

New Jersey's Vision *for* Education Reform

A Note From Our CEO

Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has dramatically eroded—nationally slipping from a +26 point lead over Republicans to now trailing by -3 points. The perception among voters is clear: Democrats have drifted from classroom outcomes and become entangled in ideological battles and special-interest politics. This trend intensified during the pandemic when prolonged school closures damaged trust, leading voters—including many in New Jersey—to question our commitment to delivering real academic results for their children.

New Jersey, traditionally viewed as having a strong public education system, nevertheless faces significant challenges, especially when it comes to equitable outcomes. While top-performing students excel, those in the bottom quartile are increasingly falling behind, widening achievement gaps that threaten our collective future. The reality is stark: despite substantial funding, accountability for results is insufficient. Meanwhile, many Republican-led states are making notable strides in student achievement by emphasizing accountability, innovation, and parental choice. For Democratic gubernatorial candidates, education offers a powerful opportunity to redefine the party's vision and distinguish themselves from current leadership.

To win voter trust again, Democratic candidates in New Jersey must boldly embrace a new education agenda,—one centered unequivocally on results. This means prioritizing innovation by supporting new school models and technologies, insisting on accountability tied directly to student outcomes, and empowering families through meaningful school choice. This policy shift represents not only a political imperative but a moral one: It is our opportunity to show voters we are ready to lead with courage and clarity, setting ourselves apart as agents of transformative change dedicated to improving outcomes for every child.



Key Communication Strategies for New Jersey Democratic Primary Electorate:

1. **Connect Families' Aspirations for a Better Future to Better Schools:** Although an overwhelming number of New Jersey Democratic primary voters (76%) believe young people today will be worse off financially than previous generations, they view improvements to public education as key to setting their children up for economic success and improving their future.
 - o **Data Insights:** Education is directly tied to the economy in voters' minds. When asked to prioritize issues for elected leaders to focus on in order to improve economic outcomes for young people, voters rated “improving public schools” second overall (25%), only behind “reducing inflation and costs” (48%).
 - o **Do:** Talk about education as the bridge to a brighter future for every child and every family in New Jersey. Position your vision as one that isn't about managing decline or narrowing focus—but about growing potential, expanding horizons, and delivering more opportunity for young people.
2. **Focus on Bringing Education Back to Basics:** Over two-thirds of NJ primary voters believe the two most important priorities in K-12 education right now are providing instruction in core subjects such as math and literacy (40%) and preparing high school graduates for a career (28%).
 - o **Do:** Emphasize the need to strengthen core education in our schools with a focus on ensuring students are reading and doing math at grade level by the end of 3rd grade. It is widely understood that kids “learn to read” until third grade; and, they “read to learn” thereafter. Connect these policies directly to improving economic opportunity for New Jersey's students.
3. **Offer Clear Policies with a Focus on Results:** Democrats, who once held a double-digit lead on trust in education, are now trailing Republicans nationally on this key issue. While voters still believe Democrats share their values on education, they increasingly do not trust us to deliver results. One way to overcome that deficit is through communications to parents, including “honestly communicate school quality ratings on academic performance to parents” (86% support).
 - o **Do:** Define specific, outcomes-focused goals that reflect the state's potential—such investments in early literacy (90% support), ensure students are doing Algebra by 8th grade (93% support), expansion of dual enrollment programs (94%), and help students with career pathways through apprenticeships (94%). Build trust by offering specific policies that will achieve those goals.

Our Three Pillars:

1. Choice:

Champion a future where every family has access to excellent schools—traditional, charter, magnet, or career-focused—and the ability to choose what's best for their child.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to education. Communicate that families know what is best for their child and should be empowered to find the school that best meets their needs.

2. Accountability:

Reclaim accountability as a value that reflects New Jersey's belief in high standards, fairness, and transparency.

Stress the importance of data-driven school improvement and public reporting that gives parents, educators, and policymakers the information needed to drive change and celebrate success.

3. Innovation:

Position New Jersey as a national leader in embracing innovation—from science-backed literacy instruction and accelerated math access to new pathways for career and college readiness.

Frame innovation - including the use of AI - as the key to unlocking more opportunities for students, more tools for teachers, and more ways for schools to succeed.

The Challenge

Now is a pivotal moment for New Jersey to decide how the state will prepare young people for success in education and the workforce. New Jersey invests more in education than most other states, ranking 3rd nationally in per-pupil spending at \$25,099, and leads the nation in 4th and 8th grade math and reading performance.

However, student performance is slipping:

- **New Jersey students are more than half a grade level behind pre-pandemic levels and recovering slower than other states.** New Jersey ranks 43rd in the nation for math recovery and 24th in reading recovery.
- **New Jersey students are graduating without the skills they need to meet the demands of today's workforce.** There are 58,000 jobs that require education beyond high school but less than a bachelor's degree open annually in New Jersey, but only 1 in 10 students enrolled in CTE programs are graduating with industry-valued credentials that would prepare them for those jobs.

79% of NJ Democratic Primary voters say they think young people today will be financially worse off than previous generations.

With federal investments and oversight in education uncertain, strong state leadership is more critical than ever. Without bold leadership and decisive action, New Jersey not only risks losing its status as a national educational leader but also the development of a skilled workforce critical to driving economic prosperity.

The Opportunity

A new governor will have the opportunity to set and execute a vision that drives not just academic recovery but long-term excellence for all students. Under strong leadership, every student in the Garden State will:

- Have access to a high-quality school that meets their educational needs, and every family will have access to the resources they need to choose the educational experience best suited for their child.
- Attend a school that receives fair funding, regardless of school type, and that uses funding to accelerate the state's academic priorities.
- Learn from a highly qualified and well-prepared teacher.
- Demonstrate proficiency in grade-level standards, regardless of socioeconomic status, with students furthest behind experiencing accelerated growth.
- Graduate prepared for a high-wage, high-demand career in New Jersey with relevant skills, credentials, and/or academic credits.

Through reforms focused on holding schools accountable for academic and postsecondary success, high-quality public school choices for all families, and innovative solutions for all teachers, New Jersey can build a world-class educational system that cements the Garden State's position not just as a higher performer but as a national model and leader.

Accountability

New Jersey's next governor must ensure that the public school system achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically disadvantaged groups.

The current system is falling short: Despite a 44% increase in per-pupil spending since 2013, New Jersey's state and national test scores have declined, both before and after the pandemic, even after it abandoned the more rigorous PARCC assessment for a shorter accountability test. **Furthermore, New Jersey is letting down the state's poorest students and students of color.** When adjusted to compare with students in other states with similar demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, New Jersey ranks 16th in 4th grade reading, trailing behind New York (10th) and Maryland (14th).

The Next Governor Should:

1. **Ensure every student has access to evidence-based materials and instruction that prepares them for the next grade and beyond.**
2. **Support the lowest-performing students to make up lost ground.**
3. **Use school quality ratings to transparently communicate school performance and target support to low-performing schools.**
4. **Modernize the use of local, state, and federal funding to support and accelerate student learning.**

New Jersey is lagging behind other states in committing to evidence-based literacy and math initiatives to ensure students master grade-level content each year. States that have demonstrated a commitment to high-quality instruction and the Science of Reading, such as Mississippi and Louisiana, have seen significant growth in reading outcomes—ranking 1st and 2nd in the increase of fourth-grade reading proficiency rates over the past decade. New Jersey is ranked 19th.

1. The next governor can take the following actions to ensure every student has access to evidence-based instruction that prepares them for the next grade and beyond:

1. **Promote evidence-based instruction in literacy and math.** New Jersey created a literacy advisory committee via legislation in 2024 but has not taken similar steps for numeracy. Districts are not required to offer evidence-based instruction or professional training that helps teachers implement these materials. *New Jersey should create a math advisory committee and require or incentivize the use of evidence-based materials and professional learning in all districts, similar to efforts in Maryland to adopt and train educators in evidence-based materials.*
2. **Increase access to accelerated math opportunities.** STEM jobs in New Jersey are projected to grow nearly twice as fast as other jobs by 2027, and completing Algebra I is key to accessing STEM college courses and career opportunities. However, middle schools serving predominantly students of color and/or economically disadvantaged students offer Algebra I at a much lower rate than other schools – 53% compared to 93%, respectively. *New Jersey should mandate access to Algebra I for every eligible 8th grade student, similar to Virginia's recent accelerated math enrollment legislation.*
3. **Provide full-day kindergarten for every student.** While 39 states require districts to provide either full or half day kindergarten for all students, *New Jersey does not require any kindergarten—despite evidence that full-day kindergarten improves student outcomes. New Jersey should require and fund full-day kindergarten statewide.*

Ensuring students are doing math and reading at grade level was ranked as the most important priority for K-12 public schools by a plurality of voters (40%).

While New Jersey's highest performers are making gains, the state's lowest-performing students are continuing to fall further behind their peers. Students in the bottom 10th percentile dropped 23 points lower in national assessments of fourth-grade reading over the past decade, while the top 90th percentile increased 4 points. New Jersey must take action to support its most struggling students to catch up to their peers.

2. The next governor can take the following actions to support the lowest-performing students to make up lost ground:

1. **Commit to tutoring to accelerate learning.** High-dosage tutoring is one of the strongest research-backed interventions to accelerate student learning: Students can learn up to 2.5 years of math in one academic year. States on both sides of the aisle have turned to high-dosage tutoring to give students the academic support they need, in addition to increased engagement and attendance, with broad bipartisan support for these efforts. In 2023, the New Jersey Department of Education awarded \$41 million to districts to support high-dosage tutoring, and the 2025 state budget proposes an additional \$7.5 million to support high-dosage tutoring. New Jersey should continue to build on this investment by creating a state list of vetted tutoring vendors and continuing to support in-school tutoring in the state budget. Additionally, states like Virginia and Indiana are providing families with individual tutoring stipends to choose tutoring services for their students. If New Jersey were to do this, they should ensure that it targets students that need it most.

Parents, educators, and policymakers deserve clear and actionable information on whether schools exceed, meet, or fall short of state expectations. Nearly 9 out of 10 parents believe their child is at grade level in reading (88%) and math (89%), yet standardized tests show that far fewer students are on track. Transparent school quality ratings are essential for keeping families informed and enabling the state to target support to low-performing schools.

3. The next governor can take the following actions to use school quality ratings to transparently communicate school performance and target support to low-performing schools:

1. **Ensure state support targets low-performing schools.** New Jersey identifies only the lowest performing 5% of schools for school improvement support and has little to show in terms of progress among these schools. *New Jersey should design and launch a process for identifying districts that are improving outcomes for high-need students and districts that aren't—including celebrating the top schools for improving outcomes with struggling student groups; create an oversight system to hold the lowest performing schools accountable; review each identified district's strategic plan and budget; and clearly and transparently communicate school performance, quality, and identification through overall school and district ratings.*

New Jersey's school funding formula fails to provide districts with financial stability to budget and plan for the next school year and beyond. The School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), passed in 2008, was fully funded for the first time in sixteen years in New Jersey's FY25 state budget. Despite this historic investment, district and school budgeting for school funding is burdensome and unpredictable.

4. The next governor can take the following actions to modernize the use of local, state, and federal funding to support and accelerate student learning:

1. **Provide fair funding that is reflective of student needs to all schools, regardless of zip code.** The NJDOE recently worked to mitigate unpredictable funding by capping year-to-year decreases to no more than 3% of the prior year's allocation. *New Jersey should ensure long-term sustainability by evaluating and revising the SFRA's methodology for calculating and allocating district funds to empower districts to plan more strategically to address student learning.*
2. **Consolidate districts to reduce costs.** New Jersey has over 600 independently operating school districts. Despite this hyper regionalized structure raising administrative costs, previous efforts to consolidate districts have faced political opposition. Currently, the School Regionalization Efficiency Program (SREP) Grant helps school districts explore the feasibility of regionalization and consolidation, but few districts have taken advantage of this opportunity. *Although this solution is likely not politically viable, New Jersey should consider mandating consolidation across districts where feasible to reduce costs and administrative burden.*
3. **Maximize federal and state funding opportunities.** Districts in New Jersey are asked to provide over 20 applications and budgets for federal and state funding. *New Jersey should reduce burdensome red tape by establishing a streamlined, unified process for districts to apply for state and federal funds, similar to Arkansas and Louisiana.*

Public School Choice

New Jersey’s next governor must ensure that all families have access to high-quality public education options so that every student can attend a school that meets his or her academic and social-emotional needs.

The current system lacks substantial high-quality options. New Jersey’s interdistrict choice program enables approved choice districts to enroll K–12th grade students who do not reside within their districts without cost to their parents, but only 20% of all school districts participate. As a result, most New Jersey students are limited to attending their zoned public school. **Additionally, hardly any students have access to high-quality charter schools.** New Jersey’s 85 charter schools serve approximately 4% of New Jersey students and 29,000 students are on charter school waitlists. Urban areas have higher concentrations of charter schools and much higher charter enrollment rates than other parts of the state.

The Next Governor Should:

1. Expand public school options by increasing the amount of high-quality charter seats in the state.
2. Provide families with information and access to high-quality public school choices, including charter schools, regardless of where they live.

New Jersey charters are outperforming traditional public schools in the districts they serve, but current charter school laws do not support the growth of high-quality charters. A rigorous evaluation from Stanford shows 85% of NJ charters perform as well as or better than their compared peer schools. Notably, economically disadvantaged students are performing 13 points higher in ELA and 7 points higher in math than their district counterparts. However, New Jersey ranks 35th nationally in state laws that foster a landscape of high-quality charter public schools that positively impact students, according to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools.

1. The next governor can take the following actions to expand public school options by increasing the number of high-quality charter seats in the state:

1. **Allow for high-quality charter school expansion and growth.** The NJDOE serves as the sole authorizer and oversees all public charter schools in the state, leaving school choice options to the whim of one entity. Charter schools can be renewed for not more than a five-year term and are evaluated annually on New Jersey’s charter performance framework evaluating academics, finances, and organization. *As recommended by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, New Jersey should delegate authority to additional authorizers (e.g., higher education institutions, non-profits, Local Education Agencies)—not just the Commissioner of Education—and hold them accountable to authorize new charter schools and/or promote high-quality charters by providing funding incentives to increase the number of high-quality charters.*
2. **Improve charter facilities.** Charter schools spend on average \$1,500 per year per student on school facilities but receive zero dollars from the state, receiving on average \$4,600 less per student per year overall when compared to traditional district schools. Last year, New Jersey passed legislation granting public charter schools and renaissance schools access to low-interest financing through the Public Charter and Renaissance School Facilities Loan Program. *New Jersey should build on the existing loan program and increase funding for charter school facilities in the SFRA to ensure all schools are able to maintain operations with safe, modern facilities.*

Families across New Jersey’s 600 school districts are left with few options for their children: **Only one out of five public school districts allow students to enroll outside their home district, and 29,000 students in the state are stuck on charter school waitlists.**

2. The next governor can take the following actions to provide families with information and access to high-quality public school choices, including charter schools, regardless of where they live:

1. **Provide more flexibility for families outside of their district.** Only 20% of school districts currently participate in New Jersey’s interdistrict school choice. New Jersey should increase flexibility for families by providing financial

1. incentives for districts that opt into interdistrict choice and/or subsidizing transportation costs for participating students.
2. Hold charter schools publicly accountable for strong student performance. Charter schools are evaluated annually on New Jersey's charter performance framework, assessing academics, finances, and organization. However, information regarding charter school quality is not readily available to the public. New Jersey should make clear, easy-to-understand summaries of charter school results available to empower families, including overall ratings and between-school comparisons. DC's public information policy requires charters to post information on their individual websites, as well as to the public charter database.

Innovation

New Jersey's next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for the workforce and for teachers to thrive in their profession.

New Jersey must improve how schools prepare all students to enter into the workforce. The state's attainment rate – the percentage of people holding graduate or professional degrees, bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, certificates, and/or industry-recognized certifications – is 59.3%, higher than surrounding states, slightly above Pennsylvania (56.4%) and Delaware (51.5%), and Maryland (59.2%). However, attainment varies widely by county (25.0% - 67.4%) and race (38.5% - 87.7%), highlighting gaps in support for all students.

Additionally, New Jersey faces looming teacher shortages. With an average teacher salary of \$81,102—the seventh highest in the nation—the state is well-positioned to attract and retain top talent. However, New Jersey continues to face teacher shortages; the number of new provisional teacher certifications has declined substantially relative to the number of permanent exits from the teaching profession. In 2013, there were three provisional certifications per permanent exit and in 2022 the ratio was one-to-one.

The Next Governor Should:

1. Prepare every student for a high-wage, high-demand career, regardless of what path they pursue beyond high school graduation.
2. Recruit, retain, and support effective educators.

For New Jersey students to thrive in today's economy, schools must innovate how they equip students with the skills and training needed to secure high-wage, in-demand jobs. While New Jersey's 91% high school graduation rate exceeds the national average, not all students graduate equipped for their next step. Only 1 in 10 students complete two or more courses in approved CTE programs, and less than 1 in 30 students participate in work-based learning experiences. For students planning to pursue higher education, New Jersey ranks 44th in the nation for dual enrollment participation.

1. The next governor can take the following actions to prepare every student for a high-wage, high-demand career, regardless of what path they pursue beyond high school graduation:

1. **Expand access to high-quality postsecondary credits.** High school students who are dually enrolled are more likely to earn higher grades in high school, graduate from high school, attend a postsecondary university, and earn a postsecondary degree. If a student is able to complete a college degree in seven semesters instead of a traditional eight, students can expect to save up to \$9,000. *New Jersey should increase access to dual enrollment by ensuring all schools can offer dual enrollment courses at no cost to students and families and/or guarantee that all credits earned in dual enrollment coursework transfer to every public institution of higher education or private one that provides dual enrollment courses, similar to efforts in California and Minnesota.*
2. **Prepare students to meet the demands of today's workforce with industry-sought credentials.** Only 1 in 10 students taking Career and Technical Education courses graduate with an industry-valued credential for an in-demand job. *New Jersey should review the credentials offered in partnership with industry/business experts for quality and/or set benchmarks for industry-sought credential attainment as part of high school performance metrics, similar to Colorado's Career Development Incentive Program that provides financial incentives for school districts and charter schools that encourage high school students to complete high-demand industry credentials.*
3. **Hold schools accountable for preparing students for life beyond graduation.** NJ is one of nine states that does not include a College and Career Readiness measure in its federal reporting of school quality under ESSA. *New Jersey should incentivize schools to provide additional preparatory experiences and credentials to students by including this measure in school quality ratings and holding schools accountable for outcomes.*

Expanding dual enrollment programs was the strongest performing policy proposal we tested with 76% of voters overall strongly in support.

4. Increase career advising. New Jersey should ensure all students have the support they need to take advantage of these programs *by requiring career exploration courses in middle school (similar to [Pennsylvania's middle school career-exploration requirements](#)), developing career-related graduation pathways or diploma seals, and requiring that every high school student complete an annual individualized student career plan, similar to [Michigan's Educational Development Plans](#) beginning in 7th grade.*

To maintain the best schools in the nation, New Jersey must recruit, retain, and support effective educators by making New Jersey the most desirable place to teach in the country. New Jersey's average teacher salary is the [seventh highest](#) in the nation at \$81,102. However, New Jersey's teacher shortage is growing and threatens to disproportionately affect [non-white students](#).

2. The next governor can take the following actions to recruit, retain, and support effective educators:

- 1. Train every teacher, both new and current, in literacy instruction best practices.** New Jersey is one of 18 states rated by the [National Council on Teacher Quality](#) (NCTQ) as "weak" in preparing teachers to effectively meet the needs of their students. *New Jersey should effectively prepare teachers by revising teacher preparation program standards to align with the Science of Reading and improving data access and transparency to monitor the quality of educator preparation programs. States such as [Rhode Island](#) and [Colorado](#), ranked as "strong" by NCTQ, provide models for educator preparation and training.*
- 2. Recruit and retain a diverse teacher workforce.** Through traditional certification pathways, the percentage of male and Black students decrease at each milestone in the teacher workforce pipeline (completing an education degree, getting a teacher certification, and becoming a teacher). *New Jersey should grow a diverse teacher workforce by investing in [nontraditional teacher pipelines](#) and paying aspiring teachers a wage or stipend while they are completing clinical practice, similar to efforts to grow a diverse education workforce in [Massachusetts](#).*

Moving Forward

Through bold reforms for New Jersey students, from how students enter K-12 schools to what they leave with, the **next governor has the opportunity to solidify New Jersey's place as the top education system in the nation.**

By holding schools accountable, expanding quality choices for families, and pursuing innovative, evidence-backed solutions for postsecondary success and the educator workforce, the next governor can ensure that all of New Jersey's students, families, teachers, schools, and communities thrive for generations to come.