

MISSION ^{TO} DELIVER

TRANSITION 2026



Report of the Delivering a Strong Education for New Jersey Children Action Team

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New Jersey is home to one of the best public-school systems in the country, but the opportunity for a high-quality education is not available in every community. There are students who have fallen behind

academically, communities that lack access to the best we have to offer, funding structures that aren't functioning effectively for all districts, and a growing teacher shortage. Change is necessary to ensure that our education system is improving outcomes and providing opportunity for everyone, and that no students fall through the cracks, especially with a federal administration seeking to slash support for education and enforce policies that threaten the stability of our local school communities. Our schools must remain safe havens for learning, protecting the privacy, dignity, and physical safety of every student and family from federal overreach or external disruption.

State assessment results have shown a considerable number of students are not performing at grade level, whether they fell behind during the pandemic or are representative of the persistent achievement gaps that are all too common among New Jersey's nearly 600 school districts. A key milestone for academic success for every student is meeting third-grade literacy benchmarks, yet only 44.9% of New Jersey third graders are performing at grade level.

It is crucial that New Jersey support all students across the birth–18 continuum, regardless of ZIP code or school setting, through funding and systems designed to meet the needs of 2026 and beyond. This includes acknowledging and addressing shortcomings in the current mixed-delivery early learning system so community-based providers are fully integrated and educators are professionally compensated, ensuring stable, adequately staffed settings from infant and toddler care through preschool; providing elementary students with strong foundational literacy and phonics instruction to meet third-grade benchmarks; and ensuring access to high-impact tutoring for students of all ages, independent of a family's ability to pay privately.

Our educators are the most important resource we have in our schools, yet the teaching profession itself is at an inflection point; it is clear that our teacher shortage is an alarming trend, not an aberration. Fewer young people are seeking careers in education, and we experience challenges in retaining those who do. Those who pursue a teaching certification, whether it is their first job or they are changing careers, encounter needless barriers during the process. Once in the classroom, educators face increasingly complex working conditions, with growing instructional and administrative demands, heightened scrutiny, and more intense family engagement expectations—often without the staffing, training, or systems needed to support this work effectively. At the same time, compensation and benefits have not kept pace with professional wages or New Jersey's cost of living, making it harder to sustain teaching as a long-term career. These pressures are particularly pronounced in private sector or non-district early childhood education, where compensation lags well behind K–12 despite growing expectations for quality, alignment, and outcomes.

Each year, New Jersey distributes billions of dollars in state aid to support our public schools, educators, and students, and local property taxes, the majority of which go to supporting school districts, continue to increase at unsustainable levels. And yet every year, some districts are forced to grapple with last-minute state budget cuts that seem inconsistent, unpredictable, and inequitable. For many districts, this has meant scrambling to cut teaching staff, enlarge classroom sizes, eliminate important programs, and delay long-deferred building maintenance and repairs. Our funding formula is overdue for real reform. If we are to serve educators, communities, and taxpayers fairly, we must modernize and stabilize our funding formula.

When we prioritize and support our children, we invest in the future success of our state. Not just the success of individual children and families, but collective success too. Our strong schools build the highly respected workforce that draws businesses to invest here, as well as helping us maintain housing values by appealing to growing families!

The Delivering a Strong Education for All New Jersey Children Transition Action Team proposes that the Sherrill-Caldwell Administration consider the following recommendations to accomplish these key priorities:

- Implementing a comprehensive third-grade literacy strategy that builds on a strong foundation from early learning and empowers educators, students, and families.
- Expanding high-impact tutoring programs, a proven strategy to support students who have fallen behind.
- Modernizing and stabilizing the School Funding Reform Act to reduce fluctuations in state aid from year-to-year and ensuring it reflects current standards and the needs of students.
- Expanding access to early learning and preschool through a stronger mixed delivery system and high-quality workforce.
- Addressing the teacher shortage by streamlining certification requirements, expanding apprenticeship models, and providing greater support for educators.

We understand that these recommendations need to fit into the broader context of all of the Action Team recommendations and will have to be prioritized accordingly. We also recognize that these recommendations will need to be considered in the context of a challenging budget landscape, particularly with the impact of upcoming federal funding cuts, and where these recommendations are not budget neutral they may need to be adjusted or prioritized.

Transition Action Team Recommendations

Implementing a Comprehensive Third-Grade Literacy Strategy

Recommendation: Invest in high-quality early learning as a foundational literacy strategy to ensure equitable access to pre-literacy opportunities.

New Jersey's school systems are among the finest in the nation, yet too often our children struggle to meet basic literacy proficiency standards. Currently, early learning and K-3 literacy standards are fragmented, with inconsistent alignment across settings, standards, and implementation. With evidence supporting the benefits of children having access to early literacy education, as the state continues advancement towards its goal for universal preschool through mixed delivery, there is the opportunity to establish a stronger foundation that is aligned with and builds towards third grade literacy from the earlier stages of learning.

To ensure all children, regardless of zip code, are given pre-literacy learning opportunities, the Sherrill-Caldwell Administration should consider creating preschool literacy standards along with revising current K-3 literacy standards to reflect developmental milestones and evidence-based foundational literacy practices. The preschool classroom curriculum and practice should link to K-3 literacy expectations, creating a seamless developmental progression. There is clear evidence that early learning programs can embed strong pre-literacy and oral language practices, including vocabulary development, phonological awareness, concept development, and sustained adult-child interactions. Additionally, the Action Team recommends that curriculum includes the incorporation of play-based experiences and arts affiliated literacy, eliminating inappropriate "push-down" expectations and ensuring a well-rounded learning program for children.

To implement these goals, the Administration would benefit from including perspectives of early education providers in the discussions on implementation, including alignment and coordination between the Department of Children and Families (NJDCF) and the Department of Education, as NJDCF funds quality programs that can support this effort. The Administration can better utilize federal and state grants to expand capacity at community-based childhood education centers to provide opportunities for early literacy exposure, for example, creating microgrants for training to ensure competencies are met through aligned curriculum and proven teaching methods.

Recommendation: Establish and build a statewide literacy framework connecting early learning, preschool, K-3 instruction, multilingual learner supports, and evidence-based foundational literacy practices.

In August 2024, Governor Phil Murphy signed legislation reinforcing the State's commitment to improving literacy outcomes for students. The legislation established a comprehensive plan that was outlined in the New Jersey Literacy Framework guide. The guide details how literacy success is measured, including the appropriate number, type, and use of universal screeners, and ensures assessment tools align with instructional goals rather than subjective definitions of progress. Given that this work is underway, this statewide literacy framework should continue to be refined under the Sherrill-Caldwell Administration, while also effectively implementing additional recommendations, starting with early learning experiences.

While the foundational work is in place, the capacity at the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) is stretched thin. To ensure success in implementation, the State should consider expansion of the NJDOE Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery (LEAR) with regional liaisons to support districts, early childcare providers, and community literacy partners. The NJDOE can also support better outcomes by expanding capacity to prioritize rapid analysis of screener data, potentially with third-party or higher education partners, and use findings to guide early intervention and targeted district assistance. Data can inform clear, ambitious, evidence-informed literacy targets grounded in developmental science and continuous improvement—not one-time benchmarks. Initial data from universal screening assessments from the 2025-26 school year can serve as a baseline for the incoming administration to build upon. LEAR can also create a digital continuous improvement and reflection framework to monitor implementation and support course correction over time. This should include a statewide hub of best practices, highlighting districts and charters effectively implementing early literacy models, as well as states with success in addressing the unique learning needs of students from low performing school districts and multilingual learners. Multilingual learners in particular would benefit from stronger supports that are currently lacking structure and consistency across all districts.

The Administration can also support implementation of the Literacy Framework through an Implementation Steering Committee focused on building strategies to ensure curriculum and literacy policies are aligned across the education continuum. This committee can help improve cross-department collaboration and leverage expertise across K-12 schools, early childhood, and higher education.

Recommendation: Strengthen teacher knowledge, coaching, and family partnerships to support literacy from birth through elementary school.

The most influential people with a role in a child's success in learning to read are their parents and our teachers. As such it is essential that the state ensure that there are robust resources to be used by families and educators to support children's reading along with consistent and engaging training opportunities that focus on improving children's mastery of reading.

The quality of the reading instruction a child receives is highly dependent on teacher skills and knowledge, and the preparation they receive before entering the classroom. Teachers must be proficient in language acquisition and foundational literacy skills, phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, language, comprehension, and writing. Opportunities exist to partner with higher education institutions to strengthen foundational literacy instruction skills across all teacher preparation programs, which are now required to have 9–12 credits related to literacy skills instruction. Teacher candidates benefit from participating in intentional hands-on experiences that allow them to apply knowledge of foundational literacy skills and pair them with knowledgeable and skilled early-reading educators.

Teachers and administrators require ongoing professional development, coaching and mentoring to be most effective. A more robust LEAR office can help train and build a network of experienced teachers as literacy coaches and mentors for teachers to ensure foundational literacy is practiced across all classrooms, while also providing opportunities for advancement and leadership for teachers. Additionally, leadership development experiences for center directors and school administrators should be available so that leaders understand the importance of designing developmentally sound literacy programs so that implementation is meaningful and appropriate.

Parents and guardians are also critical partners in literacy development. Encouraging early reading at home will strengthen achievement in school. The Administration can support parent knowledge through expanded family and community literacy programs, to help them support their child's reading and literacy acquisition. The Administration should explore partnerships with community organizations like libraries and the Free Books Project to provide free books, and make sure resources are available in appropriate formats for multilingual learners. Additionally, the state should ensure that data and reports are provided in a format that is understandable for parents and empowers them with the knowledge to support children's development.

Recommendation: Align Pre-K through third-grade instruction, materials, and assessment with developmental science and evidence-based literacy practices.

High quality instructional materials (HQIM) are essential for the learning experience that shapes students' academic success and learning outcomes. Having the right materials in place, that are aligned with literacy standards and that are culturally responsive, ensures that educators have the necessary resources to teach students the skills and content necessary to succeed in school. The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration should consider stronger requirements for districts to adopt HQIMs that are aligned with updated standards and are responsive to multilingual learners.

The Administration should also consider amending current statewide regulations detailing standardized testing practices in K-3 towards a goal of administering assessments earlier to ensure that developmentally and linguistically appropriate indicators, screeners, and observational assessments measure what we actually want to see earlier in the developmental cycle. This will result in earlier opportunities for intervention and strengthen literacy skills development in preparation for meeting expected metrics prior to grade 3.

The aforementioned recommendations to strengthen teacher and administrator knowledge are also critical to aligning instruction practice with evidence-based literacy strategies, as well as those to increase capacity of the LEAR office. Comprehensive training resources and professional development for district, school, and community provider leaders in designing and implementing literacy teaching strategies,

curriculum development, and understanding assessment data from universal screenings so that educators can adjust their teaching practices by recognizing that children may demonstrate learning differently and at different rates as has been seen with dual language learners.

Expanding High-Impact Tutoring

Recommendation: Maximize access to high-impact tutoring during the school day and ensure alignment with district core curriculum and assessments.

Rigorous research provides strong evidence that high-impact tutoring can produce large learning gains for a wide range of students, including those who have fallen behind academically. New Jersey recently dedicated federal pandemic relief funds towards high-impact tutoring, which have now been spent, leaving an uncertain future for this proven strategy.

Feedback from stakeholder groups support the recommendation for the Sherrill-Caldwell Administration to prioritize strengthening oversight of the delivery of high-impact tutoring programs, refining training protocols to ensure consistent instructional quality, and optimizing scholar session scheduling to better align with school curricula and avoid disruption during the instructional day when it can be most effective and most equitable for the largest number of students. The high-impact tutoring experience should be aligned with core language arts and math instruction, using a predictable cadence and intentional program design, while providing flexibility for districts to offer supplemental models, including virtual and out-of-school options, based on community needs and capacity.

While effective high-impact tutoring programs can be expensive, the overall favorable impact to student learning makes them highly cost-effective relative to many other educational interventions. Thus, the Administration should consider a budget appropriation and legislation to codify the statewide high-impact tutoring grant program and use benchmarks and metrics for continual funding. Any barriers that currently exist that preclude school districts from applying for such grant funding should be minimized, if not remediated, with the goal of having adequate financial resources available to be distributed to well-deserving school-based programs. The Administration can also consider factoring high-impact tutoring costs in the "at risk" weight under the School Funding Reform Act.

Recommendation: Strengthen state leadership, data, and quality assurance through a clear, statewide high impact tutoring framework.

Several national and statewide organizations have spent significant time coordinating and leading high-impact tutoring programming that is based on growing young minds and strengthening teaching and learning, especially for under-resourced districts, centers, and scholars. The vision for these organizations, most notably the National Student Support Accelerator (NSSA) and the New Jersey Tutoring Corps (NJTC), is for every young scholar to have access to the academic and social/emotional support that they need to be successful learners. The organizations have established clearly defined tenets regarding what constitutes high-impact tutoring that New Jersey can use to create a statewide definition and standards for high-impact tutoring. The guidelines of NSSA and the work of the NJTC can guide New Jersey in establishing a statewide program that incorporates clear expectations for dosage, ratios, frequency, staffing, curriculum alignment, and communication with families. The guidelines should be clear regarding the selection of any student who can benefit from high-impact tutoring and ensure that high-impact tutoring is available for all students who have not achieved reaching on grade level.

High-impact tutoring can receive greater prioritization within the NJDOE by establishing an Office of High-Impact Tutoring. This may include staff who are responsible for providing regional technical assistance, establishing standards, qualifications and evaluation for what constitutes high-impact tutors. This includes overseeing quality monitoring, producing best practice guidance for districts, outlining effective program models for different contexts, and supporting districts with resources for effective implementation.

As part of a robust statewide high-impact tutoring effort, there should be steps to conduct an after-action analysis of programs that focuses on clarification of qualifications of high-quality vendors; requires quality vendor pre/post assessments; identifies barriers to vendor procurement and establishes guardrails to prevent low-quality vendors and limit delays in procurement. Based upon feedback from individuals attending the Sherrill-Caldwell Policy Summit, it is essential that the new Administration capitalize on opportunities to minimize, if not eliminate, red tape that public schools experience in securing grants to support high-impact tutoring programs or in purchasing resources to supplement the work.

Recommendation: Build a sustainable tutoring workforce pipeline through higher education and public investment.

Research has shown that because the skills required for tutoring are different from the skills required for effective classroom teaching, a wide variety of tutors (including volunteers and college students) can successfully improve student outcomes, if they receive adequate training and ongoing support. The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration should consider establishing statewide qualifications and standards for what constitutes a high-impact tutor. The State can create a paid pipeline opportunity by partnering with universities and colleges to deploy trained college students, graduate students, student teachers and clinical interns as tutors who have participated in intensive training and ongoing support throughout the program, including structured materials and curriculum. Former and retired teachers are also highly qualified to be tutors, and current teachers are well-positioned to do this work provided that they have capacity.

Due to rigorous training programs that focus on instructional techniques, social and emotional learning and cultural competency, high impact tutoring should be a paid clinical experience that allows student teachers to receive credit for their training to strengthen their preparation and provide schools with consistent support. It would be ideal to create a New Jersey Educator Tutoring Corps of certified educators, paraprofessionals, specialists, and graduate students. This would also help to address the teacher shortage pipeline by connecting student teachers/high impact tutors to teaching opportunities early in their career.

Modernizing and Stabilizing the School Funding Reform Act

Recommendation: Fully fund the School Funding Reform Act, appropriate funds for a modernization cost study, and continue modifications of SFRA through budget language in the FY27 budget.

New Jersey made considerable progress in fully funding the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) for the first time in the FY25 budget, as well as running the formula each year to adjust for changes in enrollment and local fiscal capacity. Nonetheless, clear challenges have emerged where a district's state aid can fluctuate too much from year-to-year, and many aspects of the formula are due for an update nearly two decades after the law was enacted. While some of the needed changes require an in-depth analysis,

others are actionable in the short term, and given the urgent nature of school funding, this Action Team recommends that measures be taken in the Governor's first budget proposal.

A number of modifications to the SFRA were made through budget language in FY26 and it is recommended that these continue in some form for the FY27 budget. The Administration should continue limiting state aid reductions, either maintaining last year's 3% limit, or basing it on a percentage of a district's total operating budget. The State can also bring more stability to the formula by continuing to use multi-year averages for property values and personal income to calculate a district's Local Fair Share. Special education aid should be calculated based on actual enrollment numbers, not the census rate, which assumes every district educates the same percentage of special education students. The Administration should also consider providing districts with greater flexibility on the tax levy cap, potentially by limiting increases to the difference between the prior year tax levy and the FY27 Local Fair Share.

There was also consensus among the Action Team that SFRA was not fully funded in FY26 and that the Administration should carefully consider how limiting increases in state aid can impact districts with growing enrollment and greater needs for their students.

In recognition that other necessary updates to the formula will require time and resources for deeper analysis and deliberation, this Action Team recommends that the FY27 budget include an appropriation to commission an external study to fully modernize the SFRA.

Recommendation: Implement short-term measures to provide greater transparency and fairness, and an improved process

The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration can also make other short-term updates with direct and indirect impacts on state aid and a school district's ability to manage their finances from year to year. These changes are responsive to longstanding frustration over transparency in how state aid levels are calculated and change annually, as well as the shortened timeframes districts are left with to finalize their budgets once state aid levels are released. In years past, districts have also seen their state aid change with the passage of the state budget in June, well after their budgets have been finalized.

The Administration can provide greater transparency on state aid by creating a user-friendly website that displays the main drivers that state aid calculations are based on and how they changed from the prior year. The Administration can also provide greater flexibility for districts receiving reductions in aid by allowing an extended timeframe for finalizing their budgets, as well as the opportunity to adjust them if their state aid changes in the final budget.

School districts are also impacted by Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreements between developers and municipalities, although in many cases they are not included in these discussions and do not receive a share of this revenue, despite the impact that development has on enrollment and the tax base. To promote greater fairness in PILOT agreements, it should be required that school districts be notified of and included in those negotiations and also receive share of PILOT revenue.

As the State continues to advance the goal for universal preschool, consideration should be given to how state aid for preschool is distributed between school districts and community-based providers and the Administration should review how the current approach incentivizes the ways new seats are added. To ensure districts and providers are working together to fill seats, the State should issue stronger guidance

and direction to school districts on preschool funding that are supportive of mixed delivery and promote cooperation and intended outcomes.

Recommendation: Commission an external study to make recommendations to modernize the formula and develop cost-saving initiatives.

The School Funding Reform Act is nearly two decades old, having been enacted in 2008 and its development beginning years prior. Although some of its basic metrics are updated every three years through the Education Adequacy Report, the inputs and assumptions that inform its base cost and weights have not been revisited. This being the case, the SFRA no longer reflects things like updated learning standards, greater mental health needs of students, and lessons learned as it was fully implemented. This Action Team recommends the Sherill-Caldwell Administration commission an external study to make recommendations on modernizing the SFRA. This Action Team recognizes that changing specific areas of the formula can have broader impacts on state aid levels and emphasizes the importance of taking a thorough and holistic approach towards codifying any recommendations into law.

The study should include a cost-study to update inputs that inform the base cost of the formula, as well as its weights, especially for at-risk students and English Language Learners. The cost-study should also review Categorical Aid levels for transportation, security, and special education. This work can be incorporated into the next Education Adequacy Report for FY29. This Action Team also recommends a broader review of the SFRA's methodology for allocating Special Education funding, as well as how Local Fair Share is calculated and relied upon.

There are a number of education settings whose funding methodology has not been revisited since 2008 despite considerable changes to their role in our school system, particularly preschool and county vocational school districts. The study should calculate the true cost of providing quality preschool and align funding mechanisms with the State's framework for mixed delivery. For county vocational school districts, the State should explore a minimum level of county funding based on enrollment or per-pupil levels and also consider adding Categorical Aid for these districts to address rising tuition costs.

This Action Team recognizes that rising costs are a serious challenge for school districts, the state, and taxpayers. The study should include recommendations on cost-saving initiatives to make schools more efficient, including the development of regional or statewide initiatives to share the costs of special education and transportation services. Rising healthcare costs have also had a serious impact on school district budgets and this Action Team recognizes that its counterpart on Fiscal Responsibility is making recommendations on reforming the School Employee Health Benefits Program.

Lastly, in anticipation of a resolution to the ongoing lawsuit on school segregation, this Action Team recommends the study explore funding mechanisms that incentivize school integration.

Expanding Access to Early Learning

Recommendation: Strengthen and stabilize the mixed-delivery model through clear state standards, true-cost funding and required partnerships.

New Jersey's mixed-delivery preschool system is essential to achieving universal access, yet its implementation has been uneven and has produced significant power and funding imbalances. School districts control contracting, budgets, and expansion decisions, while community-based provider

organizations (CBOs) that deliver a substantial share of preschool seats and nearly all infant and toddler care often lack meaningful leverage, transparency, or recourse when partnerships break down. NJDOE holds fiscal and regulatory authority but lacks the capacity to consistently oversee implementation, enforce parity, or intervene early when mixed-delivery partnerships become misaligned.

Stakeholder and Task Force feedback strongly highlighted inconsistent budgeting practices, unclear definitions of parity, and provider displacement during district expansion. Expansion decisions are frequently made without regard to true community capacity, particularly when districts pursue new classrooms before fully utilizing CBOs. These challenges are compounded by flawed demand calculations: reliance on first-grade enrollment as a proxy for preschool needs excludes special education enrollment and masks true community demand. Without intervention, continued erosion of the provider sector threatens both universal preschool goals and the stability of the broader birth–5 system.

To address these challenges, the State should strengthen and stabilize mixed delivery through clear standards and required partnerships. This includes building dedicated NJDOE liaison capacity—with clear authority and sufficient staffing—to support, oversee, and rebalance district–provider collaboration. This Action Team recommends these roles be independent of district reporting structures and charged with ensuring equitable implementation. System alignment should be reinforced through the formal inclusion of providers on the existing Implementation Steering Committee and related decision-making structures.

A successful statewide mixed delivery system requires maintaining a viable number of community-based providers. To build on the recent codification of preschool expansion—and recognizing that existing “due diligence” requirements have not yet produced consistent or effective partnership outcomes—the state should recalibrate how district expansion and partnership decisions are made, shifting from discretionary practice to accountable implementation grounded in the intended use of public funds: serving as many children as possible. District-only growth or failure to meet the required universe of eligible preschool students should trigger a requirement that districts formally demonstrate and justify why partnerships with eligible community-based providers are not being pursued when licensed community capacity exists, with that determination reviewed and validated by an independent, non-NJDOE entity. Stronger oversight and corrective action for districts that do not meet enrollment or partnership expectations are necessary to protect mixed delivery and ensure expansion decisions align with system capacity and public purpose. Equitable implementation must include district overhead transparency, provider sustainability and break-even technical assistance, and updated census calculations that include special education enrollment, so planning and expansion decisions are grounded in true demand and real costs.

Recommendation: Build a high-quality early learning workforce through paid pathways, certification alignment, and professional advancement.

New Jersey’s private sector early learning workforce is being asked to do more than ever before. As expectations expand to include higher standards, inclusion, and accountability, educators are increasingly expected to serve as teachers, therapists, special education supports, social workers, and health monitors—without corresponding staffing, training, or pay. This Action Team’s discussions and public feedback made clear that burnout and turnover are not failures of dedication or resilience, but predictable outcomes of a system that professionalizes expectations without professionalizing compensation and support. Credentialed early educators and leaders earn wages far below their K–12 counterparts, often lack access to pensions and affordable benefits, and face limited opportunities for advancement. Many rely on public safety-net programs to meet basic needs; others earn just above eligibility thresholds while struggling to afford necessities in New Jersey’s high-cost environment. This instability is accelerating teacher shortages, disrupting continuity of care, and undermining child outcomes.

To stabilize and professionalize the workforce, the Sherrill-Caldwell Administration can prioritize sustained funding to achieve compensation parity for credentialed early educators and early learning leaders with their K–12 counterparts. This can be accomplished through wage ladders aligned with the new career lattice, using a phased approach that begins with targeted wage supplements to immediately close the most severe compensation gaps while longer-term structures are established. In parallel, student teachers should be allowed to choose community-based Pre-K programs to complete student teaching, with exploration of limited substitute roles to relieve staffing shortages while strengthening the preparation pipeline.

The State should also strengthen inclusive and special education supports by piloting regional, shared-service specialist and coaching models, with a pathway to long-term implementation. Inadequate access to specialists is a major driver of early educator burnout, while early identification and intervention improve child outcomes and reduce long-term remediation costs. Improving early learning outcomes depends on a stable, well-supported workforce. Research and stakeholder feedback consistently underscore that educator quality is directly linked to children's early literacy, language development, and long-term academic success. Persistent underinvestment in early childhood educators has limited the state's ability to make durable progress, despite rising expectations for quality and outcomes. Addressing workforce compensation, supports, and sustainability is a necessary foundation for strengthening New Jersey's early learning system and achieving its broader goals for children and families.

Recommendation: Fund systems for community-based providers at the true cost of quality to support stability, expansion, and equity.

New Jersey's community early learning providers cannot achieve stability, equity, or sustainable expansion without increased funding that reflects the true cost of delivering high-quality early learning and ensures consistent access for children. Action Team discussions and stakeholder feedback consistently highlighted the central role of the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) in maintaining children's access to early learning. The current CCAP freeze—partially lifted but with extremely limited availability—and outdated eligibility thresholds are pushing children out of programs, disrupting continuity of care, and creating enrollment volatility that undermines provider sustainability. When children lose access to care, programs are forced to reduce classrooms, cut staff, or operate with financial uncertainty—further shrinking supply. While CCAP instability also affects parents' ability to remain in the workforce, stakeholders highlighted the impact on children's consistent access to safe, stable, high-quality early learning environments.

Facility investments must also continue through New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA), which already houses specialized early learning infrastructure, so community-based providers can meet quality standards and respond to demand. Together, fully reopening and modernizing CCAP, continuing facility investments, and grounding decisions in an accurate understanding of true costs would stabilize providers, protect children's access to early learning, improve long term child outcomes and strengthen New Jersey's early learning system.

Recommendation: Ensure alignment and quality across the birth–18 continuum to improve long-term student outcomes.

New Jersey's early learning system depends not only on access and funding, but on the quality and coherence of the supports surrounding children, educators, and families. While professional development requirements, family-facing services, and community supports exist across the state, they are often

fragmented, inconsistently delivered, and insufficiently aligned with the developmental needs of young children. Action Team discussions and stakeholder feedback emphasized that the current approach places heavy demands on educators without providing a coordinated system to support success.

Early childhood educators are required to complete significant training, yet much of it is disconnected from classroom realities, not differentiated by credential level, and reflects a K–12 “push-down” approach that is misaligned with early childhood development. Training often lacks continuity or coaching and cannot replace needed specialization or direct supports, leaving educators responsible for complex needs like developmental delays, multilingual acquisition, and mental health. Limited early-learning leadership development also undermines stability and instructional quality.

To address these challenges, this Action Team recommends strengthening statewide professional development by reviewing existing training requirements and building a shared, coherent system of training, coaching, and leadership support for both district and community-based early childhood educators. This system should be differentiated by credential level, emphasize developmentally appropriate practice, and prioritize continuity so training translates into improved instruction and leadership over time—while operating alongside, not in place of, specialized supports.

Stakeholders also emphasized that early learning outcomes are deeply influenced by access to community-based supports beyond the classroom. Children and families need coordinated access to intervention services, multilingual supports, developmental screening, mental health resources, food security, and immigration-related assistance. When these supports are fragmented or inaccessible, educators are left to fill gaps they are not resourced or trained to address, contributing to burnout and inconsistent child outcomes. Finally, the State should develop a comprehensive, statewide family enrollment and education strategy to improve access and participation. Streamlining registration, strengthening multilingual outreach, investing in coordinated family communication, and launching a public awareness effort would increase preschool participation—particularly in high-need communities—while reinforcing trust in the early learning system.

Addressing the Teacher Shortage

Recommendation: Modernize and streamline certification to remove barriers and expand access

Current pathways towards teaching too often impose cost, redundancy, and delays that can exclude qualified candidates without improving educator effectiveness. This Action Team recommends modernizing teacher certification and entry requirements to reduce unnecessary barriers while maintaining rigor and alignment with classroom practice. Reform should focus on streamlining entry into the profession, recognizing preparation quality and demonstrated competence, and expanding access to high-need credentials. This includes modernizing educator assessment and certification requirements to reduce misalignment between current testing structures and the diverse preparation pathways through which individuals enter the teaching profession today. While maintaining high standards and essential competencies, the State should allow greater flexibility in how candidates demonstrate readiness, particularly for nontraditional and career-transition pathways. GPA thresholds should also be adjusted to reflect national norms, expanding access to the profession without lowering standards. In parallel, the State should make the existing certification pilot permanent to preserve more flexible limited pathways that allow candidates to enter classrooms while completing requirements.

To better meet workforce needs, the Administration can restore and expand stand-alone certifications—including bilingual education and special education to provide flexibility and responsiveness to local shortages. Recognizing the Seal of Biliteracy as an option to satisfy language proficiency requirements would further reduce time and cost barriers while maintaining high expectations for bilingual educators.

Finally, certification reform should address credit transferability and reciprocity. The State can reexamine how credits ladder from county colleges to four-year institutions to ensure coursework counts toward licensure. This includes recognizing emerging and specialized subject areas—such as engineering and applied sciences—and ensuring that credits align with teaching eligibility rather than forcing candidates into limited or temporary certification routes. Together, these changes would modernize certification to reflect today’s workforce realities, expand access to the profession, and ensure New Jersey remains competitive in recruiting and retaining high-quality educators across the full education continuum.

Recommendation: Build a statewide teacher pipeline through apprenticeships and homegrown pathways.

New Jersey should expand paid apprenticeships and earn-and-learn pathways that reduce debt, provide real-world preparation, and strengthen educator pipelines in areas of critical shortage. These models are especially effective for candidates who cannot afford to step out of the workforce to complete unpaid training and should be strategically aligned to meet the state’s most pressing needs, including bilingual education, special education, STEM, and early childhood.

To build a sustainable pipeline, the State should scale apprenticeship and residency models that integrate coursework, mentored classroom practice, and compensation from day one. For infant–toddler educators, these pathways can include funded steps that raise compensation once credentials are earned, ensuring that professional advancement results in tangible wage gains comparable to how credentials function in the K–12 system. Without this alignment, current infant/toddler apprenticeship pathways risk professionalizing expectations without improving retention.

The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration can also expand and invest in high school teaching academies and career and technical education (CTE) programs—such as Red Hawk Rising—to identify and support future educators earlier. Targeted grants should prioritize areas with the greatest shortages, ensuring these programs are accessible, regionally responsive, and connected to postsecondary pathways that lead directly into certification.

The State can also strengthen advancement pathways for individuals already working in schools and early learning programs, including paraprofessionals, classroom aides, and assistant teachers. These educators represent a proven, community-rooted talent pool and can be supported through paid work-and-learn models, credit for prior experience, tuition assistance, and streamlined certification requirements aligned with classroom practice. Creating clear, supported pathways for these professionals to advance into certified teaching roles would improve retention, diversify the workforce, and reduce reliance on external recruitment.

Together, these strategies would create a cohesive, debt-conscious pipeline that values experience, expands access to the profession, and ensures that preparation pathways translate into long-term workforce stability and growth.

Recommendation: Reduce financial barriers to entering and remaining in the profession.

New Jersey can strengthen teacher recruitment and retention by reducing the financial barriers to entering and remaining in the profession and by aligning compensation and benefits with the demands placed on educators across the birth–18 continuum. This begins with expanding tuition assistance, scholarships, and loan forgiveness for teacher candidates, by re-energizing the Governor’s Teaching Scholarship Program and exploring tuition-free or debt-free pathways tied to service commitments. These pathways should be accessible to educators at all stages of preparation and across county college and four-year degree programs, supporting multiple entry points into teaching while addressing persistent shortages statewide.

Candidates should also be able to complete preparation without sacrificing financial stability. Providing paid student teaching stipends would ensure aspiring educators are not forced to choose between income and completing licensure requirements. Earlier paid clinical experiences—such as high-impact tutoring, instructional support, or classroom assistance—should be expanded to strengthen preparation prior to student teaching and help candidates build confidence, skills, and professional identity while earning income.

Retention requires equal attention. This Action Team recognizes the impact that reforms to educator pension and health benefits have had in keeping individuals in the field. The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration should consider opportunities to strengthen and protect pensions and healthcare benefits as critical incentives.

Targeted wage supports are especially important for early childhood educators outside the SFRA funding structure and should be paired with intentional opportunities for advancement that align compensation with increasing responsibility, skill, and expertise.

Finally, New Jersey should build on proposed legislation to allow and fund CCAP access for early childhood educators as a proven workforce retention strategy. The high cost of childcare—combined with inadequate compensation—remains a major barrier for many educators working in the field. Ensuring access to affordable childcare supports workforce stability while reinforcing the state’s commitment to early educators as essential professionals.

Together, these strategies would reduce financial barriers to entry, strengthen preparation, and improve long-term retention—helping New Jersey recruit and sustain the skilled educators its education system depends on at every level.

Recommendation: Reduce administrative burdens and support leadership pathways.

New Jersey can also improve educator retention, effectiveness, and morale by reducing unnecessary mandates and restoring professional autonomy while strengthening leadership pipelines and public confidence in the profession. Educators across the system report being overwhelmed by duplicative mandates, compliance-driven assessments, and outdated requirements that detract from time spent teaching, mentoring students, and collaborating with colleagues. The Sherrill-Caldwell Administration should explore eliminating unnecessary or redundant mandates and amend high-stakes testing requirements—including exit exams—that do not demonstrably improve instructional quality or student

outcomes. Educators should be focused on evidence-based practice and professional growth rather than compliance.

This Action Team discussed the “green trajectory” that places novice teachers under the supervision of novice leaders, compounding stress and accelerating burnout. Strong, intentional teacher and leadership pathways—grounded in mentorship, coaching, and phased responsibility—are essential to stabilizing schools and ensuring instructional quality. Investing in leadership development alongside teacher development would reduce turnover and strengthen school culture.

Together, these actions would rebalance accountability with trust, strengthen professional pathways, and reaffirm New Jersey’s commitment to educators as the foundation of a strong and sustainable education system.

Recommendation: Launch a statewide positive messaging and recruitment campaign to elevate the teaching profession and rebuild public confidence in education.

Throughout the work of this Action Team and at the Policy Summit, stakeholders repeatedly identified the need to shift public narratives about teaching. Sustaining New Jersey’s excellence in education depends on attracting and retaining highly skilled, committed educators. Without teachers, none of the state’s education goals—academic achievement, equity, innovation, or workforce readiness—can be realized.

A marketing campaign for recruitment can help reframe teaching as a respected, high-impact profession central to New Jersey’s future, countering negative and dismissive narratives that have contributed to declining interest in the field. Messaging should be considered that resonates with younger generations, highlighting not only purpose and impact, but also the State’s commitment to improving educator mental health, well-being, and workplace safety. Stakeholders emphasized that recruitment efforts must affirm that educators are valued, protected, and supported, in contrast to recent trends in harmful or aggressive behavior toward teachers.

Strengthening public regard for the profession is a necessary complement to compensation, preparation, and working-condition reforms. A coordinated, forward-looking messaging strategy would help restore confidence in teaching as a career choice, reinforce respect for educators, and support long-term workforce stability across New Jersey’s education system.

Other Policy Considerations

- This Action Team also discussed the impact that adequate nutrition and food security have on learning outcomes. Kids simply cannot reach their potential on an empty stomach, and due to the high cost of living, many families struggle to put food on the table. We recommend the Administration explore options to make free school meals universal, ensuring that every student comes to class ready to learn and alleviating some of the burden on families.
- This Action Team acknowledges the work that its counterpart for Kid’s Mental Health and Online Safety can have on academic outcomes for students and their ability to thrive. We know that students are experiencing a greater number of mental health challenges than ever before, which have been exacerbated by social media platforms.

- Safe and adequate school facilities are also a foundational element of our school system, and New Jersey is home to some of the oldest and most crowded school buildings in the nation. There is a persistent backlog of capital needs in our most economically disadvantaged communities. This Action Team discussed the need for an appropriation in the FY27 budget for capital and emergent projects in School Development Authority districts, as well as the need to secure long-term funding for facilities projects under the SDA's school construction program.
- This Action Team also considered the potential for volatile federal policy shifts that may target specific communities or programs. The State can explore mechanisms to provide temporary stabilization aid to districts experiencing sudden, targeted freezes or rescissions of federal dollars, ensuring that no child's education is used as leverage in federal policy disputes. Resources for legal defense and coordination with the Attorney General's office are also essential to ensure school districts can defend their legal rights without impacting already tight local district budgets.
- Charter Schools are a well-established component of New Jersey's education system and have provided opportunity and improved academic outcomes for many New Jersey children. The Action Team recognizes that Charter Schools are key stakeholders in these issues and recommends their perspectives be included in implementation discussions. This Action Team was not able to reach consensus on changes to Charter School funding for operations and facilities, nor was there consensus on how to include them within each recommendation framework. Nonetheless, there are over 60 thousand New Jersey students attending Charter Schools that deserve to benefit from the Administration's goals.