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JerseyCAN

Policy Prescriptions:

Five Concrete Policy Levers to Accelerate Student Progress in New Jersey.

Unlike Louisiana and Mississippi where an upward trajectory of academic progress in Kindergarten through Grade 12 is occurring, New Jersey's academic achievement - though comparatively high when compared to other states - has been in stagnation or decline. To understand this, data on both state tests and national assessments must be examined, to balance concerns about the reliability of state test scores.

> In May 2023, the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) announced a change in the proficiency level cut scores in English Language Arts and Mathematics for the state's New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA). Cut scores for demonstrating proficiency in English Language Arts and Mathematics were lowered from 750 to 725. An analysis then showed that applying the lower cut scores to that year's student data more than doubled the state's English Language Arts proficiency rate on the NJGPA - moving proficiency from 39% to 81%, while Mathematics proficiency rate saw a 7% uptick, from 50% to 57%.

Recommendations:

1. Implement current literacy laws with fidelity and pass new, complementary literacy legislation.

2. Improve and modernize New Jersey's mathematics landscape to include universal screeners and K-12 data science standards.

3. Provide universal access to high-impact tutoring, annexed to high-quality Tier I instruction.

4. Use college-level standardized assessments to gauge academic competency, award college credit, and drive remediation.

5. Strengthen the non-college pipeline by connecting high school students to industry-valued credentials in New Jersey.

These dramatic increases in presumptive student proficiency raised questions about the legitimacy of the revised cut score, and while state officials cited COVID impacts and student mental health concerns as factors for revisiting cut scores, the lower cut scores remain in place.

Reliable information about students' academic standing is of concern to parents, many of whom provide anecdotal accounts of a disconnect between the high grades seen on their children's report cards and comparatively lower achievement as per results on state tests. On the national stage, data on our nation's high schoolers show that only 35% of 12th graders performed at or above proficient in Reading on the National Assessment of Education Progress, or NAEP in 2024, and a mere 22% of 12th graders showed proficiency in Mathematics. Significant discrepancies between proficiency on New Jersey state tests and NAEP represent an *honesty gap*, and there is significant work to be done to provide support to students who, without help, will lack the skills to thrive after high school.

JerseyCAN supports the pursuit of policies that shifts the focus from moving the bar of student proficiency and instead, mobilizes academic resources so that students are well-positioned for the long-term goal of postsecondary success.

> New Jersey must finally balance its accolades in education with a reckoning of the patterns in state and national student data that reveal academic stagnation, deep disparities across demographic groups and a failure to embrace and implement curricular and pedagogical frames that are fast-tracking improvement in other states across the country. The state must acknowledge, and act upon, the fact that our work in literacy is not yet done; that tweaks in our mathematics standards coupled with screener tools and substantive professional learning for educators must occur; that high-impact tutoring is an indispensable part of any plan to support students' success and that our pathways to postsecondary success must democratize college in a financially feasible way while ensuring that the full swath of earning opportunities, inclusive of non-college options are optimized.

Implement current literacy laws with fidelity and pass new, complementary literacy legislation.

- Implement new literacy laws with fidelity, including ensuring that the NJDOE will name and require - with a thoughtful waiver process in place - specific high-quality literacy screeners and literacy curricula that are vetted by the NJDOE and meet the New Jersey Student Learning Standards objectives across all grade bands.
- Pass new literacy bills, as proposed here, that complement recently-passed laws.

Strong literacy and math skills are the bedrock of academic progress and postsecondary success. In the absence of a strong foundation, students experience the "Matthew Effect"—where early struggles compound over time, leaving them further behind as the cumulative construct of knowledge-building becomes more evident. Conversely, when students achieve grade-level proficiency early, the effect works in their favor, enabling them to keep pace and master increasingly rigorous coursework. In 2024, New Jersey took an important step forward with the passage of two key literacy bills, **Senate Bills S2644 and S2647**, which provided a roadmap for building strong foundational literacy statewide. These reforms, which include twice-yearly literacy screeners, obligatory evidence-based interventions for struggling students, and parent notification of student results, represent a good start to ensuring every child can read proficiently by the end of the early grades. With that said, fidelity of implementation is crucial.

There is also a dire need for the New Jersey Department of Education to name specific high-quality literacy screeners and curricula that have been vetted by the Department. This would mark a major positive step toward equity of opportunity in our schools, helping districts to choose curricular selections in a crowded field of uneven curricular options.

We recommend the following:

- Vet and name 3-5 specific high quality literacy screeners and high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) that meet the NJDOE's standard of quality to support student success.
- Pass legislation to promote literacy coaching, with a bill that secures the funding and the training required to hire literacy coaches that will be centrally trained and supported by the New Jersey Department of Education's Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery (LEAR) or an analogous entity.
- Create a strong model for student and family support.

All of these prospective policies are outlined in JerseyCAN's report Where the Rubber Meets the Road. Implementation of existing laws and policies and initiation of new policies will ultimately be the deciding factors to translate recent legislative advances in literacy into student success.

Improve New Jersey's mathematics landscape to include universal screeners and K-12 data science standards.

There is a pressing imperative for mathematics to receive a heightened level of attention from policymakers and power brokers in New Jersey's Legislative and regulatory bodies. New Jersey must take actions that mirror those taken to improve literacy in the Garden State, and go even further from the outset to make several foundational decisions in mathematics that will pay later dividends for student learning. In keeping with the strong policy recommendations for foundational mathematics outlined in the 50CAN report, **Mathways: Every Kid is a Math Kid,** New Jersey should:

- Administer a high-quality numeracy screener to students to provide information to families, and gauge students' foundational mathematical understandings, e.g. identifying numbers, predicting missing numbers in a sequence, demonstrating ability to determine amount in a set on sight (subitizing) etc. Student support would then be planned, in part based on screening results.

- Vet and name high-quality mathematics curriculum for students. Naming of specific high-quality curricula is important because in New Jersey there are approximately 600 active school districts, and students in districts that are struggling to meet all the demands of teaching and learning would stand to benefit from state guidance on high-quality curricula. Notably, in Louisiana where significant improvements in students' mathematics outcomes have been made, teacher-led curriculum vetting and rating is a practice used to assist school districts in making their curricular selections.

- Launch a formal initiative to provide teacher professional development that supports mathematical teaching of discrete math concepts and increases the confidence teachers have in their ability to teach mathematics.

- Act on constructive reviews of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) in Mathematics to improve the Data Literacy and Statistics and Probability strands of the standards. New Jersey's mathematics standards are well-designed, particularly in the elementary grades, however there are opportunities for further improvement in certain mathematical strands. The Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that New Jersey is one of the top 5 paying states for data science with an average salary of $134,140, and the northern region of the state has the highest employment levels for data scientists of any metropolitan area in the country. Labor market indicators make a case for ensuring that the Data Literacy and Statistics and Probability strands of the NJSLS are comprehensive and robust. The Data Literacy standards in the K-5 grade band are appropriately strong, however the middle and high schools standards in Statistics and Probability - the related upper grade strand - could build more strongly upon the skills that students learn starting in Kindergarten. Mathematics standards in the upper grades should call for students' use of authentic technology, e.g. coding programs, Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications, and data visualizations, alluding to the skills that will be necessary for students to function in a future where data literacy, statistics & probability will be increasingly prominent.

Providing universal access to high-impact tutoring, annexed to high-quality Tier I instruction.

- Create structures for universal access to tutoring statewide, for students who require Tier 2 or Tier 3 academic support.

A policy-driven approach to expanding access to tutoring statewide would engage students at the foundational stages of literacy and numeracy development. Strong Tier 1 instruction, i.e. foundational literacy and math instruction will lead to accurate identification of students who stand to benefit most from Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions like tutoring. When tutoring is integrated seamlessly into the fabric of the school experience, student growth accelerates and learning recovery occurs, ensuring that students are poised for long-term success.

Among the most powerful interventions available, high-impact tutoring has a robust evidence base demonstrating its impact on student achievement. Research underscores the positive effects of tutoring when delivered with the appropriate content, frequency, group size, and by trained tutors. A new book by Liz Cohen, The Future of Tutoring published by Harvard Education Press, adds a strong analytical lens to the potential of high-impact tutoring to support student success. New Jersey has already begun to build momentum with the New Jersey Tutoring Corps, which has made promising progress in improving student outcomes, including a six-fold improvement in mathematics proficiency over the course of a summer tutoring program.

Use college-level standardized assessments to gauge academic competency, award college credit, and drive remediation.

- Increase the use of CLEP assessments to award college credit to high schoolers and to support students' academic readiness for postsecondary options.
- Optimize the use of AP to award college credit to high schoolers and gauge student academic readiness for postsecondary options.

Preparing students for a successful future requires a focus on data points that provide clear and reliable measures of their academic readiness. The state's current high school assessment, the **NJGPA**, provides some insight into student competency; nationally-benchmarked assessment data points deepen understanding of a student's academic profile. A functional approach to assessment usage in the upper grades would interpret the assessment information gleaned from tests that students already take for other purposes. For example, 66% of New Jersey's high school students took the **SAT** test in 2024. Test outcomes and general profiles of the test-takers are published annually to help students and families know the threshold of test scores that best correlate with college success.

Even more directly, standardized assessments that actually award college credit with a passing score signal college readiness, with the added bonus of arming students with college credits before they leave high school. **Advanced Placement (AP), and College-Level Examination Program (CLEP)** exams are two such assessment programs. The lesser-known CLEP offers testing for 34 discrete college classes, including the obligatory English and Mathematics courses students must take in their freshman year in college, often called ENG101 and MATH101. There are great benefits to high school students being able to pass a nationally benchmarked test that awards college credits. AP credits are accepted at a significant number of the country's colleges and universities. CLEP is accepted at 2,900 of the country's colleges and universities but it is vastly undersubscribed in New Jersey. Democratizing college is essential to New Jersey's growth and to its accordance of opportunity to all its citizens. These assessments hold great promise for awarding college credits to students who earn them, and can also serve as a warning signal when students fail to show mastery on these tests.

Strengthen the high-school-to-work pipeline by connecting students to industry-valued credentials in New Jersey.

Whether embedded in CTE schools or infused in traditional high school settings, pathways to industry-valued credentials make graduates more employable and deliver an immediate economic benefit to students and their families, yet only **2.2%** of New Jersey's high school students graduate with one of these credentials. This is a lost opportunity for thousands of students. It is incumbent upon our education leaders to identify the industry-valued credentials that are relevant and in-demand, as evidenced by place-based evaluations tied to economic forecasting of New Jersey's growth industries. After such identification occurs, students must be provided with this information and with opportunities to meet credentialing or internship requirements which offer a direct bridge to the workforce after high school. Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs are central to this effort, equipping students with the academic knowledge and technical skills necessary for success in future careers. There are opportunities for credentialing at the high school level, e.g. cybersecurity, that can be supported in various high school settings.

A promising opportunity for industry-valued credentials also resides with the New Jersey Film Academy, created under the Center of Workforce Innovation for Film & Television Production. With major movie studios built or in progress to come to Newark, Monmouth County and elsewhere in the state, high school students can potentially begin to train for roles that strengthen the state's burgeoning film industry. The academy provides pathways for students from diverse backgrounds to earn valuable industry-recognized credentials and degrees, positioning New Jersey as a leading hub for film and television production.