

SUMMING UP:

Providing High-Quality Public Education to All New Jersey Children

New Jersey faces the challenge of how to preserve a public education system that works well for many students while simultaneously extending its benefits to those who still lag behind.

In the highest-performing districts, students earn stellar standardized test scores and gain admission to top universities. The state-funded preschool program is a national model for reducing the achievement gap between low-income children and their more advantaged peers. New Jersey is nationally known for its nearly 50-year effort to improve the education of urban, low-income, African-American, and Latino students.

But deficits persist, in both educational achievement and equity. Despite real improvements in the quality of their schooling, many students in urban and low-income districts continue to fall short of the achievement levels attained in more affluent suburbs. Even within high-performing districts, the achievement of African-American and Latino students lags that of white and Asian students. And, New Jersey's public school system is one of the most segregated in the nation, resulting in large part from public policies that fostered housing discrimination. In addition, the Legislature's failure to evaluate the effectiveness of the state's school finance formula and to allocate the funding mandated by the New Jersey Supreme Court has perpetuated a system that too often fails students and overburdens local taxpayers.

Without prompt action, many more of our children will lose the opportunity to obtain the education promised in New Jersey's Constitution.

Finally, the need to prepare more residents for good jobs demands that New Jersey lower the financial barriers that put higher education out of reach and make stronger efforts to increase two- and four-year college completion rates.

Key Recommendations

Fully fund the school finance formula codified in the School Funding Reform Act of 2008.

- Distribute state aid to districts in accordance with the SFRA formula

Carefully evaluate the SFRA formula and, if necessary, adjust its provisions.

- Conduct an initial assessment in light of knowledge gained in nine years of partial implementation; if necessary, interim changes should be proposed for legislative enactment
- Reconsider SFRA's census-based special education funding model
- Collect the data necessary for a full-scale evaluation of the formula, to be completed after three years of full funding

Expand the successful state-funded preschool program.

- Adjust per-pupil funding rates according to the SFRA to restore full funding for current preschool programs and to ensure adequate funding for expanded programs
- Commit to implementing and fully funding the preschool expansion called for in the SFRA, beginning in school year 2018-19 with full implementation by 2022
- Continue the high-quality program standard and delivery approach that has been essential to New Jersey's preschool success

Prepare residents for good jobs by increasing completion of post-secondary degrees and credentials.

- Invest in New Jersey's two- and four-year colleges so as to expand the number of residents who earn degrees
- Implement and evaluate strategies to improve college completion rates

Advance educational equity and racial and socioeconomic integration for the benefit of all children. Encourage integration by developing magnet schools and inter-district choice programs to draw families voluntarily to more diverse schools.

- Require New Jersey's existing magnet high schools to include metrics for a diverse student body in their admission decisions
- Develop additional magnet schools, as appropriate, that include diversity criteria
- Modify New Jersey's Interdistrict Public School Choice program to include a controlled choice component
- Evaluate the controlled choice program to determine whether it is successful in reducing segregation

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