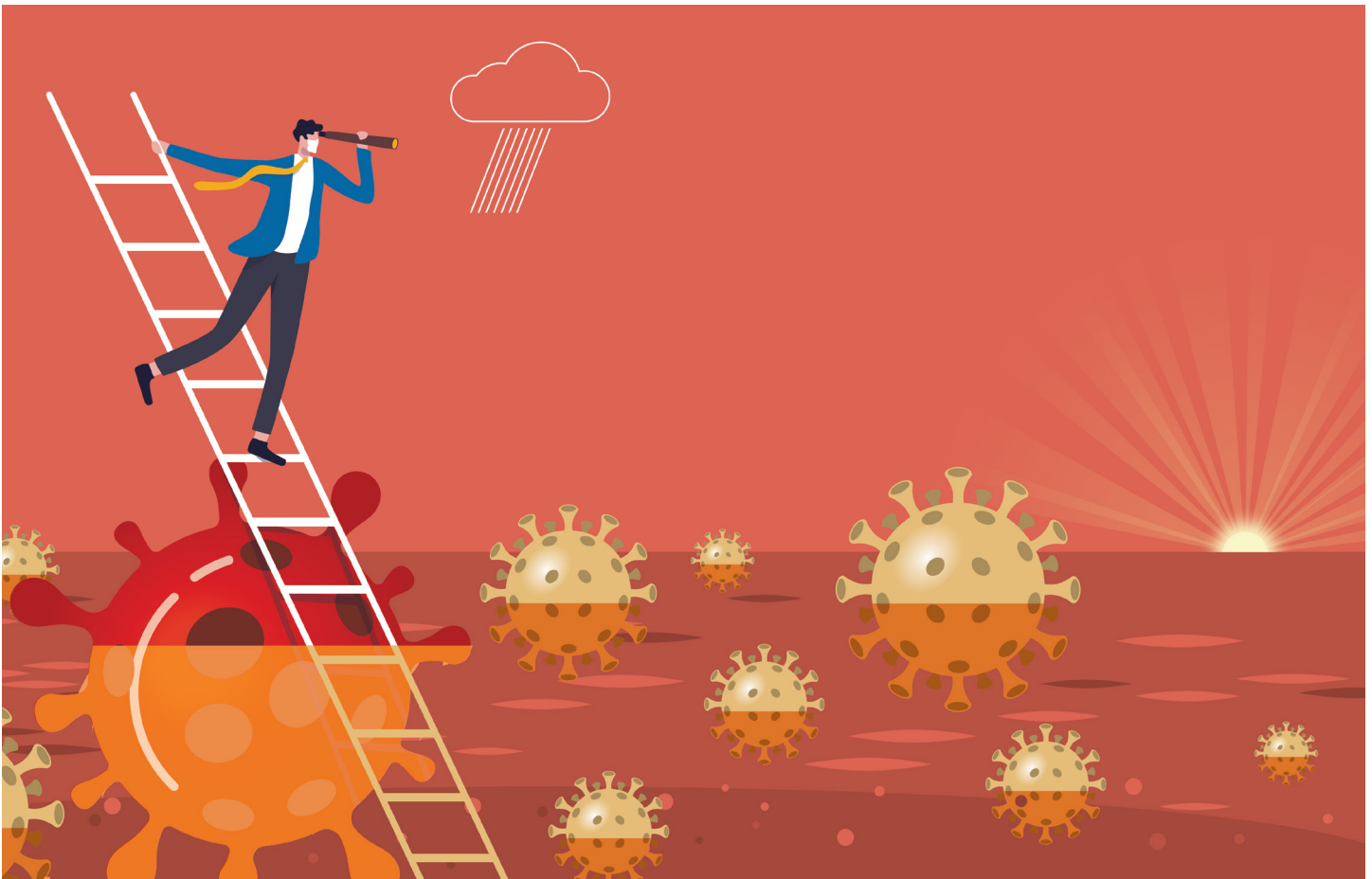




New Jersey School Boards Association

413 West State Street • Trenton, NJ 08618 • Telephone: 609.695.7600 • Toll-Free: 888.88NJSBA • Fax: 609.695.0413

Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health



**The Fourth in a Series of NJSBA Special Reports on
How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State**

January 27, 2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	1	HOW DISTRICTS ARE COPING: INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES	11
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2	• School Nurse Sees Increase in Anxiety, Depression; Somerville Adds ‘Virtual Calming Corner’ to School Website.	11
• Findings and Recommendations	3	• Listening to What Students Think About and Care About, a Social Worker Learns How to Help a Student Get Through the Day	12
• Updates on Recommendations and Findings from Previous NJSBA Reports on Education During the Pandemic	6	• Making the Best of It: North Warren Regional Sees Benefits in Students’ Flexible Schedules	13
IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM	7	• Moorestown: Addressing Student Isolation; How One District Helped Students Connect.	14
• Lingering Impact of Loneliness and Isolation.	8	• At West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional, Students Endure Isolation While a Robust Counseling Program Saves Lives	15
• Recent Increases in Virus Cases Convince Many Schools to Continue Offering Only Remote Instruction	8	• Hamilton Township CARES: ‘Social Distancing Does Not Mean Living in Isolation’	16
• Results of NJSBA Survey on Students’ Mental Health	9	• In Howell, Joseph Isola Advocates for the Postponement of Spring Achievement Tests as Students, Staff Cope with Pandemic	17
		• With Mental Health Services, Ramsey Superintendent Dr. Matthew Murphy Calms Fears and Builds Hope for a Pandemic-Free Future	19
		CONCLUSION	21
		• Districts Need to Maintain Vigilance, Help Students and Staff Get the Services They Need.	21
		APPENDIX	23

Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health

**The Fourth in a Series of NJSBA Special Reports
on How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education
in the Garden State**

January 27, 2021

www.njsba.org/StudentMentalHealth

The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of the state's local boards of education and includes the majority of New Jersey's charter schools as associate members. NJSBA provides training, advocacy and support to advance public education and promote the achievement of all students through effective governance.

Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health
New Jersey School Boards Association

Michael R. McClure, President
Lawrence S. Feinsod, Ed.D., Executive Director
Alan Guenther, Lead Researcher/Writer
Janet Bamford, Chief Public Affairs Officer
Adriana DiGiacomantonio, Design

© New Jersey School Boards Association 413 West State Street, Trenton, New Jersey 08618

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from NJSBA

January 27, 2021

Dear Member of the New Jersey Education Community,

Today, the New Jersey School Boards Association releases “Eye on the Future as Districts Monitor Student Mental Health,” the Association’s fourth special report since the pandemic began in March 2020.

The report shows that the long hours that boards of education spent planning for the 2020-2021 school year, and the difficult decisions they have made in the past several months, have, for the most part, successfully allowed their students to continue their education and safely weather the threat of the coronavirus.

Many experts feared that students in New Jersey and the nation were ill-prepared to withstand another serious mental health challenge. But that has not occurred, according to an NJSBA survey released with today’s report, supported by other national surveys and data reaching similar conclusions.

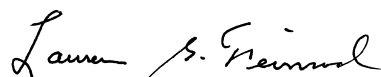
With expert guidance from NJSBA’s educator-in-residence Vincent DeLucia, and substantial input from the NJSBA’s Health and Wellness Committee, today’s report gives examples of useful strategies and resources many districts are employing to address students’ feelings of isolation as they care for the social-emotional needs of their students.

New Jersey’s school leaders and educators continue to do an exemplary job by guiding their school districts through this historically difficult time. Since March, NJSBA has been committed to helping local boards of education meet the challenges of the pandemic through training, advocacy, direct services and research. The Association has generated a series of special reports, including:

- [Searching for a ‘New Normal’ in New Jersey’s Public Schools: How the Coronavirus Is Changing Education in the Garden State](#) (May 20, 2020) addressed the safe reopening of schools.
- [Choosing the Best ‘Road Back’ for Our Children](#) (August 31, 2020) provides an advocacy agenda for public education during the pandemic, including state and federal funding, assistance in securing personal protective equipment and technology, financial flexibility, and critical changes in law and regulation.
- [Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide](#) (October 23, 2020) looks at the challenges facing school districts in delivering instruction remotely to all students during the pandemic and beyond.

We believe that the information contained in our series of special reports will prove valuable to our members and help inform public policy during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the future.

Sincerely,



Dr. Lawrence S. Feinsod
Executive Director, NJSBA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the past several months, the New Jersey School Boards Association has studied the psychological impact that living with the unrelenting threat of the coronavirus has had on school-age children.

Before the pandemic, the nation's children were already in the midst of a mental health emergency, according to Mental Health America and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Nationally — and in New Jersey — suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 15 and 24, resulting in approximately 4,600 lives lost each year, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In New Jersey, as the NJSBA showed in its October 2019 report, [Building a Foundation for Hope](#), many New Jersey youth were already in serious crisis, leaving them ill-equipped to experience the additional trauma of living during a time when a life-threatening virus was spreading through the population.

Fifty percent of students with diagnosable mental health illnesses were going untreated, according to NAMI. Suicides and incidents of self-harm were at disturbingly high levels, according to state data.

Through Jan. 27, 2021, the virus had already killed 425,208 Americans, according to the *New York Times*, and 21,105 New Jerseyans. Educators and mental health experts worried that so much loss — and the changes to daily life that the pandemic has brought about — would trigger a chain reaction in schools and communities, creating a wave of more serious incidents that would overwhelm the ability of school districts to provide mental health services to students and staff.

Today, in the NJSBA's fourth report on the impact of the pandemic on education in the Garden State, a compilation of national and state data, anecdotal information from superintendents, and an NJSBA survey with more than 260 responses all show that, for the most part, the worst has not occurred.

The NJSBA conducted a survey of school districts, reviewed more than 50 published newspaper articles and studies, and interviewed two dozen board of education members, superintendents and staff. Although there are notable and concerning exceptions, the general feeling has been that plans laid during the summer to monitor student mental health and conduct regular wellness checks have been successful.

Alert teachers and dedicated staff have effectively intervened to prevent an onslaught of self-harm incidents or suicides from occurring, superintendents told the NJSBA in interviews which are detailed later in this report.

These incidents have ranged from the quietly heartbreaking to the dramatic. In one case, a parent took a picture of her young son, hiding beneath a blanket, afraid to face the glare of the computer screen and the scrutiny of his class. The parent sent the picture to a superintendent who asked a counselor to intervene. A few kind words, and an extended chat about the Sonic the Hedgehog video game changed the child's frame of mind and convinced him to "power up" his mood.

Some children are not so easily rescued. During a routine "check in" telephone

call, a teacher discovered that a middle school-age girl was showing disturbing signs of suicidal ideation. While the teacher was on the phone with the student, a counselor was immediately engaged, and a call was placed to the student's parents. Mental health services were promptly arranged for the student in a district which employs 34 counselors to provide services to 10,000 students in 10 buildings.

In a [September article](#) on youth suicide trends, *USA Today* reported that "(m)any children...are struggling to imagine their futures." A Nov. 16 NJSBA survey of board members, superintendents and staff showed that 47.73% of the respondents said, "We do not see evidence of more students in crisis, but in general students are more anxious and depressed."

With national infectious disease experts such as Dr. Anthony Fauci saying that the administration of available vaccines has been disappointingly slow, it is not clear how long schools will continue to be actively battling the spread of the virus. Fauci [said on Dec. 22](#) that he doesn't expect life to return to normal until October or November of 2021. Others have said that unless the pace of vaccinations picks up, the wait for the resumption of normal life could be even longer.

In the pages ahead, the NJSBA will more fully report the results of its recent survey on how isolation and the fear of the pandemic has affected students and staff. Superintendents, mental health practitioners, and board members will provide insights into how their districts have managed the crisis. It is our hope that education leaders will discover information and strategies that may, if appropriate, be employed in their own districts.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **New data on the mental health of New Jersey schoolchildren.** Although student suicides and incidents of self-harm remain at disturbingly high levels, the coronavirus pandemic has apparently not created a new wave of incidents. The 264 board of education members, superintendents and business administrators responding to an NJSBA survey that collected data from Nov. 16, 2020, through Jan. 8, 2021, were asked to select which statement most accurately reflected conditions in their district.
 - a) 47.73% said, "We do not see evidence of more students in crisis, but in general students are more anxious and depressed."
 - b) 32.58% said, "In general, students are coping well. Our district has not seen increased evidence of serious crises."
 - c) 12.12% said, "Our district has seen evidence of more serious crises, such as incidents of self-harm, threats of self-harm, or hospitalizations."
 - d) 7.58% selected "other."

More detailed survey data, including how their parents' job loss is affecting the mental health of students, is published on page 10 of this report.

2. **When schools reopen in fall 2021, restrictions may still be in place.** National experts caution that while new vaccines offer hope, it is unclear when enough people will be vaccinated to make a return to normal possible. Schools should be prepared to start the next school year with social

distancing and mask requirement still in place.

3. **More state and federal aid is needed.** A [COVID relief package](#) was signed on Dec. 27 that would provide billions to public education. The bill represents a welcome first step, but the NJSBA remains convinced that more assistance will be necessary to help districts face, and effectively address, the enormous and ongoing challenges caused by the pandemic. As proposed, President Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus aid package would provide badly needed funds to N.J. governments and schools.
4. **Postpone high-stakes federally required assessments.** In conjunction with the major education groups in the state, the governor and the acting education commissioner should consider asking President Joe Biden and his education secretary-designee, Dr. Miguel Cardona, to postpone national achievement tests which can be stressful for students. With a large percentage of districts either entirely, or significantly, educating students through remote learning, administering tests would also create a significant drain on resources better spent on providing mental health services for students and maintaining a high-quality education program.
5. **Approve a five-bill package to assist students with their mental health needs.** This legislative package, spearheaded by Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald, reflects many of the recommendations in NJSBA's October 2019 report, *Building a Foundation for Hope*. That research project emphasized the importance of school-based programs, collaboration with higher education and community organizations, parental involvement, and professional development to build educators' awareness of their role in addressing student mental health and social-emotional learning. The five-bill package, which *School Board Notes* [reported on Dec. 15](#) was approved by the Assembly Education Committee, includes the following measures:
 - [A-4433](#): Creates a grant program to encourage school districts to partner with institutions of higher education to train school-based mental health services providers.
 - [A-4434](#): Establishes a Student Wellness Grant Program in the N.J. Department of Education.
 - [A-4435](#): Requires the Department of Children and Families to give priority to certain school districts with student mental health counseling centers in awarding grants under School-Based Youth Services Program.
 - [A-4436](#): Establishes a "Student Mental Health Task Force" to identify and study resources available to schools and parents to address student mental health needs. The bill requires that local boards of education have representation on the task force.
 - [A-4437](#): This bill would permit a student assistance coordinator, school counselor, or other mental health professional working in a school district to refer a student to a private individual licensed to provide professional counseling.

The NJSBA commends Assembly Majority Leader Greenwald for his

leadership on this critical issue and looks forward to working with the Legislature to win final passage.

6. **Strengthen and preserve the School Based Youth Service Programs.** The current state budget boosts funding for the Department of Children and Families' Office of School Linked Services, which administers the School-Based Youth Services Program (SBYSP), to a total of \$15 million. The SBYSP provides services such as mental health counseling, employment counseling, substance abuse prevention, suicide prevention, pregnancy prevention and sexual assault prevention. NJSBA [advocated](#) strongly for the restoration of funding for this critical program in which nearly 100 schools currently participate. On Sept. 10, Gov. Phil Murphy announced his support for funding the program, which would have been reduced to less than \$5 million under his original proposal.
7. **Develop a long-term recovery plan.** As the pandemic ebbs, and time and resources permit, the New Jersey Department of Education, in conjunction with the state's major education groups, and a diverse array of district representatives from around the state, should consider developing short- and long-term plans to help students recover from any delay in learning progression caused by the disruptive events of the past year. The governor took an important first step on Jan. 11 when he signed [Executive Order No. 214](#), suspending the state's graduation exam requirements for the 2020-2021 school year, allowing districts to focus resources on addressing the pandemic.
8. **Resources and recommendations for social-emotional learning and suicide prevention.** For districts seeking guidance on how to build long-term relationships with the community to help monitor and support the mental health of children, see the more than 70 recommendations in the October 2019 NJSBA report, "[Building a Foundation for Hope](#)." The report includes information on how to create an inclusive Community Response Team that includes government, police, experts in trauma care, and the faith-based community. The report also provides information on how to develop a funded, comprehensive district-wide action plan that would ensure long-term success of a social-emotional learning (SEL) program.

Updates on Recommendations and Findings from Previous NJSBA Reports on Education During the Pandemic

Since this is the fourth NJSBA special report on the impact of the pandemic in the last nine months, previous recommendations from earlier remain relevant to the immediate future. The following findings and recommendations from the May 20 report, [Searching for a New Normal in New Jersey's Public Schools](#), and the Aug. 31 report, "[Choosing the Best Road Back for Our Children](#)," have been updated:

- **NJSAC relief achieved.** In its May 20 and Aug. 31 special reports, the NJSBA recommended, "The New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJSAC), which is the state's monitoring and district self evaluation system, should either be suspended or revised so that districts are not penalized for taking actions necessary to address the pandemic." The [governor signed](#) the NJSAC relief bill, [A-4975/S-3187](#), into law in December. The NJSBA worked closely with the bill's sponsor, education advocacy groups such as the N.J. Association of School Administrators, the NJDOE, and the governor's office. The NJSBA offers its sincere thanks to the bill's primary sponsor, Assemblyman Nicholas Chiaravalloti, for his leadership in spearheading this measure through the Legislature.
- **Progress made on helping districts secure PPE and technology.** In its Aug. 31 report, the NJSBA said, "A statewide mechanism to facilitate school district purchasing of medical supplies and technological devices is critical..." Since then, NJSBA-supported legislation, [A-4461](#), has moved forward in the Legislature. A-4461 would require the state to award one or more contracts to enable for the purchase of pandemic-related goods and services by school districts statewide. In its Jan. 12 edition, [School Board Notes](#) reported that the bill has been approved by the full Senate and now returns to the General Assembly, which passed a previous version of the bill in August, to concur with amendments made in the Senate. From there, the bill will go to the governor.
- **Senate approves allowing districts to carry a 4% surplus.** In November, the state Senate approved [S-2691](#), which would authorize school districts to maintain a surplus at 4% for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Under current law a school district, other than a county vocational school district, may only maintain a surplus of 2%. In addition, the use or transfer of those funds between line items and program categories shall not require the approval of the commissioner of education. NJSBA supports the legislation, which is part of the Association's [pandemic advocacy agenda](#). The bill's Assembly counterpart, [A-4310](#), has received committee approval and is ready for consideration by the full Assembly.

The third report in the series, "[Reopening Schools: Online Learning and the Digital Divide](#)," published Oct. 23, 2020, focused on the digital divide and challenges districts faced in making sure that students had access to a high-quality education no matter where they lived.

Findings and recommendations in the third report included:

- **Provide updates on state efforts to close the digital divide and a transparent status update on internet access.** The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) acknowledged over the summer that, as many as 234,000 schoolchildren lacked internet access and were unable to fully participate fully in remote learning. [On Jan. 14 NJSpotlight reported](#) that the number of students without internet access has been trimmed to about 7,700. The NJSBA commends the efforts of school districts and the NJDOE to provide internet access as rapidly as possible and looks forward to the day when every student is able to access coursework online.
- **Develop a statewide report on the delivery of special education services.** What was the experience of New Jersey's 246,693 special education students during the shutdown? What has happened as many schools have moved to virtual learning? How can we address the delay in learning progression for special education students? The NJSBA applauds the extraordinary efforts of special education service providers operating under the most difficult conditions, but once the pandemic ebbs, this is an area that needs to be studied and addressed.
- **Identify the components of high-quality of online instruction and develop a program to sustain and improve it.** Online instruction—whether it is a 100% virtual program or a hybrid of virtual and in-person teaching—is likely to be with the state's schools for months to come. As the June 8, 2020 Microsoft report, "Education Reimagined: The Future of Learning" points out, "...traditional pedagogy does not transfer flawlessly to digital." Teachers need continuing professional development to effectively teach classes online. As the pandemic subsides, rather than returning to business as usual, how can the NJDOE help districts incorporate digital discoveries into the curriculum and provide resources to assess and improve the quality of online instruction? Through necessity, many districts made great strides in providing online education. How can those innovations be maintained and enhanced? On page 13 in the current report, North Warren Regional High School Board of Education President Bethany Summers describes how her district is thinking about keeping some of the advantageous aspects of online learning once schools return to normal.
- **Districts should consider enrolling in a new program to improve remote instruction.** The new Sustainable Jersey Digital Schools program issued a report in August called the [Remote Digital Learning Roadmap](#). The digital schools program is supported by the NJSBA, the NJDOE, Sustainable Jersey, and other leading educational agencies. Board of education members should become familiar with this new program and, working with their superintendents, gauge how it could help improve their districts' remote learning programs.
- **When the pandemic is under control, assess any delay in student learning progression.** [Senate Bill 3214](#) would require the state commissioner of education to prepare two reports on how the coronavirus has affected student achievement. The NJSBA supports the intent of S-3214, which has not yet been considered by the full Assembly. The required reports would be an important step toward developing a funded strategic plan to help address the instruction that may be needed. The NJSBA also recognizes the strain that the current emergency has placed on staff and resources. Therefore, during committee deliberations on the bill, the Association cautioned against the imposition of any additional responsibilities on staff that would take away from districts' top priority — advancing student learning and achievement while protecting the health and safety of students and staff. NJSBA's position statement on the bill can be found [here](#).



IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

They were living every parent’s worst nightmare.

Frank and Dara Falco sat together on a couch in their Demarest, Bergen County home, clutching a picture of their smiling teenage son, a tuba player, who committed suicide on April 29, about five weeks after the pandemic shuttered schools across New Jersey.

Frank Falco said he knew his son, Jordan, was depressed long before he died, he told NJ.com in a Nov. 29 special report called “[A life interrupted](#)” by reporter Adam Clark.

“What killed him wasn’t the pandemic. It was the depression,” Falco told NJ.com. “But I can tell you without a doubt that it did not help.”

The Falcos embodied the worst-case scenario that experts feared — that the pandemic would exacerbate a pre-existing mental health crisis among young people.

Two years before COVID-19, in 2018, the state reported 94 suicides among those 15 to 24. (2018 is the most recent year for which Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data is available.) Nationally, suicides among people 10 to 24 [increased 56%](#) between 2007 and 2017.

But the coronavirus crisis has worsened the situation for some students.

The *Washington Post* reported on Dec. 16 that the disruption caused by the pandemic has been especially hard on teenage athletes. According to the Post, a survey of high school athletes conducted by the University of Wisconsin last summer found that approximately 68% of the 3,243 teens polled [reported](#) feelings of anxiety and depression at levels that typically require medical intervention.

The lead researcher of the study at Wisconsin, Tim McGuine, [in an interview in August](#) published in mycentraljersey.com, said that “the greatest risk [to student-athletes] is not COVID-19. It’s suicide and drug use.” That study caught the eye of the national organization overseeing high school sports, the National Federation of State High School Associations, which already was dealing with an uptick in reports from state athletic directors about mental health concerns for teen athletes whose seasons were in flux.

To assess the mental health impact on school-age children, the Center for Promise

at America's Promise Alliance conducted a [nationally representative survey](#) in May 2020 of 3,300 young people aged 13-19.

The survey found:

- Since their school buildings closed, young people's levels of concern about the present and future have increased, and indicators of overall health and wellbeing have suffered. For example, 30% of young people say they have been feeling unhappy or depressed more often, and nearly as many say they are much more concerned than usual about having their basic needs met.
- More than one-quarter of students (29%) say they do not feel connected at all to school adults. A similar percentage do not feel connected to classmates or to their school community.

LINGERING IMPACT OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

A study published in the November 2020 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* concluded that the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health may continue long after the pandemic ends.

"Children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends," [according to the study](#). "This may increase as enforced isolation continues. Clinical services should offer preventive support and early intervention where possible and be prepared for an increase in mental health problems.

"Social distancing and school closures are likely to result in increased loneliness in children and adolescents whose usual social contacts are curtailed by the disease containment measures," the study concluded. "...Early indications in the COVID-19 context indicate that more than one-third of adolescents report high levels of loneliness ... (and) there are well-established links between loneliness and mental health."

Quarantining, and social isolation, can result in future mental health problems, the study said, adding that mental health providers should continue to provide services and monitor adolescents for lingering psychological effects long after the pandemic ends.

RECENT INCREASES IN VIRUS CASES CONVINCING MANY SCHOOLS TO CONTINUE OFFERING ONLY REMOTE INSTRUCTION

While school districts and families alike hoped for a widespread return to in-person instruction in schools this winter, the rise in COVID-19 cases in New Jersey has made that impossible in many districts.

Due to the recent rise in coronavirus cases in the state, the Woodbridge Public Schools, for example, which had originally been scheduled to resume a hybrid of in-person and virtual instruction on Jan. 19, recently announced that it will [remain all-virtual until March 1](#).

On Jan. 8, Jersey City and Newark, the two largest school districts in the state, announced they would offer only remote instruction until April 21, [according to WABC TV](#) in New York.

Even so, Gov. Murphy has praised school districts for continuing to educate children throughout the pandemic, and for holding down the number of cases that seem to be transmitted in schools. In a [Dec. 23 story posted by NJ.com](#), the governor reported seven new in-school transmissions of the virus. At the time of the governor’s late December announcement, there were 105 outbreaks affecting 459 students and staff since schools reopened in August, the governor said. During that same period, he said the state overall registered 250,563 total positive cases. “This means less than two-tenths of 1% of cases are traced to activity within our schools,” Murphy said during [a coronavirus briefing in Trenton](#).

However, since then, the number of cases of in-school transmission has continued to grow. As of Jan. 27, 2021, there have been 131 outbreaks in schools, reported by the state, affecting 629 students and staff, according to the state’s [COVID data dashboard](#) for schools. The state does not report how many of those cases resulted in death.

According to the statewide [COVID data dashboard for all residents](#), as of Jan. 27, there were 602,660 confirmed COVID cases in New Jersey. Of those, there were 18,984 deaths confirmed to be caused by COVID, with another 2,121 deaths where COVID was listed as a “probable” cause, leading to a total of 21,105 deaths as of Jan. 27.

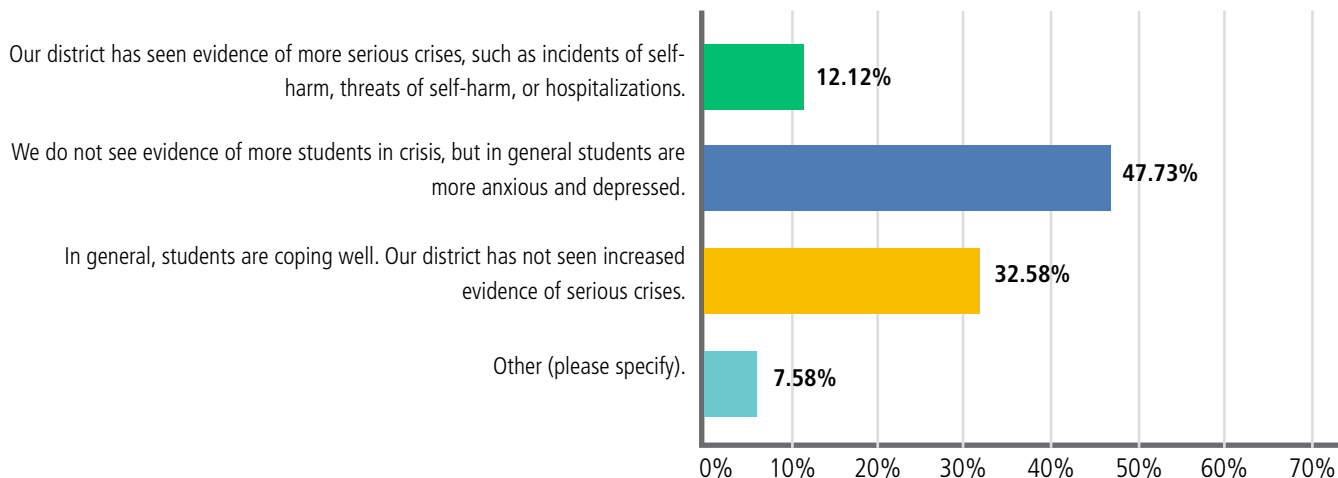
RESULTS OF NJSBA SURVEY ON STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH

A New Jersey School Boards Association survey, which collected data from Nov. 16 through Jan. 8, 2021, found that 60% of the 264 board members, superintendents and administrators felt that students were either “more anxious and depressed” (47.73%) or that their district has “seen evidence of more serious crises, such as incidents of self-harm, threats of self-harm, or hospitalizations.” (12.12%)

Detailed in the following charts are the survey results.

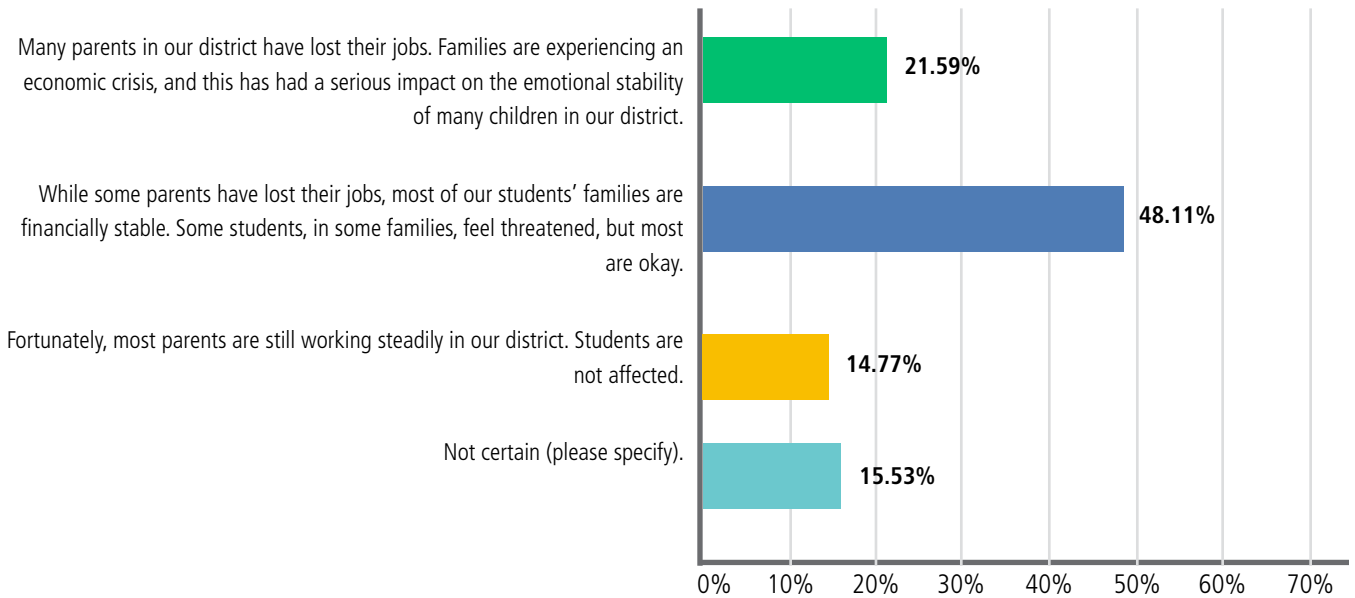
Since the start of the pandemic, are you aware of increased tension for students at home and in school due to the threat of illness, less contact with family and friends, less time in school physically, or the replacement of in-person instruction with remote learning?

Select the statement below that you believe best describes the situation in your district.



SOURCE: NJSBA Survey on the Psychological Impact of the Pandemic on Students

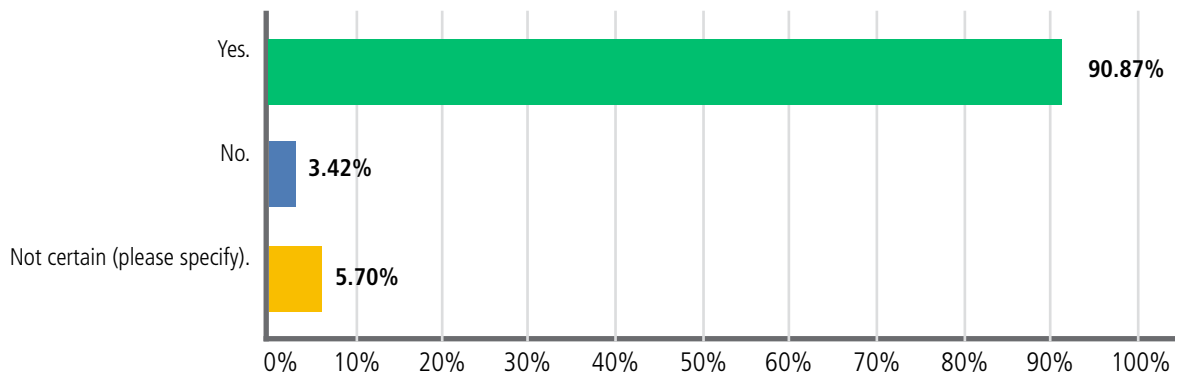
From your perspective, indicate the degree to which the pandemic's economic impact has placed additional stress on families and negatively impacted student learning and emotional well-being.



SOURCE: NJSBA Survey on the Psychological Impact of the Pandemic on Students

Remote instruction may require parents to place a greater effort on managing students' time and on ensuring their participation in instruction.

From your perspective, has the impact of remote learning on parents increased stress at home?



SOURCE: NJSBA Survey on the Psychological Impact of the Pandemic on Students



HOW DISTRICTS ARE COPING: INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES



Christine Guerriero

Registered Nurse
Somerville School District
Somerset County
Board of Education
Member
Garwood School District
Union County

SCHOOL NURSE SEES INCREASE IN ANXIETY, DEPRESSION; SOMERVILLE ADDS ‘VIRTUAL CALMING CORNER’ TO SCHOOL WEBSITE

Christine Guerriero, a member of the NJSBA Health and Wellness Committee, described what she has seen as a registered nurse serving the 2,200-student Somerville school district in Somerset County.

“In previous years, I would anticipate freshman having difficulties adjusting to high school in the beginning of the school year and seeing them in the health office” with various minor complaints, she said. “This year, I have seen students at all grade levels coming to the health office with complaints of headaches, stomach aches and nausea. In talking to them, most complaints have been related to anxieties. They wanted to be in school, but they feared coming to school. The fear of potentially contracting the coronavirus was real.”

She saw cause for concern for the mental health of her students, she said — an uptick in cases, but not an epidemic.

“I have seen an increase in the number of students requiring hospitalization or intensive outpatient care in the beginning of the school year,” she said. “While the pandemic has not been the root cause of their mental health issues, I do believe that it has added to the sense of anxiety and depression that they experience.” In a typical year, about a half dozen students require treatment or hospitalization, she said. This year, she has seen about that number of cases, but the cases have come earlier in the year.

In an attempt to create a positive environment in the school, she said, the school psychologist and student assistant counselor went into classrooms to introduce themselves, to explain their roles in the school and to offer resources.

A “Virtual Calming Corner” was added to the district website. It offers a place where students and staff can take a break, relax, listen to music, learn yoga activities, and play games. Guerriero added that Teen Mental Health First Aid training sessions help staff support students when they need help in dealing with their feelings.



James DiLorenzo, MSW, LSW

School Social Worker/School
Anti-Bullying Specialist
Highlands Elementary School
Monmouth County

LISTENING TO WHAT STUDENTS THINK ABOUT AND CARE ABOUT, A SOCIAL WORKER LEARNS HOW TO HELP A STUDENT GET THROUGH THE DAY

Sometimes, it's just too much for the youngest children to deal with the daily stress caused by the pandemic. On a virtual learning day, a young boy in the Atlantic Highlands Elementary School in Monmouth County hid under a blanket, unable to face his class and the glare of the computer screen. A concerned parent sent in a picture to superintendent Dr. Susan Compton, and school licensed social worker James DiLorenzo was asked to form a relationship with the child, to try and learn how to help him.

He found out that the child had been experiencing other difficulties, too. He'd been afraid to enter the school building, or, if was able to get inside, he'd pause again outside of the classroom. All this student needed, DiLorenzo said, was "a pep talk" — a way to increase his feeling of strength and self-confidence.

"He loves video games," DiLorenzo said the child told him, especially Sonic the Hedgehog, who gets "power-ups" from gold rings. That gave DiLorenzo an idea. If the Hedgehog can have "power-ups," why can't a student?

"We tried it out one day, and it worked," he said.

DiLorenzo walked with the child to the cafeteria for a power-up. "We walked to the cafeteria, had some cereal, and he went back to class. The rest of his day was successful. After that, I created three little gold rings that I Velcroed to his pencil case. We discussed that he can use three power-ups each day, if needed." Power-ups would include having a snack or taking a walk, something that would give the child a chance to improve his frame of mind.

Principal Daniel Layton said the school district, like many others, has been closely monitoring student behavior since the pandemic began. Layton said he has been pleased to note that the number of disciplinary cases is down. He had been afraid that, with so many more children learning virtually, that the number of cyberbullying cases would increase.

Superintendent Compton said Atlantic Highlands social workers Rachel Robinson and DiLorenzo have played an important role in meeting the social-emotional needs of the district's students. She said board president Alyson Denzler and board member Erin Dougherty have played key roles with the district's strategic planning and promoting the goal of social and emotional wellness. The same goals and priorities were also supported by the Highlands Board of Education, where board president Diane Knox also "led the charge there along with the administration in promoting that social emotional learning was a top priority with an emphasis on the school climate and culture."

"As the Tri-District superintendent," Compton said, leading three schools — Atlantic Highlands, Highlands and the Henry Hudson Regional School district — "I can tell you that these social and emotional programs have made a huge impact in supporting our students during this pandemic."



Bethany Summers

Board of Education President
North Warren
Regional School District
Warren County

MAKING THE BEST OF IT: NORTH WARREN REGIONAL SEES BENEFITS IN STUDENTS' FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES

Bethany Summers, president of the North Warren Regional Board of Education, said her 800-student district had found ways to cope with the pandemic in positive ways.

For senior high school students, she said, the decreased hours in school has given them an opportunity to spend time on planning their future.

One senior student, for example, chose to attend fully virtually so that she could take college classes in addition to her high school work.

The college courses have more long-term assignments and the high school classes are short-term, Summers said, so this student is able to balance the assignments. Virtual attendance, she finds, enables her to get more work done more efficiently.

The district might want to consider offering more options to students even after the pandemic ends.

“Perhaps flexible scheduling with virtual options for seniors would allow them opportunity to focus on college, work or career (or internships) as they transition out of our public school system,” Summers said.

Another senior remarked that she could concentrate more on her classes without being distracted by her peers in class and her social life outside of class. Her college essay discussed the virtues of virtual learning and how that has made her more mature.

“We also are offering Zooms for seniors, one-on-one with their guidance counselors, on the college application process. They can walk the students through Naviance as they apply,” she said. Parents are now more involved with the college admissions process since it is happening at home.

“When the students were meeting their counselors in school, parents would rarely attend. In addition, local colleges are having Zoom sessions with students that are more in-depth and longer than the typical college fair we have,” Summers said.

One of the concerns, Summers said, which has affected both teachers and students, is that the virtual environment does not lend itself to time off.

“Students are handing in assignments seven days a week,” she said. “Teachers are handling parent phone calls, emails and text much the same. Some have now seen the importance of ‘turning it off’ and setting hours to engage parents, and hours to be for themselves, to hike, read, exercise, etc.

“I think it is important to stress to all involved that your ‘school-switch’ cannot be in the ‘on’ position constantly,” Summers said. “Taking time to work on self-care is not selfish but self-preserving. Incorporating mindfulness, and giving students and teachers the opportunity and tools to find what flips their switch to ‘off’ for a while will benefit not only each as an individual, but those who they work with and who depend on them.”

Addressing Student Isolation

How one district helped students connect



Grade levels K-3:

- Individual counseling with students (both in person and virtual)
- vGroup counseling across cohorts (virtual)
- Google Classroom where students can access our past videos/resources posted.
- Arrival and dismissal to say hello and greet students in the building.
- Spending time at recess helping students connect with each other
- Helping parents arrange virtual playdates with students in different cohorts
- Week of Respect activities centered around respecting self and others as well as Golden Rule
- Daily themes for students at home and in school to participate
- School Instagram account showing fun things happening at home and at school
- Two weekly lessons as well as Fun Friday movement activities
- Spirit Assemblies in person and filmed for at home students
- Check in forms posted for students to reach out for counseling or to just touch base

Grade levels 4-6:

- Lunch Bunches connecting different cohorts & choice remote/ hybrid students. (Virtual)
- Weekly Counselor Corner Videos sent out to teachers to use during morning SEL meetings
- Google Slide offices where students can access resources and set up appointments with counselors through Google forms.
- Shining Star program to recognize students who are being kind/ exhibiting model student behaviors. Prizes are delivered to full remote students' homes.
- Individual and small group counseling with students (both in person and virtual)
- Messaging with students via email and Google hangouts when they have questions/ want to check in.
- Google Classroom where students can access our past videos/ resources posted.
- Week of Respect activities centered around being respectful to others, yourself & the environment. Schoolwide lesson about what makes them who they are and how they can respect differences to connect classmates and promote respect to others. Full remote students were asked to place their drawings in a window of their home.
- Hallway duty AM & PM to say hello and greet students in the building.
- Morning announcements streamed through Marica Klock so full remote/ non live cohort students can hear them.
- Thanksgiving Food Drive — students donate food for Thanksgiving food baskets. A bin has been placed out front of the school building for full remote students to drop off donations.

Grade levels 7-8:

- Counseling sessions (both in person and through online platforms like Zoom/ Google Meet)
- Google Classroom where students can access new/past resources
- Breakout Google Slide Offices specifically geared towards different topics such as mindfulness, yoga, growth mindset etc.
- In each office, students have the ability to explore a wealth of various resources that the counselors have vetted before sharing
- Week of Respect Activities centered around kindness and respect
- Kindness Tickets started in October that continue all throughout the year to recognize students both in person and online who are 'caught being kind'
- All recognized students are entered into a drawing to win a prize each month
- Thanksgiving Food Drive - students/families donate food for Thanksgiving food baskets
- WAMS Social Media Account
- Collaboration with teachers/administrators to work with both in person and fully remote students
- All students are able to sign up to meet with their teachers during afternoon extra-help small group/individual sessions
- Teacher referrals to counselors
- Assisting in the transition of fully remote students returning to the hybrid model
- Share information with parents/students about clubs that will be running virtually at the Middle School level

Grade levels 9-12:

- Individual and group counseling sessions – traditional to digital using Zoom and Google Meet
- Social/emotional learning initiatives, such as Chill-and-Chats (teachers host conversations about a variety of topics including mindful practices and yoga)
- Disseminating information about clubs, activities, and community service initiatives. Some clubs will meet virtually (i.e. Interact Club).
- Maintaining usual events such as Week of Respect
- Feedback from the Student Advisory Board
- Teacher referrals to counselors
- Counselors and VPs work together to reach out and work with students
- Bring students back to school (for our remote to hybrid students)
- Note: Older students have
 - more capacity/control over social engagement than do our younger students.
 - Use any spare time for doing homework and getting off the screen

Source: Lauren Romano, vice president, Moorestown Board of Education



Dr. Lee McDonald
Director of Counseling, Health
and Wellness
West Windsor-Plainsboro
Regional School District
Mercer/Middlesex counties

AT WEST WINDSOR-PLAINSBORO REGIONAL, STUDENTS ENDURE ISOLATION WHILE A ROBUST COUNSELING PROGRAM SAVES LIVES

In the middle of a routine check-in call, a school counselor suddenly realized that the young female student he was chatting with was talking about committing suicide.

“The student shared that she was having thoughts of suicide, and while she didn’t necessarily have a plan in place, there were red flags,” said Dr. Lee McDonald, director of counseling, health and wellness for the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District.

He described how the incident unfolded. There was no panic, only a well-conceived plan that was immediately put into action. The counselor kept the student engaged while notifying McDonald, who contacted the parents in the home, to make sure someone was available to safely intervene.

After contacting the parents, McDonald said, he was able to get one of the district’s mental health clinicians involved in minutes. The parents agreed to have the clinician perform a mental health assessment. All agreed that the student would receive intensive outpatient therapeutic support. The crisis? For now, averted.

As the NJSBA outlined in its Oct. 19 report on student mental health, *Building a Foundation for Hope*, no school is suicide-proof. Children in early adolescence are fragile, especially during a life-threatening pandemic which has many of them questioning what the future holds.

West Windsor-Plainsboro is strongly committed to student mental health. The district employs 30 counselors, and four student assistance counselors, to provide services for about 10,000 students in 10 buildings, McDonald said. As part of their mental health services, the counselors also address students’ social and emotional well-being while teaching healthy coping mechanisms and strategies for navigating difficult circumstances.

The district spends roughly \$450,000 a year for a partnership with the Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care led by Sonia Rodrigues-Martó, program director. Rutgers provides four clinicians onsite in the school district.

Even with the many therapeutic supports offered by the West Windsor-Plainsboro district, students continue to be challenged by the isolation, and the pressure of dealing with a life-threatening pandemic.

“Initially, going back to March, there was a decrease in the number of mental health assessments that we were facilitating,” McDonald said. “Things slowed down for students, stressors were mitigated, sleep and rest increased.” Nearly 10 months later, as the pandemic drags on, the number of students having difficulty has seen “an uptick.”

“As time has worn on, with the isolation, the quarantining, the reality of not being able to engage in the things that used to be ‘normal,’” he said, “you’re starting to see an uptick in mental health challenges. ... The pandemic has adversely impacted students over time.”

In the past, 4% to 5% of the students accessed mental health services which could include school based counseling, intensive outpatient therapy, or hospitalization, McDonald said. More recently, the number of students seeking clinical treatment or therapeutic support in the 10,000 student district has increased to 5% to 6%.

The arrival of vaccines, McDonald said, has given students “a glimmer of hope, which I believe is also an opportunity for people to revisit the reality that they are still going to be in this situation for some time. ... We have to maintain our health and safety protocols, we have to make sure we’re masking and washing our hands, and that we’re social distancing.

“Somewhere in there, I think there’s a balance” between staying vigilant, he said, “and hoping that we can get back to ‘normal,’ whatever that may be, at some point in the not-too-distant future.”



Amy Hassa
Board of Education President
Hamilton Township, Atlantic County
Chair, NJSBA Health and Wellness
Committee

HAMILTON TOWNSHIP CARES: ‘SOCIAL DISTANCING DOES NOT MEAN LIVING IN ISOLATION’

Ask Amy Hassa what she’s *not* involved in around town. It’s probably a shorter list.

In addition to serving as chair of the NJSBA’s Health and Wellness Committee and having been recently elected president of the Hamilton Township Board of Education in Atlantic County, Hassa is most passionate about connecting people, finding what they need and making sure they get it.

Since the pandemic began in March, Hassa has worked closely with dozens of equally passionate volunteers and workers. They’ve come from the Hamilton Township School District, the [First United Methodist Church of Mays Landing](#), and the Main Street Pantry. The Township of Hamilton police, the Mays Landing Merchants, the Senior Advisory Committee, Gratitude to Go (Earth Angels for Dementia), and the Hamilton Township Education Association have also lent a hand. The local Rotary Club, businesses and many local people, such as John Kurtz, Yogi Kumar and Angel Merrill have donated trucks, meals and countless hours of service.

“As a school board member, I have a lot of networks in my community,” she said. “I know everybody because I volunteered a lot through the Girl Scouts.”

A social worker with a master’s degree, Hassa knows that problems don’t come in neat little boxes, and solutions aren’t simple. A child who is hungry is going to have a hard time feeling safe, and a child who doesn’t feel safe isn’t going to be able to learn very well.

Hamilton Township, like many other communities in the state, has been economically hard hit by the pandemic. In June 2020, the national [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reported that of the 357 largest counties in the nation, Atlantic County, New Jersey had the largest year-over-year decrease in employment. In [November 2020](#), the county had an unemployment rate of 15.2%.

Parents have lost their jobs. Families are in trouble.

“I said that we have to have a conversation with how to feed people, right now,

during this pandemic. I started making phone calls to all of these different leadership groups in our community, the Mays Landing merchants, the Rotary, anybody who had a leadership role got a call,” she said. “And they all showed up.”

Many ideas were considered and discarded. In collaboration with municipal officials and the police, it was decided that each volunteer would be assigned three families in need.

The effort started small but grew steadily.

“We probably had 10 families to start. And then each week, we started adding more and more families. The school made the commitment to call every family in the district. They trained their secretaries who weren’t working at the time... And the school took it to a level that was unbelievable.” The school and community formed a closely linked team, she said. The help provided by the school district was indispensable to the success of the project.

The final result?

“We’re now providing 16,000 meals a week,” she said. “So each child gets seven breakfasts, seven lunches.” Meals are picked up at the school. Families without transportation have meals delivered to their porches, delivered safely.

“It was one of our ways of combating isolation,” Hassa explained. “It’s not just a matter that the kids learn better when they have a full stomach. It’s the whole idea that we’re now finding out that community members, young and old, have been completely cut off from others, and this program allows us to try to take on the isolation they have been feeling.”

Meals are paid for by Hunger Free New Jersey, along with some other local grants, Hassa said. She points out that funding is still available and that other communities can also take part in the program.

“The thing about this program that meant the most to us is that it would be a human contacting a human every single week just to say, ‘Hey, how are you? How are you making out? How are your kids? How’s school going?’

“The human connection,” Hassa said, “is really what made this program special.”



Joseph Isola
Superintendent
Howell School District
Monmouth County

IN HOWELL, JOSEPH ISOLA ADVOCATES FOR THE POSTPONEMENT OF SPRING ACHIEVEMENT TESTS AS STUDENTS, STAFF COPE WITH PANDEMIC

Born in Fort Dix and raised on Staten Island, Joseph Isola has earned a reputation as a person who speaks plainly and directly about the issues that matter to his students, staff and the parents in the Howell Township public schools in Monmouth County, where he has served as superintendent for seven years.

For example, he has spoken publicly, many times, about his 18-year-old niece, Melissa, who died of a heroin overdose, and he has used that story to show his personal connection and understanding of the mental health crisis schoolchildren are facing today.

In a recent interview, Isola outlined the current mental health challenges facing

his teachers and students, what can be done to relieve the pressure, and what he thinks can be done to move forward once the pandemic ends.

Many students, especially young students, are under enormous pressure to perform in ways for which they are not developmentally ready.

“In the world we’re living in, students’ levels of responsibility have been impacted greatly,” he said. Under normal circumstances, a fourth-grade student would get off the bus, show up at school, and have structure with their teachers and their peers.

“That’s no longer the case,” he said. Students are living with complicated schedules. Half days. Zoom sessions. Some days they’re in school, some days they’re not.

“The flexibility we’re placing on students far exceeds their developmental readiness,” he said. “That’s a problem that creates stressors that they may not be mature enough to handle.” In too many cases, students respond by keeping their video off when they show up for class. This diminishes their ability to be present, to take part in conversations, and it prevents teachers from seeing how they are receiving the class material being delivered on any given day. The district, he said, reaches out to students and tries to find out what is going on in their lives to help them, but it’s a constant struggle.

In addition to students being asked to handle unprecedented levels of stress for prolonged periods of time, there is the pressure being placed on teachers.

“Teachers want to be perfect,” he said. “They always feel like they’re being judged and evaluated. And there’s no way to be perfect, right? But in their own mind, they’re stressing about being as good as they were, before the pandemic. In this whole new world, they can’t be perfect, and it is eating them up.

“It has been, in my opinion, the greatest challenge for staff, that they’re dealing with this new level of expectations for meeting kids’ needs. I think they feel less effective, because the whole structure is less effective than normal,” Isola said. “One of the greatest fears teachers have is that they feel the new way that education is being delivered during the pandemic ‘isn’t working for kids.’ They say, ‘I’m nervous about the kids. And it’s my job to make sure they’re okay.’”

The truth about the state of education during the pandemic is that it is impossible to cover every aspect of education in the same way it was addressed when class was in session for in-person instruction, Isola said.

“There’s no way we’re covering it all. Let’s be real,” he said. “We have fewer hours on task due to the pandemic,” he said. “There isn’t a way that what we are doing is equal to what we were doing (before the pandemic).”

Isola’s view is shared by many.

During his State of the State address on Jan. 12, Gov. Murphy acknowledged the idea that student learning was not progressing the way it normally would in New Jersey, which *Education Week* has rated as the best public school system in America.

“I wish I could tell you that no child is falling behind in this disruptive year. But I can’t,” Murphy said. “That is why our focus must turn to ensuring our students have the academic and social-emotional support needed as they rebound from the stresses of the pandemic.”

One important way to relieve stress, Isola said, would be to postpone the achievement tests typically administered in the spring. For that to happen, the Murphy administration would have to apply for a waiver to the federal government, and the Biden administration would have to agree to suspend the achievement tests in the same way they were suspended last year.

“Assessing students in the middle of a pandemic,” he said, “is ludicrous. To me, it shows absolute disregard for students’ and staffs’ mental wellness.” His district, like many others, is regularly administering less intrusive local assessments to track students’ learning.

After the pandemic, he said, the state is going to need to find out what level of education has been delivered during the pandemic. To immediately regain ground on every state learning standard would be impossible. He advocates for the identification of “priority standards” which are the core, fundamental principles that every student needs to know before graduating that will “build foundational strength for learners” as they move forward. Keeping track of the crises his students and staff are facing, and planning how to move forward after the pandemic, is an all-consuming task.

“It will be an enormous, enormous challenge,” he said. “It keeps me up at night.”



Dr. Matthew Murphy
Superintendent
Ramsey School District
Bergen County

WITH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES, RAMSEY SUPERINTENDENT DR. MATTHEW MURPHY CALMS FEARS AND BUILDS HOPE FOR A PANDEMIC-FREE FUTURE

When it comes to providing mental health services for students, staff and the community, Dr. Matthew Murphy, superintendent of the Ramsey School District in Bergen County, is in it for the long haul.

The need for improved mental health services has been an issue in the nation’s schools for many years. The NJSBA described students’ mental health in its October 2019 task force report on students’ mental health, [*Building a Foundation for Hope*](#):

“Our children are in emotional trouble, with anxiety reaching near epidemic levels. As many as one in eight children – and 25% of teens – are contending with diagnosable anxiety disorders. Left unattended, these issues can lead to children harming themselves – or others. Suicide rates are increasing fastest among children from the ages of 10 to 17 in New Jersey and the nation.”

Due to the pandemic, “you can throw those numbers out this year,” Murphy said. Like many districts, the 2,800-student Ramsey district has seen “a dramatic rise” in anxiety and stress levels for students and staff.

It’s heartbreaking to see students, according to Murphy, especially the younger

students, who “just don’t have the life experience to tell them that it’s going to be okay.”

But in all the bad news — with the rising death tolls, the riots and the fear and chaos in the world today, Ramsey has had some unexpected good news. The number of serious incidents of self-harm and hospitalizations has actually decreased this year, Murphy said.

In a typical year, the district will have 15 to 20 student mental health issues requiring hospitalization or another high-level intervention. But during the pandemic, through December, only three or four students have had serious issues, Murphy explained. He is grateful for the lower numbers, and he thanks the local board of education for supporting mental health initiatives that may be helping to calm the waters.

The initiatives include:

- A “warm line,” which parents, community members and staff can use, at any time, free of charge. The Ramsey district has a relationship with West Bergen Mental Healthcare, which staffs the help line with appropriate expertise. The warm line’s purpose is to stay a step ahead of the crisis of a “hotline.”
- Depression screenings. Students in grades seven, eight and 10 are screened for early signs of mental health issues. Screenings are performed by existing district staff, at no additional cost.
- The Ramsey district adopted the RULER program out of the Yale University Center for Emotional Intelligence. Marc Brackett, who developed the program, wrote a book, *Permission to Feel* and was invited to speak in the district.

“I got this book for every staff member and every board of education member,” Murphy said. The program helps students measure their feelings and label them. In the RULER acronym, the R stands for recognizing, the U for understanding the causes and consequences; L is for labeling emotions; E is for expressing them, and R is for regulating and controlling feelings.

He invited the author to visit the district before the pandemic, and used his book to help develop a “cohesive, unifying social emotional learning program.” With that in place, everyone in the district was literally on the same page, and staff could use the same language and describe the same behaviors and expectations.

Murphy said there will be a permanent, long-term need for a comprehensive program for mental health services. Even after families aren’t afraid of suffering from the virus anymore, the need to understand what happened, and how it affected students and families, will be more important than ever.

“The peak of the impact,” he said, “on our emotional, spiritual and mental states, hasn’t happened yet.” The fallout from the pandemic, and the need to deal with fear and the emotions it has stirred, will go on for years. Eventually, he sees schools as being the hub of a center of mental health services, interacting with the community, with students and families getting the help they need, free of the stigma too often attached to expressing emotions and getting support.

“Oftentimes, it takes someone years to get help,” he said. “And shame on the insurance companies that make you go through a maze to get a basic service.”

Meanwhile, he works every day toward ending the “social isolation” that too many in his suburban district are feeling. He knows that a large number of parents in his district have lost their jobs. Too many are hurting. He looks toward the future with faith that the hard times will end. With vaccines now being administered, “it’s put a little more pep in my step,” he said. “There’s light at the end of the tunnel now. It gives us hope. And I think we all do better with hope.”

CONCLUSION

DISTRICTS NEED TO MAINTAIN VIGILANCE, HELP STUDENTS AND STAFF GET THE SERVICES THEY NEED

As this report is being released, COVID-19 vaccines are just beginning to be made more widely available throughout New Jersey. While our state is moving in the right direction as more people are being vaccinated, it would be naïve to think that the operation of our schools will return to “normal” any time soon.

Meanwhile, according to superintendents, board of education members, healthcare professional and social workers, the majority of New Jersey’s 1.4 million public school students seem to be weathering the emotional strains of the pandemic fairly well.

Due to excellent planning by boards of education, superintendents, and educational professionals throughout the state, and the efforts of school districts to address the social-emotional needs of students, New Jersey has not seen the serious increase in mental health issues that many experts feared could be triggered by 10 months of worry and concern caused by the coronavirus.

But the important word, moving forward, is vigilance, coupled with the knowledge that any mental health incident, any self-harm or hospitalization that curtails the hope and promise of childhood is a tragedy.

When the NJSBA first conducted an in-depth look at student mental health in its October 2019 report, [Building a Foundation for Hope](#), Ocean City School District Superintendent Dr. Kathleen Taylor described the aftermath of a student suicide during the school year.

“You live in fear,” she said. “You have that happen once, and you’ll do anything you can to try and save a child’s life.”

So districts must continue to be attentive to the mental health needs of children.

Boards of education and superintendents are encouraged to consider some of the ideas and resources discussed in this report. Social workers, school nurses, board presidents and superintendents have all discussed ways to reach out to students and help them cope with the crisis.

On the state and federal government level, mental health bills proposed by state

Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald deserve serious consideration. To relieve pressure on students and school leaders, consideration should be given to postponing achievement tests to allow schools to focus limited time and resources on addressing the public health crisis. At the same time, when the virus subsides, the state Department of Education should be working on a recovery plan to help students who may need extra academic assistance.

School boards should be commended for their exemplary planning and implementation. But the difficult days are not over. The NJSBA remains committed to providing information, training and resources that can help districts address the public health crisis of a lifetime.

CRITICAL POLICY REFERENCE MANUAL

FILE CODE: 6164.1

X Monitored

Mandated

X Other Reasons**Sample Policy**

INTERVENTION AND REFERRAL SERVICES FOR GENERAL EDUCATION PUPILS

The board of education shall provide a program of intervention and referral services for general education pupils who are experiencing personal, interpersonal or academic difficulties to help them function productively and develop positively in the classroom environment.

The chief school administrator shall prepare procedures to:

- A. Identify learning, behavior and health difficulties of students;
- B. Collect thorough information on the identified learning, behavior and health difficulties;
- C. Identify the roles and responsibilities of the building staff who participate in planning and providing intervention and referral plan and services;
- D. Develop and implement action plans which provide for appropriate school or community interventions or referrals to school and community resources, based on the collected data and desired outcomes for the identified learning, behavior and health difficulties;
- E. Provide support, guidance and professional development to school staff who identify learning, behavior and health difficulties and refer pupils and to school staff who participate in planning and providing intervention and referral services;
- F. Actively involve parents/guardians in the development and implementation of intervention and referral plans;
- G. Coordinate the access to and delivery of school resources and services for achieving the outcomes identified in the intervention and referral services action plan;
- H. Coordinate the services of community-based social and health provider agencies and other community resources for achieving the outcomes identified in the intervention and referral services action plans;
- I. Maintain records of all requests for assistance and all intervention and referral services plans in accordance with federal and state law and regulation;
- J. Review and assess the effectiveness of the services provided in achieving the outcomes identified in the intervention and referral plan and modify each plan to achieve the outcomes as appropriate; and
- K. At a minimum, annually review the intervention and referral services action plans and the actions taken as a result of the building's system of intervention and referral services and make recommendations to the principal for improving school programs and services, as appropriate.

The board shall review and adopt these procedures, and the chief school administrator shall report to the board on their implementation.