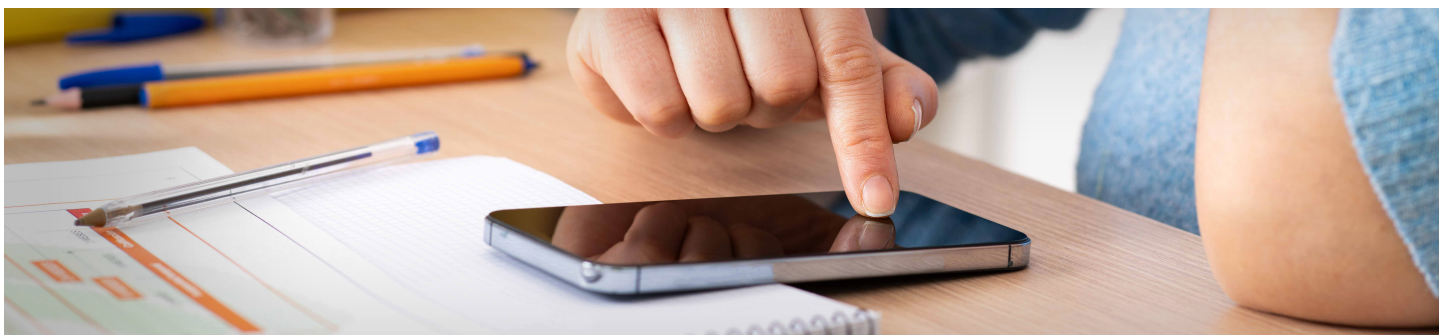
Introduction

In today's increasingly connected world, cell phones and other internet-enabled devices are integral to how students communicate, access information, and engage with the broader world. However, the unregulated use of these devices during the school day can result in lower academic performance, harm to emotional well-being, and deterioration of a positive school climate (Böttger & Zierer, 2024; Gath et al., 2024). Additionally, adolescents who spend over three hours a day on social media platforms are at double the risk of experiencing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression (Riehm et al., 2019). In response to these concerns, the New Jersey Department of Education has developed this set of guidelines to support districts in crafting thoughtful, inclusive, and age-appropriate policies based on research and best practices that allow for flexibility in local implementation.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this document is to provide New Jersey public school districts, including charter schools and renaissance school projects, with guidelines for developing and implementing local policies governing the use of internet-enabled devices by students during the school day, on school buses, and at school-sponsored events. These guidelines aim to promote student well-being, academic engagement, and digital safety by offering policy considerations, implementation strategies, and a range of recommendations across grade levels to equip districts to tailor policies on student use of personal internet-enabled devices to their unique community needs.





Limiting Use of Internet-Enabled Devices on School Grounds During the School Day

In 21st century classrooms, students learn to safely and effectively use internet-enabled devices, such as district-issued laptops, under the supervision of a teacher in alignment to the [New Jersey Student Learning Standards](#). District-issued technology and sponsored platforms should continue to be used in classrooms for educational purposes.

To protect students from material that is inappropriate for viewing, prevent the inappropriate use of technology, and restrict access to social media platforms, school districts should continue to use existing information technology systems to proactively establish and monitor restrictions to the district's network. Schools may want to consider utilizing device management software to restrict or monitor student browsing on school-issued devices or from devices connecting to the school district's Wi-Fi. Schools are encouraged to apply age- and grade-appropriate access controls uniformly across all student devices unless documented exceptions for the purpose of instruction and/or accommodation are approved. Districts should ensure transparency about their monitoring practices in their acceptable use policies and in notifications to students and families.

To promote academic engagement, limit distractions, and support the well-being of students, school districts should adopt a policy on student use of internet-enabled devices during the school day. When developing their policy, school districts must determine the level of access that students may have to personal devices. **At a minimum, schools should limit the use of personal internet-enabled devices during instructional time for students in kindergarten through grade 12, but all districts are encouraged to limit the use of personal internet-enabled devices throughout the entirety of the school day.**

Below are three common types of policies to limit the use of personal internet-enabled devices:

- **Bell-to-Bell Policy:** If cell phones and other devices are brought to school, they are securely stored by school district staff upon entering the building and returned at the end of the day. Students are unable to access their devices throughout the entire school day.
- **Off and Away Policy:** Cell phones and other devices are expected to be powered off and stored out of sight during the entire school day. Students maintain physical access to their devices and may store them in their backpack, locker, or other out of sight location. Students are not permitted to access their devices through the entire school day (including during lunch or between classes).
- **Limited Use Policy:** Cell phones and other devices are expected to be powered off and stored out of sight during instructional periods but may be used during designated times and in specific areas (e.g., lunch or between classes). Under this type of policy, schools may elect to collect and store student devices during instructional periods or allow students to maintain physical access to their devices as long as they remain off and stored out of sight.

Exceptions

There are specific circumstances where a student may require use of their cell phone or other internet-enabled devices. School district policies must comply with all applicable State and Federal laws that protect the rights of students with disabilities or health related needs, including but not limited to, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Students should be permitted to use their cell phone or other internet-enabled device on school grounds during the school day, or during school-sponsored events in the following circumstances:

- To fulfill accommodations provided in a student's individualized education program (IEP);
- To support the implementation of a 504 Plan;
- To monitor or address a student's healthcare (upon submission by a parent or guardian of documentation from a healthcare professional indicating that the use of an internet-enabled device is necessary for the health or well-being of the student);
- For translation services;
- For a student caregiver who is routinely responsible for the care or well-being of a family member;
- When required by law; and
- In the event of an emergency.

Schools should inform families of their right to request a device-related accommodation through the appropriate process. School teams must base such accommodation determinations on documented medical, developmental, or other health needs and review them on a regular basis. Examples of accommodations may include using a smartwatch to monitor blood glucose levels, managing anxiety through a guided app, or communicating with a caregiver as part of a behavioral plan in the student's IEP, amongst others. School nurses, case managers, and IEP/504 coordinators should be involved in planning for and implementing student use of internet-enabled devices. Staff responsible for implementation should have ready access to documentation of the accommodation and should ensure their enforcement strategies minimize disruption.

Districts should develop clear procedures and disseminate them to ensure staff implement device-related accommodations confidentially. Staff training may be necessary to recognize and honor valid device accommodations without drawing unnecessary attention to the student. Staff should treat students with device accommodations with sensitivity and dignity. As appropriate, schools may develop one-page "device use summaries" for staff to ensure awareness while maintaining student confidentiality.

Device Types

Effective implementation of any cell phone and internet-enabled device policy requires districts to define which types of technology devices are covered to ensure consistency across classrooms and grade levels, supporting clear expectations for students, families, and staff. District policies should explicitly reference the range of personal technology that falls under the policy.

- **Examples of internet-enabled devices:** smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, smart glasses, earbuds/wireless headphones, etc.
- **Examples of non-internet-enabled devices:** basic flip-style cell phones, two-way radio/walkie-talkie, etc.

Districts should clarify whether specific health-monitoring devices (e.g., passive fitness bands or glucose monitors) are exempt from restrictions.



Device Storage Options

A school district's device storage needs will depend upon the policy that the school district selects. For example, school districts that implement a bell-to-bell policy will need to ensure they have the capacity to store or restrict access to each student's cell phone and other personal internet-enabled devices from the moment they enter the building. Whereas school districts that have a limited use policy may find that they need to provide storage materials for every classroom to ensure devices are secured and not a source of classroom disruption. Below is a non-exhaustive list of examples that school districts may consider to effectively implement their policy:

- **Locked Pouch System:** Upon entry to school, devices are placed into secure pouches which allow students to carry their personal devices but prevent their use. At the end of the day, staff use a specific magnetic device to unlock each pouch and allow students to retrieve their devices.
- **School Locker or Bin System:** Upon entry to school, school staff collect and store devices in assigned lockers or bins. Students retrieve their devices at the end of the day when the staff unlock the storage unit.
- **In-Class Storage Stations:** Each classroom is equipped with a teacher-managed system where students are expected to store their devices for the entire instructional period and retrieve them when class is complete. These storage stations may be locked or unlocked and include options such as numbered pockets/shelves, caddies, or lockers.

School district policies should determine whether storage options are implemented school-wide or tailored by grade level. Schools should establish procedures for the secure handling of confiscated devices, including logging, securely storing, and facilitating retrieval (whether by students or parents/guardians).

Staff should receive training on storage protocols and their appropriate enforcement. School staff should communicate expectations for storage and retrieval during student orientation and back-to-school events and outline these expectations in both student and parent handbooks, and in district and school websites. By identifying appropriate storage strategies, districts can support distraction-free classrooms while maintaining transparency and consistency for students, staff, and families.



Age-Appropriate and Grade-Level Differentiated Guidelines

To support developmentally-appropriate policy decisions, districts are encouraged to implement differentiated approaches for cell phone use across grade bands. These guidelines recognize that students' cognitive, social, and emotional development vary significantly between early elementary and adolescence by outlining age-appropriate considerations for students in grades K-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Across all grades, the goal is to promote healthy habits, minimize distractions, and create school environments that foster academic engagement, social connection, and student well-being at every stage of development.

Grades K-5 (Elementary School) Recommended Policy Components

Research consistently shows that younger children benefit most from in-person social interaction, structured routines, and minimal exposure to screen-based distractions during the school day. Early elementary students are still developing foundational skills in self-regulation, attention, and social interaction skills. A recent meta-analysis examining the relationship between mobile device use and behavior of children aged 3 to 12 years old highlights that increased access to mobile devices is associated with a greater prevalence of behavioral and emotional problems, including decreased academic focus and social development and heightened emotional reactivity (Morata Sampaio et al., 2025). Therefore, for students in grades K-5, it is developmentally appropriate to minimize or eliminate access to personal devices during school hours to promote face-to-face engagement, enhance learning readiness, and support emotional well-being.

School policies at this level should emphasize minimizing distractions and fostering face-to-face peer engagement. Policies should be simple, enforceable, and consistently applied. Consider the following suggestions to incorporate into a K-5 cell phone and internet-enabled device policy.

- Students are discouraged from bringing personal internet-enabled devices, including, but not limited to, cell phones, smart watches and earbuds to school.
- If students choose to bring personal internet-enabled devices they must remain off and stored out of sight throughout the school day, including during arrival, recess, lunch, and dismissal. Students should not carry or use devices on their person during the school day unless granted an exception for medical or safety needs.
- Staff must apply clear, age-appropriate consequences and use strategies to redirect students who attempt to use devices. Districts should address repeated or willful violations through their student code of conduct policy.
- While students must receive instruction aligned to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards on [Digital Citizenship](#), classroom instructional time should be entirely free of **personal** internet-enabled devices. Teachers should not incorporate students' personal technology into lesson plans at this grade level. All digital engagement should occur through district-managed tools and devices.
- **Important Note:** Students should be permitted to use their cell phone or other internet-enabled device during the school day if there is a documented need that is in alignment with the above section, "Exceptions" (e.g., to fulfill accommodations in the IEP, to monitor healthcare, for translation services).

Grades 6–8 (Middle School) Recommended Policy Components

Adolescence, particularly during the middle school years, is characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer influence, a growing desire for autonomy, and uneven development of executive function skills, including impulse control and decision-making. Neuroscientific research indicates that the prefrontal cortex, which governs reasoning and self-regulation, continues to develop during early adolescence, making students in grades 6–8 particularly vulnerable to the distracting and emotionally intense nature of social media and mobile devices (Blakemore, 2019). [The Digital Wellness Lab](#) notes that middle school students experience greater difficulty disengaging from notifications and digital interactions compared to younger peers. Furthermore, data from the National Education Association (2024) and the Pew Research Center (2022) indicate that classroom distractions, cyberbullying, and peer conflicts often escalate with increased access to mobile devices during this developmental window. Therefore, while middle school students may require some flexibility, policies should emphasize firm boundaries during instructional time and clearly defined parameters during non-instructional periods to support healthy learning environments and digital citizenship.

Middle school students are in a transitional stage where they seek more independence but continue to require structure and clear limits. A well-crafted policy at this level strikes a balance between autonomy and supervision, providing consistent messaging on responsible device use including promoting a culture of responsible device use. Consider the following suggestions to incorporate into a grades 6–8 cell phone and internet-enabled device policy.

- Students are encouraged not to bring to school personal internet-enabled devices, including, but not limited to, cell phones, smart watches and earbuds.
- If students choose to bring personal internet-enabled devices they must remain off and stored out of sight at least during instructional time, including core academic classes, electives, and advisory periods.
 - Schools may find it helpful to provide students with storage options to assist them in not accessing the device during times when its use is not permitted.
- Schools may want to consider allowing flexible use of devices during lunch, time between classes, or arrival/dismissal times, provided it is permitted under the district’s policy on student use of internet-enabled devices.
 - Example: A school may designate a “phone use area” in the cafeteria or courtyard for use during lunch periods but prohibit use in the hallways or bathrooms.
- Schools should communicate behavioral expectations, including permitted device use, to students and their families and reinforce them throughout the school year. Communication of this policy should include school-wide notifications, signage, and reinforcement as part of classroom routines.
- Staff should consistently intervene when students use devices during inappropriate time periods and apply progressive, developmentally appropriate responses in accordance with the district’s code of student conduct.
- In addition to providing instruction aligned to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards on [Digital Citizenship](#), schools may also consider instructional programming tied to device expectations.
 - Example: A “Wellness Wednesday” advisory curriculum might include lessons on social media stress, identifying misinformation, avoiding distractions, and setting personal screen time goals.

- **Important Note:** Students should be permitted to use their cell phone or other internet-enabled device during the school day if there is a documented need that is in alignment with the above section, “Exceptions” (e.g., to fulfill accommodations in the IEP, to monitor healthcare, for translation services).

Grades 9–12 (High School) Recommended Policy Components

By high school, most students have regular access to personal mobile devices and increased autonomy in their use. While older adolescents are more capable of self-regulation than their younger peers, the presence of internet-enabled devices, especially during academic instruction, remains a significant source of distraction, contributing to academic underperformance, social comparison, and mental health strain. Research from Twenge et al. (2022) highlights strong associations between frequent social media use and increased levels of anxiety, depression, and sleep disruption among high school-aged youth.

High school students benefit from policies that reflect their growing independence but also recognize the persistent academic and social-emotional challenges associated with mobile device use. Consider the following suggestions to incorporate into a grades 9–12 cell phone and internet-enabled device policy.

- Internet-enabled devices, including, but not limited to, cell phones, smart watches, and earbuds, must be off or silenced and stored out of sight during all instructional time unless explicitly permitted by a teacher for educational purposes.
 - Example: A teacher may allow phone use for a science lab timer or group project research, but not for social media, texting, or recreational browsing.
- Districts may permit device use during lunch periods, study hall, or transition times.
- Schools must communicate behavioral expectations, including permitted device use, to students and their families and reinforce them throughout the school year. Communication of this policy should include school-wide notifications, signage, and reinforcement as part of classroom routines.
- Staff must consistently intervene when students use devices during inappropriate time periods and handle infractions using a graduated approach that aligns with the district’s code of student conduct and emphasizes reflection and personal responsibility.
- In addition to providing instruction aligned to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards on [Digital Citizenship](#), schools may also consider instructional programming tied to device expectations.
- Districts may want to consider full-day phone-free pilot projects for specific grade levels or subject areas to evaluate the impact on focus, attendance, and classroom behavior.
 - Example: It may be beneficial to implement a bell-to-bell or off and away policy for a 9th grade academy to help students transition into high school with strong habits.
- **Important Note:** Students should be permitted to use their cell phone or other internet-enabled device during the school day if there is a documented need that is in alignment with the above section, “Exceptions” (e.g., to fulfill accommodations in the IEP, to monitor healthcare, for translation services, etc.).

Emergency Communications

Pursuant to N.J.A.C. 6A:16-5.1, each school district shall develop and implement comprehensive plans, procedures, and mechanisms that provide for safety and security in the school district's public elementary and secondary schools. School safety plans must include thoughtful integration of personal mobile device procedures during emergencies or perceived threats. While limiting cell phone use during the instructional day supports academic focus, policies must account for the realities of crises in a manner that supports school-wide safety plans and coordinated emergency response.

District policies should clarify expectations for internet-enabled device use in the event of an emergency, such as a school lockdown, evacuation, or natural disaster. While students may seek to access personal devices during emergencies, unregulated use can interfere with emergency communications, contribute to misinformation, and disrupt coordinated safety protocols.

School leaders should train staff to recognize that emergency scenarios may trigger strong student impulses to communicate with family or access information, and to respond in a supportive, safety-informed manner.

Districts should provide developmentally appropriate guidance on when and how mobile devices may be used, if at all, during emergencies.

- For example, during a lockdown, students should be instructed to silence devices and avoid unnecessary communication unless directed otherwise by emergency personnel.
- During events such as weather-related evacuations, students may receive updates from staff and should follow the directions of adults regarding the use of their devices.
- School leaders (or designee) should incorporate clear expectations into school safety plans, emergency drill protocols, and staff professional development.

In the event of an unplanned emergency closure that prevents students from retrieving stored personal devices (e.g., phones in locked pouches or school-managed lockers), districts should:

- Develop and communicate a clear, centralized protocol for retrieving stored devices safely and efficiently once the school building is accessible.
- Consider designating specific pick-up windows and a secure location (e.g., main office, security desk) for device return, ideally with staff oversight and sign-out procedures.
- Communicate retrieval procedures through multiple channels, including robocalls, email, and school websites.

In the event of a family emergency or for non-emergency communication, families should contact the school's main office directly rather than reaching out to students during the school day. District staff will then follow local notification procedures to ensure the student receives the information in a timely and appropriate manner.

By embedding mobile device expectations within broader emergency management protocols, districts can reinforce safe and effective responses without undermining efforts to maintain distraction-free learning environments during the school day.

Communicating Cell Phone Policy to Students, Families, and Staff

The effective creation and implementation of a district's cell phone policy requires proactive, transparent, and inclusive communication with students, families, and staff. Schools should view policy rollout as an opportunity to build understanding and collective buy-in around creating a safe and focused learning environment. Communication efforts should be ongoing and accessible, clearly explaining both the rationale behind the policy and the expectations for behavior.

Districts must establish a clear communication protocol that ensures students, families, and staff are aware of the policy and understand how it applies to them. Key elements include:

- Clearly outlining the purpose and rationale of the policy.
- Explaining what is prohibited and permitted, including any necessary accommodations.
- Including information about how they will enforce the policy, including consequences for violations, and how staff will address concerns or disputes.

Schools should consider the following strategies when communicating about the student use of internet-enabled devices:

- Emphasize how the policy is designed in the best interest of students as it is grounded in research about student well-being, learning, and healthy technology use. Messaging should highlight the policy's role in promoting focus, safety, and social connection.
- Communicate information across multiple platforms to ensure reinforcement throughout the school year by:
 - Including information in student handbooks, family newsletters, and on district and school websites.
 - Presenting the policy during back-to-school night events, grade level orientations, and staff professional development sessions.
 - Integrating expectations in the student code of conduct presentations and classroom discussions.
- Ensure all families and staff members understand and engage with the policy by:
 - Providing translated versions of materials.
 - Utilizing visuals, infographics, and frequently asked questions.
 - Offering opportunities for families and students to ask questions and provide feedback during information sessions, parent-teacher conferences, or through digital forms.
- Continue communication with students, families, and staff after initial implementation by:
 - Incorporating reminders into morning announcements, signage, and homeroom lessons to help students stay organized and on track.

- Encouraging school leaders and teachers to consistently reinforce expectations and share data demonstrating the impact of the policy.
- Revisit and update the policy annually to reflect stakeholder feedback and emerging digital trends.

By approaching communication as an integral component of implementation, districts can foster greater understanding and partnership among all members of the school community.

Conclusion

Student use of internet-enabled device policies that are thoughtfully designed, developmentally appropriate, and equitably enforced can play a crucial role in supporting student focus, fostering healthy peer relationships, and minimizing digital distractions. These guidelines provide New Jersey school districts with considerations and suggestions to establish local policies that reflect community values, meet legal obligations, and prioritize student success. By aligning policy design with evidence-based research, districts can create safer, more connected, and academically supportive school environments that benefit all learners.



Key Terms

Bell-to-bell

Description of the timeframe when the bell rings at the start of the school day until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the academic day. Bell-to bell includes time in between class periods and lunch.

Digital citizenship

Digital citizenship involves the development of thoughtful, empathetic citizens who can wrestle with important ethical questions at the intersection of technology and humanity. Model digital citizens focus on using technology to make communities better, engage respectfully online with others, and leverage technology to amplify voices and perspectives. They are careful to determine the validity of online sources of information and are always respectful of ideas different than their own.

District-managed tools

School-issued technology or platforms used for educational purposes (e.g., laptops, tablets, learning management systems, etc.).

Internet-enabled device

Any device capable of connecting to the internet and accessing online content (e.g., smartphones, tablets, smartwatches), including social media applications. An internet-enabled device does not include an internet-enabled device provided by a public school when used for educational purposes.

Non-internet-enabled device

A basic communication device that is not capable of connecting to the internet or enabling the user to access content on the internet (e.g., basic flip-style cell phones).

Personal technology

Any device owned or brought by a student for personal use. This includes phones, smartwatches, earbuds, or tablets not issued by the school.

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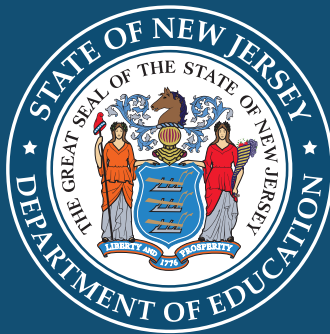
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