

school leader

m a g a z i n e

Chronic Absenteeism

Strategies for Getting
Students Back in School

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SUPERHEROES IN SCHOOLS

TACKLING SCHOOL
TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

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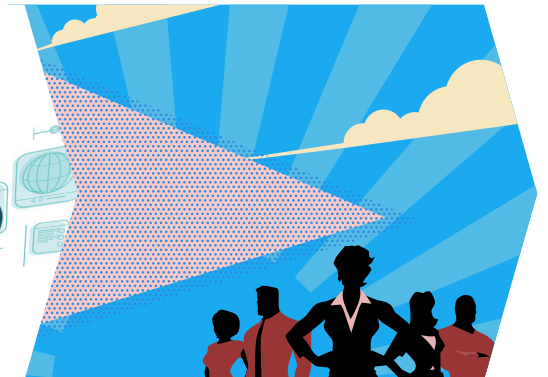
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NJSBA President
Karen Cortellino, M.D.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MANDATED TRAINING

In 2007, the state's School District Accountability Act was signed into law. This multifaceted legislation impacts school board members in a variety of ways, including the requirement to complete mandated training.

As the state designated training provider for all mandated training courses, the New Jersey School Boards Association offers a variety of options – all at no charge.

Whether it's Governance I, which I like to call "boot camp for new school board members," Governance II, Governance III or Governance IV, mandated training provides new and returning school board members the chance to acquire knowledge and build skills that are prerequisites to furthering student achievement.

NJSBA is always working hard to improve the mandated training it offers. In fact, it recently convened a committee to update the Governance I curriculum, which aligns with my goal of getting back to basics.

As you complete your mandated training, I'd urge you to keep in mind how it can help you be more effective – and how that, in turn, can lead to stronger, more effective boards.

The Center of Public Education, the research arm of the National School Boards Association, conducted a meta-analysis of 10 studies and reports on school board leadership, including several based on the Iowa Lighthouse inquiry. It found that effective school boards do the following:

1. Commit to a vision of high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction, and they define clear goals toward that vision.
2. Share strong beliefs about what is possible for students to achieve and their ability to learn, as well as the capability of the school system to teach all children at high levels.
3. Are accountability-driven. They spend less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies to improve student achievement.
4. Have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage both internal and external stakeholders in setting and achieving district goals.
5. Are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use data to drive continuous improvement.
6. Align and sustain resources, such as professional development, to meet district goals.
7. Lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Participate in team development and training, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitment for their improvement efforts.

Training and professional development, including mandated training, will help you master these characteristics.

We often say that no public officials in New Jersey have a greater impact on the lives of children than school board members. NJSBA can help you acquire the skills and knowledge you need to serve the children in your community.

Karen Cortellino, M.D.

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EXECUTIVE WORD

'THE BOARDROOM' AND THE POWER OF TRANSPARENCY

I firmly believe in the power of transparency for the success of any organization. Open and honest conversations break down barriers, reduce misunderstandings, and foster closer relationships with stakeholders, building trust and credibility essential for a positive environment.

While transparency may be challenging, it is crucial. Leaders must discuss challenges, vulnerabilities, and failures, taking responsibility and moving forward to find solutions. Openly addressing challenges leads to a stronger organization, with informed and supportive members.

When I was the superintendent in Somerville, I started an initiative to foster transparency in the school district. It was called "Talk with Tim," and offered a way for any stakeholders, including parents, community members and staff, to submit a question to me on any topic. I promised a response within 48 hours, and was willing to discuss anything that wasn't confidential or a matter that involved confidential personnel or student situations.

When I responded, I also copied the staff on my responses, so they would be fully informed about stakeholder concerns and questions. This initiative was successful in fostering candid discussion and idea-sharing in the district.

I feel so strongly about the need to be transparent with stakeholders that I have decided to introduce a similar initiative at the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Each month, I plan to host a live podcast, "The Boardroom," from noon to 1 p.m. I will be joined by NJSBA employees and/or members of our extended community. We will discuss services and programs, and take live call-in questions from members on any topic.

The podcast will be broadcast live on various platforms and available on demand. Join us on NJSBA's YouTube, Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram. The podcast will be archived for later viewing and listening.

Participants can submit questions using the chat function, or by calling in to the live programs at 609-278-5292. Mark your calendars and follow us on social media to stay updated.

I look forward to our transparent conversations — with and for board members!

Very truly yours,

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WINTER VIRTUAL COUNTY ASSOCIATION MEETINGS AND PROGRAMS

This winter, NJSBA's county school boards association meetings will be held virtually due to possible inclement weather.

The meetings will include the content-rich programming that are a hallmark of county school boards associations.

Members will hear updates from executive county superintendents and NJSBA staff members, speak with state legislators, and share ideas and best practices with each other.

Among the topics that will be discussed at meetings throughout the winter:

- > The board's role in student achievement and curriculum.
- > School district budgets and finance.
- > NJSBA resources.
- > How to promote your district.
- > Roundtable discussions on timely topics.

For more information on meeting topics, please visit the County School Boards Associations page on the NJSBA website.

Board members are welcome to attend meetings in any county — not just their home county.

New Jersey's 21 county school boards associations offer training, information and forums to explore the issues facing public school districts.

Winter County Association Virtual Meeting Schedule (January-March 2024)

County	Date
Salem/Cumberland County Virtual Meeting	Monday, Jan. 8, 2024
Somerset County Virtual Meeting	Monday, Jan. 22, 2024
Warren County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2024
Burlington County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024
Hunterdon County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Jan. 25, 2024
Sussex County Virtual Meeting	Tuesday, Jan. 30, 2024
Essex County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024
Ocean County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024
Mercer County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024
Passaic County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Feb. 1, 2024
Atlantic County Virtual Meeting	Tuesday, Feb. 6, 2024
Bergen County Virtual Meeting	Tuesday, Feb. 6, 2024
Monmouth County Virtual Meeting	Tuesday, Feb. 6, 2024
Hudson County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, Feb. 7, 2024
Union County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, Feb. 7, 2024
Camden/Gloucester County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Feb. 8, 2024
Morris County Virtual Meeting	Thursday, Feb. 8, 2024
Cape May County Virtual Meeting	Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2024
Middlesex County Virtual Meeting	Wednesday, March 6, 2024

Upcoming Winter Programs Sponsored by ELFNJ

NEW BOARD MEMBER ORIENTATION WEEKEND Held at the Crowne Plaza Princeton Conference Center, the New Board Member Orientation Weekend is an on-site intensive, three-day training course. Board members will learn how to effectively fulfill their responsibilities while attending large and small group sessions on topics including school law, policy, the School Ethics Act, ways to improve student achievement, school finance, labor relations, the board-superintendent relationship and advocacy.

- > **Friday, Jan. 19, 2024, to Sunday, Jan. 21, 2024.**
- > **Friday, February 23, 2024, to Sunday, February 25, 2024**

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TEACHER RETENTION: STRATEGIES TO CUT ATTRITION

A look at the research of three N.J. based education professors

While reflecting on the overwhelming and increasing statistics of teacher attrition, it is most disheartening to note that 40-50% of teachers leave the teaching profession within their first five years. Unfortunately, that number increases to 70% of teachers leaving who teach in schools where more than half of the students are students of color. With one out of every five teachers leaving teaching after their first year, this results in beginning teachers having the highest rate of teacher attrition. These high attrition rates lead to a revolving door through which nearly a million teachers move in and out of schools each year. This mass exodus calls for effective measures to retain teachers.

It is useful for school leaders, particularly board of education members, to understand what factors can contribute to improving teacher retention.

This article examines the research from three distinguished university professors on the topic. Dr. Michael H. Salvatore, senior vice president of administration at Kean University, discusses the concept of principal leadership through professional learning communities; Dr. William O. George III, interim superintendent and chief executive officer of Monmouth Ocean Educational Services and an associate professor and director of the Ed.D. program at Monmouth University, addresses the roles of family and community engagement in the success of all students; and Dr. John E. Henning, professor emeritus at Monmouth University, emphasizes the importance of the preparation and development of relationships that occur through mentoring.

Principal leadership, family and community engagement and mentoring all

contribute to teacher retention and student success in the 21st century. Let's take a look at the light this research shines on teacher retention.

Principal Leadership: Communication, Instructional Leadership, and Integrity

Salvatore suggests that to attract, prepare and retain effective teachers, sustainable high-quality leaders, specifically principals, need to be in position. A positive school climate is nurtured where principals celebrate successes, collaborate with staff members and have a strong commitment to staff learning through professional development. Ongoing professional development for school principals results in high-quality leadership and cultivates a positive school climate. One way principals experience professional development is demonstrated through professional learning communities. PLCs prepare committed and engaged principals to demonstrate strong communication skills, instructional leadership and integrity. The distinctive characteristics of PLCs are described as complex multilayered constructs. These constructs prepare the principal for high-quality leadership beginning with teacher and leader effectiveness. PLCs increase collective efficacy among faculty and become the catalyst to improvement in staff performance and student learning outcomes. Improving school leadership influences teacher performance -- and schools with systemic processes to build leadership capacity outperform their peers.

PLCs directly influence teacher performance and student learning, which ultimately impacts teacher efficacy and their decision to remain in the classroom.

It is necessary to improve the quality of relationships to build a positive school climate and school culture. Relationships are influenced by the school principal. Student learning is also indirectly influenced by the principal and has an impact on the school climate. The leadership of the principal shapes both climate and culture through relationships with families and community members, and relationships among other teachers.

Family and Community Engagement: Collective Efficacy and Collaboration

George explains it is critical to create a culture of safety, trust, collegiality and a shared sense of purpose to retain teachers. Shared purpose and relationships between faculty and school leadership are key factors that produce collective efficacy. Shared vision is the broader perspective lending itself to interdependence and the necessary communication skills to compete in the 21st century. Research continues to support that having more people involved in the educational process of the student produces a greater rate of success, personally and collectively. About one-fifth of teachers voluntarily depart each year from buildings where they had little input into decision-making. However, schools where teachers had a higher scale of decision-making input reported less than 5% voluntary departure. Through this shared decision making, teachers experienced the empowering factor of collective efficacy.

Collective teacher efficacy results in teachers feeling empowered to meet student needs. This impacts student achievement and is identified as one of the most powerful predictors along

with collaboration. Collaboration is also a strength where teachers learn to utilize, value and respect the expertise of each other. Families are teachers' best resources for their students; intentional planning for family involvement is necessary. We must create a synergy among all of these resources to foster a community of learners, so that our children will be successful in the 21st century.

Mentoring Teachers Henning highlights mentoring as a developmental approach and a key factor in the teacher preparation process. Mentoring supports teachers as they grow from their beginning as teacher candidates to early career teachers to ultimately become teacher leaders. Mentoring changes as teacher candidates and teachers develop. When conditions are created to foster and accelerate an unbroken continuum from pre-service to in-service, they build mentoring capacity. Building mentoring capacity in teacher education equips new teachers with multiple professional opportunities and develops them into effective teacher leaders through sustainable structures. Mentoring improves teacher preparation and teacher practices. This happens through three stages of the mentoring process. The first stage is practical skills and information, including classroom organization and instructional resources.

The second stage is the art and science of teaching and polishing classroom management skills.

The third stage is a deeper understanding of instructional strategies and ongoing professional development that is based on the students' needs. As the mentees move through these stages, a mentoring culture is established, and they become better teachers.

As we keep teacher retention in mind, it is important for us to remember, just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest

link, "a school cannot exceed the quality of its teachers." Therefore, in response to challenges that new teachers face, a synergy of principal leadership, family and community engagement and mentoring must be intentional and simultaneously employed for public education to prosper.

DR. MARIA PARADISO-TESTA IS A MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY ALUMNA, A FORMER SCHOOL PRINCIPAL/SUPERINTENDENT AND CURRENTLY A CONFERENCE PRESENTER AND ADJUNCT PROFESSOR AT BROOKDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S ALTERNATE ROUTE TEACHING PROGRAM.

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TRANSGENDER STUDENTS AND PARENTAL NOTIFICATION: WHAT PATH FORWARD?

Questions and issues school leaders should ponder

The laws governing New Jersey school districts are often so ambiguous they bring to mind the old saying, a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Statutes and regulations are usually the product of so many negotiated compromises that the final version is sometimes clear as mud. Until the courts announce the correct interpretation in a case brought before them, school boards must rely on educated guesses about how that litigation will turn out. And so it is with the legalities surrounding the accommodation of transgender students in our public schools.

There are legal, psychological, moral and educational dimensions to every aspect of transgender student accommodation, from bathroom access to preferred pronouns, with passions running high on all sides. Lately, however, concerns about parental notification have taken center stage. Are school staff permitted, or even required, to disclose students' transgender status to their parents? Do students' preferences regarding parental notification take precedence? Should different rules apply to very young students?

In the law, as in life, finding the right answers starts with asking the right questions. This article intentionally takes no position on where school leaders should land regarding parental notification, but instead poses questions and identifies issues school leaders should ponder as they think the issue through for themselves.

To help understand where we are in the evolution of transgender accommodation law, let's review how we got here. On a national level, the legal wrangling

over the rights of transgender students focuses on Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, a federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of "sex" in federally funded programs. Title IX does not define "sex," the U.S. Supreme Court has not yet addressed whether the term means only the anatomical sex assigned at birth or includes the gender one identifies with -- and there is no consensus on the issue in the lower federal courts.

In 2016, with sexual politics very much impacting the presidential campaign that year, the Obama administration issued a "Dear Colleague" letter taking the position that "sex" in Title IX includes one's identified gender, and that transgender students are fully protected under that law. The letter did not have the force of law but served notice on school districts that they could face time-consuming and expensive enforcement actions by "the feds" if they did not adopt that interpretation. The Trump administration, in early 2017, withdrew the letter with the pronouncement that "there must be due regard for the primary role of the States and local school districts in establishing educational policy[.]" thus leaving school districts uncertain about what Title IX requires of them.

The uncertainty over federal law was less of a concern here in New Jersey because our own state-level anti-discrimination statute, the New Jersey Law Against Discrimination, has for many years included "gender identity or expression" and "affectional or sexual orientation" as protected legal classifications. Even so, to this day the LAD has never

spelled out what specific accommodations transgender students are entitled to, or how to reconcile those students' privacy with their parents' understandable desire to know what's happening in their children's lives.

To fill this void, the New Jersey Legislature, in 2017, adopted *N.J.S.A. 18A:36-41*, directing the commissioner of education to "develop and distribute to school districts guidelines concerning transgender students." These guidelines were to address, among other things, "confidentiality and privacy concerns, including ensuring that school personnel do not disclose information that may reveal a student's transgender status except as allowed by law, and advising schools to work with the student to create an appropriate confidentiality plan regarding the student's transgender or transitioning status[.]"

A year later, in 2018, the Department of Education issued the long-awaited guidance, accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/5h5vr54b>. Along with accommodations such as access to restrooms and locker rooms, the guidance addressed confidentiality and parental notification: "School personnel may not disclose information that may reveal a student's transgender status except as allowed by law. . . There is no affirmative duty for any school district personnel to notify a student's parent or guardian of the student's gender identity or expression." The guidance did not advocate keeping students' sexuality secret from their parents. To the contrary, it encouraged parental involvement, but for the most part left it to the student to decide if, when and how that should be

accomplished. Exceptions were provided for legally mandated disclosures, such as HIB investigation results, as long as students were given advance notice this would be occurring.

Like the 2016 “Dear Colleague” letter, the department’s guidance was not a statute or administrative regulation, so it was not legally binding in itself. It did, however, represent the department’s position on what was required to comply with the LAD, so districts that ignored it did so at their peril. Many school boards around the state promptly modified their transgender accommodation policies to track the guidance, including its parental notification standards. Although the changes generated little fanfare at the time, there have been organized campaigns in some districts, over the past year, to roll back transgender accommodations and mandate notice to parents if school employees have any reason to believe students are transgender. In response to these concerns, some districts revised their policies to require parental notification even over students’ objections.

The highly publicized policy revisions by the Marlboro, Middletown and Manalapan-Englishtown districts in Monmouth County, and the Hanover district in Morris County, quickly drew the attention of the state attorney general and the New Jersey Division on Civil Rights, the state agency responsible for enforcing the LAD. Some of those revised policies established a presumption that parents be notified unless there is reason to believe it poses a danger to the student. Two K-8 districts highlighted the younger ages of their students as justification for greater parental involvement. One revised policy mandated parental notification whenever any student exhibits behaviors having an adverse impact on their safety or well-being, as long as it was not based solely on the student’s membership in any of the LAD’s legally protected classifications.

The attorney general and DCR’s director jointly filed administrative complaints with DCR alleging these policy revisions discriminated against transgender stu-

dents in violation of the LAD. They also sought preliminary injunctions before Superior Court judges in both counties to preserve the status quo while those administrative proceedings ran their course,

The attorney general’s arguments in court were grounded in the LAD’s definition of unlawful discrimination, that is, subjecting individuals to adverse treatment “on account of” their membership in one of the LAD’s many legally protected groups. There is nothing inherently unlawful about notifying parents of their children’s gender identity or expression. It only becomes discriminatory if some students are singled out for that treatment “on account of” being transgender. Still, the attorney general conceded that schools would be obligated to respond truthfully to a parent or guardian who contacted the school seeking confirmation whether their child identified as transgender.

The exception for students whose well-being would be jeopardized by parental notification did not save the policy either, the attorney general argued. The open-ended discretion given school officials to make that determination invites arbitrariness, inconsistency and stereotypical assumptions that children’s transgender status is inherently problematic. The attorney general also presented studies showing that a significant percentage of transgender students suffer anxiety from the prospect of their parents being informed of their status, and in some cases were subjected to violence or removal from their homes.

Some of the districts argued that their policies were not discriminatory at all, because they required parental notification if *any* students change their gender identity. Others argued that parents’ constitutional right to control the upbringing of their children takes precedence over any objections to disclosure, and notifying parents best serves the students’ interests in any event.

On a preliminary injunction motion, the issue isn’t whether the applicant’s legal position is absolutely correct, but whether

there’s enough likelihood of ultimate success that the challenged action should be held in abeyance until a final determination can be made on a complete record. The judges in both counties found the attorney general’s arguments sufficiently persuasive, by that standard, to prohibit the districts from revising their policies until the DCR proceedings are concluded.

While the injunction proceedings against Hanover were underway, that board rescinded its transgender student policy altogether. The judge allowed the board to do so, since nothing in the LAD or the Department of Education’s 2018 guidance required districts to adopt a stand-alone transgender accommodation policy. But the judge issued this warning: “To the extent school boards choose to ignore the [2018 department guidance], school districts and staff are in danger of engaging in activities violative of the LAD and may find themselves exposed to liability.”

As of this writing, the DCR proceedings remain in the early stages. Some of the districts who were enjoined are seeking appellate review. More recently, parents in the Cherry Hill and Cranford school districts have filed suit in federal court challenging the department’s 2018 guidance as unconstitutional and beyond the scope of its enabling legislation. All of these proceedings will take some time to resolve. School board members are sworn to uphold the law, but when the law is still evolving, as it is here, what factors should boards consider before committing themselves to a course of action in this legal twilight zone? Let’s review the available options.

OPTION #1: STAY THE COURSE. If your board supports the state’s position, as many do, there is no need to change your existing policy if it tracks the department’s 2018 guidance. Even if your board disagrees with that guidance, sitting tight while the current cases work their way to a conclusion may still make sense. You may not satisfy those in your community, or on your board, who disagree with the current policy, but would avoid costly

litigation from the state with uncertain results. Once the pending cases are finally decided, there should be binding state-wide guidance from our appellate courts that will resolve the issue as a matter of law and take your board off the hot seat.

OPTION #2: REVISE YOUR POLICY TO PROVIDE GREATER PARENTAL NOTIFICATION.

If your board is considering a revision to your policy to provide greater notice to parents than the department's 2018 guidance permits, you will need to assess two separate risks: first, the chance that some transgender students will suffer psychological harm, or worse, if their preferences are disregarded; and second, the chance that the attorney general will bring legal action against your district, with all the expense and inconvenience that would entail.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with challenging the state on this or any other issue if your board feels strongly enough about the principles at stake. As

responsible public officials, however, you should first consult with legal counsel to satisfy yourself there is a plausible legal argument standing a chance of prevailing in court. You should then commit the financial resources necessary to withstand the litigation that may ensue, even if requires multiple levels of appeals, and be transparent with your community about where you stand and why.

As for the prospect of jeopardizing transgender students, it cannot seriously be disputed that at least some may suffer harm if their parents are notified over their objection. Your board must determine whether the benefits of parental notification outweigh that risk, however small. Of course, whether it's approving a new contact sport or sanctioning a ski club trip, school boards often make decisions that pose some risk of harm to students. The question isn't whether something is safe, but whether it's *safe enough*. That's a value judgment. The judge in the Monmouth

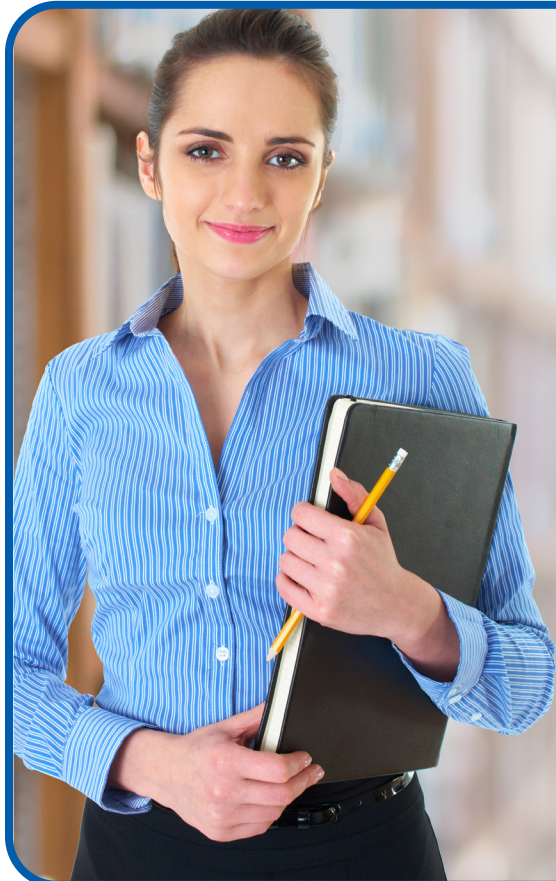
County case made his: "The statistical possibility that even one transgender student affected by the Amended Policies should run away from home, or attempt or commit suicide, is sufficient to tip the balance of equities in favor of the State." Your board must make its own value judgment and be prepared to stand by it.

OPTION #3: RESCIND YOUR TRANSGENDER POLICY ALTOGETHER.

Since there is no legal requirement to have a free-standing transgender accommodation policy, some districts have followed Hanover's lead and chosen to eliminate theirs. There are pros and cons to this strategy. The advantages are the community relations benefit of satisfying those who oppose your current policy and avoiding the likelihood of getting sued by the state for having an illegal policy. But having no policy at all comes with risks as well.

One of the important functions of board policies is to provide readily acces-

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FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE: ENHANCING SCHOOL BUS SAFETY TO PREVENT BULLYING AND VIOLENCE

Bullying is a serious concern for children, parents and educators. One in five students report being bullied, according to The National Center for Educational Statistics. It's a startling reminder of the ongoing struggles many children face daily. The consequences of bullying extend beyond immediate distress and can contribute to long-term issues like depression, anxiety and academic challenges.

A critical yet often overlooked space where bullying occurs is on the school bus. Here, the responsibility to monitor student behavior falls on bus drivers. However, their primary role is providing a safe ride, which can limit their ability to manage and respond to student interactions. This gap in supervision can lead to incidents that are not only distressing but also difficult to resolve without clear evidence.

Consider a troubling scenario: A middle school student accuses a high school junior of harassment on the bus. The junior emphatically denies the allegations. The bus driver didn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary. The bus has a standard camera in the front, but the footage is too far away and unclear to determine what happened, and there is no audio. Parents are unbelievably upset and threatening legal action. There is no way to truly know what happened, and everyone involved is alarmed and confused.

“Technology on most buses is from the 20th century. It’s time for an upgrade.”

We’ve come a long way from black boxes

Modern school buses are often equipped with cameras, but they typically offer limited viewpoints and lack audio capabilities. Furthermore, the current camera technology on most buses does not provide access to live video and often requires extensive steps to be taken just to view the footage. This outdated technology falls short in providing clear and actionable insights. As our superintendents, district safety directors and school board members have reported, “Technology on most buses is from the 20th century. It’s time to upgrade.”

What’s the solution?

How do we extend student safety from the classroom to the school bus? The answer lies in embracing innovative solutions like Transportant, an all-in-one solution built for safety and efficiency in school transportation.

Real-time video feeds and second-by-second GPS fleet tracking allow for live monitoring so you can see where the bus is, and who is on it, throughout the entire route. With the

capability to view multiple angles or even multiple buses simultaneously, it becomes easier to keep an eye on student behavior. The system even allows for direct communication and gives administrators the ability to speak into the bus, enabling immediate responses to bullying or behavioral issues before they escalate. In the event more help is needed, drivers can use an alert button to notify school administrators and timestamp the video for prompt review.

These features collectively enhance safety, but also foster trust and transparency among students, parents, and school administrators.

To learn how Transportant can help improve student safety in your school district, email rick@transportant.us or visit transportant.com



Rick Smithuysen

Rick Smithuysen, a lifelong resident of New Jersey, has 30 years of experience collaborating with schools and districts to address bullying. His current focus lies in partnering with districts to improve student behavior on school buses.

RECENT TRENDS IN COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATIONS

An update on recent contract settlements

The New Jersey School Boards Association collects and maintains a database of teacher contract bargaining data, including settlement rates, board gains, salary guides and more.

NJSBA urges school board negotiations committees to bargain with a primary focus on their board's ability to pay and what makes sense for their district, rather than relying mainly on comparative settlements in surrounding school districts. Nevertheless, comparative data should not be completely discounted. Board members, especially those on the negotiating team, should be knowledgeable about settlement data and current trends in contract negotiations.

Comparative data can provide boards with a sense of what agreements are being made in other districts. It can also provide board members with a sense of how competitive their district is in various areas, such as pay and work time, as well as the overall negotiations climate, before sitting down at the negotiating table.

SETTLEMENT RATES The results of our continuing surveys to the 135 New Jersey school districts with teachers contracts that expired June 30, 2023 (with 84% of the districts responding at the time this article was written), has found that a collectively negotiated agreement has been reached in at least 68% of those districts, some of which are still pending ratification. Further inquiries to those school districts that remain unsettled for the 2023-2024 school year indicate that at least 29% of those districts are at impasse and are now in, or about to go into, the mediation process. There are also still several districts whose teachers contract

expired June 30, 2022, that have not yet reached a settlement for a successor agreement and are now going through impasse procedures as well.

For new teachers contracts that began with the 2023-2024 cycle that have reached a settlement and reported it to NJSBA, the average increase — inclusive of increment — is 3.56% for 2023-2024. The preliminary average increase for 2024-2025 is 3.53%, and 3.47% for 2025-2026. In comparison, settlements for contracts that began with the 2022-2023 cycle, had average increases of 3.46% for 2022-2023, 3.38% for 2023-2024 and 3.32% for 2024-2025.

BOARD ACHIEVEMENTS In considering settlement rates, board members should also consider concessions from the teachers association achieved in the bargaining process, which can affect the effective cost of the settlement. For example, a district may have obtained a concession on tuition reimbursement or reduced its payment for unused sick leave, which may have resulted in savings to the board.

NJSBA has determined through individual district surveys that 46% of the new teachers contracts that begin with the 2023-2024 cycle have reported some type of concession from the association. Some of those changes include more flexibility in scheduling, additional student contact time and reducing or phasing out health insurance waiver payments.

However, two of the most notable trends, both of which are not necessarily a "board" achievement, have been observed since coming out of the pandemic — shorter salary guides and longer contracts.

SHORTER SALARY GUIDES The average length of a teachers salary guide in New Jersey increased during the 2013-2014 school year from 16 steps to 17 steps and stayed level through 2021-2022. However, since coming out of the pandemic, the number of steps on a teachers salary guide is being reduced once again, bringing the average back down to 16 steps. This may not seem like a large decrease, but considering there are several hundred school districts, it takes a good number of them reducing their salary guide steps to affect that average. Boards that have recently sent their union-proposed salary guides to NJSBA for review are frequently showing districts shortening their guides by one, two or more steps over the course of their agreement.

Shorter guides tend to have larger increments, so depending on where your staff falls on the guide, fewer steps can result in a large built-in cost of increment — which is the amount the board will incur by moving everyone (not on max) up one step on the guide. The length of the guide also affects how quickly a teacher travels through the guide, so a shorter guide may have more staff at the maximum salary rates, resulting in an overall higher salary cost for the board.

Before negotiations start, the board should conduct a structural analysis of the expiring teachers salary guide and compute the current cost of increment. NJSBA offers a teachers Salary Guide Wellness Check as a dues-based service to help your negotiating team determine where the issues lie within the current structure of your guide.

Once you have reached a settlement

and have proposed salary guides from the union, the Wellness Check service also includes an analysis of one set of proposed teachers salary guides to determine what changes that may have occurred to the structure of the guide and to make sure it costs out correctly, according to what was agreed upon in your memorandum of agreement.

LONGER CONTRACTS While three-year contracts are still the most popular, a record number of one-year agreements occurred during pandemic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022. Many settled quickly to move on from negotiations and reached a one-year agreement for salary-only. The sentiment at the time was to address other pandemic-related issues the board was facing with the idea of negotiating a longer contract next time.

Since 2022-2023 and continuing into 2023-2024, an unprecedented number of four- and five-year agreements have been reported. It is important to note that it was the employees union who asked for a change in the law to allow for five-year agreements, which was enacted in January 2013. Since the enactment, the percentage of five-year agreements ranged from 2%-9% each year until 2022-2023, when 17% of the reported contract settlements were of five-year duration. Of the settlements reported so far for the 2023-2024 cycle, 26% of them are five-year contracts, indicating the push for longer agreements isn't slowing down.

While it's understandable the parties would like to limit the amount of time spent negotiating, longer contracts result in the inability of the board to react to changes in their economic circumstances or the educational priorities of the district. For example, if a provision is no longer needed, or state aid is drastically cut two years into a five-year agreement, the board's hands are tied until that contract expires. The board should carefully weigh the desire to negotiate less often with the conditions a longer contract imposes on a future board of education and consider what will the board gain by agreeing to a longer contract.

Average Starting Salaries/Steps

YEAR	SALARY	#STEPS
2012-13	\$49,129	16
2013-14	\$49,792	17
2014-15	\$50,422	17
2015-16	\$50,937	17
2016-17	\$51,510	17
2017-18	\$52,153	17
2018-19	\$52,978	17
2019-20	\$53,781	17
2020-21	\$54,677	17
2021-22	\$55,611	17
2022-23	\$56,627	16
2023-24	\$57,732	16

Contract Length

FOR CONTRACTS THAT BEGIN WITH:	1 YEAR	2 YEARS	3 YEARS	4 YEARS	5 YEARS
2012-13	2%	2%	93%	3%	0%
2013-14	1%	4%	90%	3%	2%
2014-15	5%	3%	81%	8%	3%
2015-16	8%	5%	80%	4%	3%
2016-17	12%	5%	74%	7%	2%
2017-18	6%	3%	79%	9%	3%
2018-19	3%	3%	82%	10%	2%
2019-20	1%	2%	75%	13%	9%
2020-21	22%	4%	60%	8%	6%
2021-22	16%	2%	66%	8%	8%
2022-23	1%	4%	63%	15%	17%
2023-24	3%	4%	47%	20%	26%

NEGOTIATIONS DATA PORTAL As districts prepare to go into their next negotiations cycle with the teachers union, it is important for the board and the negotiating team to gain an understanding of current trends, review current settlement increases and research the competitiveness of its salary guide.

NJSBA made significant improve-

ments to the way it disseminates the negotiations and contract data it collects. In February, the labor relations unit released a newly updated *Negotiations Data Portal* (previously titled *Current Negotiations Data*), which includes a new custom data report generator. This feature allows the user to select the criteria for

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STRATEGIES FOR GETTING STUDENTS BACK IN SCHOOL

School districts throughout the state are finding new and innovative ways to reduce their chronic absenteeism rates.

A student is chronically absent if 10% or more of the school days are missed – which for most districts is 18 days, or about two days per month. Chronic absenteeism leads to lower test scores, learning loss and may indicate students are worried about bad grades, bullying, or troubles at home, according to the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

New Jersey's chronic absentee rate of 18.1% is well below the national average of 29.7%, according to 2021-2022 figures released by the state and United States departments of education. But the state's numbers are still 8% higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic closed schools and shattered routines.

"We still have work to do," said Cynthia Rice, senior policy analyst for Advocates for Children of New Jersey, who said school board members need to realize how important attendance is to student success. "You have to make this as important as how you implement curriculum, because no matter how good your classroom quality is, if you don't have kids in those seats, it's not

going to make a difference."

In recent interviews with *School Leader*, superintendents and administrators who have achieved better results shared the secrets of their success.

Using data to drive results. In Newark, administrators used data to drop the district's chronic absentee rate by nearly 15%. The district found that about 1,800 students were missing between 17 and 25 days of school each year – hovering slightly below or over the 18-day mark that would make them "chronically absent," said Edwin Mendez, director of attendance.

Each of these students was assigned an "attendance buddy," Mendez said. School counselors, principals, teachers, parents, case workers and others were drafted to make personal contact with targeted students.

Next, the district examined data from previous years to see which days students were most likely to miss class. Fridays were bad days for attendance. So was Halloween, the day before Thanksgiving, the day before break and many days in June. Special efforts were made to remind students how important it was to be in school on those days.

Cynthia Rice, Advocates for Children of New Jersey



As they recover from the pandemic, schools are finding chronic absenteeism rates remain stubbornly high. But not in all districts. In interviews, school leaders who have achieved better results shared the secrets of their success.

In addition to reminders, the district used incentives. Students who wanted their yearbooks early had to show up every day the week before the books were distributed, and the yearbooks were handed out on Friday, to help bolster a low-attendance day.

“We had festivals, we had parties, we had assemblies, giveaways, we had movies, popcorn, food ... anything you can think of to motivate a student to come to school,” Mendez said. The district also invested in technology to ensure absences were recorded accurately.

“Students scan in when they’re late. If a homeroom teacher already marked that student absent, that absence will be converted to a ‘tardy,’” Mendez said.

The results: Earlier this year, when the state released Newark’s numbers for 2021-2022, it showed a chronic absentee rate of 28.1%. Next year, based on the latest 2022-2023 figures, the chronic absentee rate will be 13.2%, Mendez said.

March Madness and other incentives In Passaic, Superintendent Dr. Sandra Montanez-Diodonet assembled an Attendance Review Committee that monitors chronic absenteeism closely, and she found innovative ways to use the data.

For example, using the data, schools take part in a “March Madness” competition, based on college basketball’s annual tournament. Schools face off in brackets and advance when their absentee rate is better.

At the Marion P. Thomas Charter School in Newark, Superintendent Angela Mincy says students with either perfect or “greatly improved” attendance get to spin a wheel every month. Students can win prizes donated by the community as a reward, Mincy said. The top prize so far has been a Sony PlayStation 5.

Last year, the charter school had a chronic absentee rate of 49.2% for the 2021-2022 school year, according to state figures. When new results for 2022-2023 are released next year, the district’s chronic absentee rate will decrease to 34.2% — a drop of 15%.

In addition to prizes and incentives, Mincy said the district sends a personalized letter home to every parent, saying how many days the student has missed. The letters are accompanied by a robocall to the students’ homes, telling parents to watch for it.

Videos in students’ native language To

combat chronic absenteeism in her 3,200-student district in Hunterdon County, Flemington-Raritan Superintendent Dr. Kari McGann convinced most parents to agree to receive mobile text messages whenever their chil-

Dr. Kari McGann,
Flemington-Raritan school
district



Five Strategies to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

KNOW THE DATA Know the difference between “average daily attendance,” which offers a snapshot of who’s in school, and “chronic absenteeism,” which monitors student attendance over time and could indicate which students are in academic trouble.

USE THE DATA Data can predict which days are low attendance days every year. Develop strategies to encourage students to come to school on those days.

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES Find out why students are missing class and help them get to school. Make sure you can communicate with families in their native language. Evaluate whether free breakfast and lunch, better bus service, or daycare for students with children will improve attendance and increase academic success.

OFFER INCENTIVES AND REWARDS Reward homerooms that post perfect or greatly improved attendance. Competitions, free pizza and prize wheels can make coming to school fun.

REVIEW POLICIES AND ELIMINATE BARRIERS See if traditional disciplinary policies are unnecessarily keeping students out of school. Make sure “tardy” students are not counted as “absent.”

dren missed school.

When middle school students said they were stuck at home because they had to help younger elementary school students catch a later bus, McGann’s middle school principals arranged Lyft rides so the older kids could also get to class.

As immigrants find new homes in New Jersey, McGann discovered another issue. While text messages and letters are an effective way to communicate with some parents, some students arriving in the district from Ecuador could not read or write – in English or their native language.

The solution? Video messages, recorded in their native language, posted on a special Facebook page, and also sent through bilingual agencies affiliated with the United Way.

Somerville saves money, provides services – and increases attendance The Motivation for Academic and Personal Success program is an alternative high school, started eight years ago

by Dr. Timothy J. Purnell, who was Somerville’s superintendent at the time and is now the executive director and CEO of the New Jersey School Boards Association.

Students who weren’t thriving in the traditional academic program also weren’t attending school, said Dr. Tanya McDonald, Somerville’s director of special services. As it sought to boost attendance, the district discovered something else. By bringing back six students from expensive out-of-district placements, Somerville could still serve those students and also pay for an alternative high school that would provide a high-quality education to as many as 40 students in need of extra services and motivation.

McDonald said the school’s impact on student attendance has been impressive. When the MAPS school in Somerset County began, attendance for those students improved 61%. The school has graduated 90 students since its inception.

MAPS principal Scott Hade said teachers are selected for their “ability to connect to life circumstances, and things that matter to the students, so they can see the relevance and importance” of what they’re learning. A therapy dog, Jeter Rose, also encourages the children to come to school.

In Union City, a sense of community helps students succeed

Silvia Abbato was appointed as the first Latina superintendent of her 96% Hispanic district about 10 years ago, and she knows what it takes to convince students to attend class. One-third of her 13,000 students aren’t fluent in English; 45% are at risk and 84% are economically disadvantaged.

Abbato knows the many challenges her students are facing. As a 9-year-old immigrant arriving in Union City from Cuba, she spoke no English. Her parents were respected educators in Cuba and worked in menial jobs while attending school at night to establish their academic credentials in the United States.

When she first taught in the Union City school district, Abbato covered holes in the crumbling walls with posters. She is thrilled to see how much the district has improved and that others are also getting the chance to live the American dream.

She tells the story of a young boy, Ramzi Saber, who came from Morocco with his mother, Ilham Chermane.

“He talked her into coming to the U.S., although they had no family here,” Abbato said.

Ilham wanted to turn around at the airport and go home, but Ramzi insisted. They arrived in the United States and found refuge in Union City, where Ramzi flourished in the school district, and his mother found a job as an aide. As a high school freshman, Ramzi used mathematics to discover a new planet in a distant solar system. His discovery won awards and helped him earn a full scholarship to the California Institute of Technology, where he is currently working on a project for NASA, Abbato said.

Union City students receive free breakfast, lunch and some extended programs also include dinner. The district maintains a daycare center for the infants of current students to provide support and help keep those students in school. Abbato said regularly attending school brings a necessary order and regimen to her students' young lives.

Improving bus service and breakfast In an email, Superintendent Anne Mucci of the Morris School District outlined what steps the district had taken to improve attendance:

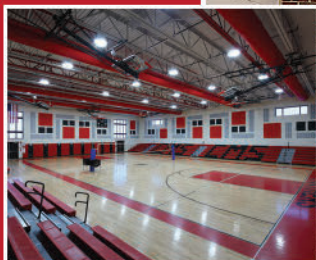
- › We increased bus service for areas in the district where we noticed clusters of chronically absent students.

- › We switched our breakfast service from grab and go to sit-down service in the cafeteria, increasing the quality of the breakfast choices and allowing the students to start their day with social time with their peers.
- › We tightened our attendance policy in accordance with state law and reviewed it at all of our fall meetings with families; our primary focus was on limiting unnecessary absences.
- › We designed reminder attendance letters to be automatically sent to families when their child is accruing unexcused absences.

What the focus should be Rice, the policy analyst from the Association for Children of New Jersey, summarized what school board members need to know. Focus on chronic absenteeism, not daily attendance figures, she said, to get an accurate picture of which students are in trouble. Develop relationships with students and families.

"You can't abolish chronic absenteeism," she said. "But you can make progress and help those kids."

ALAN GUENTHER IS THE RETIRED ASSISTANT EDITOR FOR THE NJSBA.



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TIPS ON OVERCOMING TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

An interview with two experts

If you run a transportation department at a school district, play a role in budgeting, or find yourself struggling to navigate challenges that revolve around busing as a coach, parent or teacher, then you already know getting students from Point A to Point B has gotten a lot harder – and more expensive – than it was 10 or even five years ago.

BY THOMAS A. PARMALEE

Inflation, high interest rates, a pandemic that caused some bus drivers to retire early or exit the workforce altogether and an increasingly demanding environment have combined to make what once was a difficult task seem almost impossible.

To help board members, school administrators and other stakeholders understand the stakes and overcome transportation challenges, *School Leader* reached out to two transportation experts: Janine Byrnes, president of the School Transportation Supervisors of New Jersey and director of the Sussex County Regional Cooperative in Hopatcong; and Joe Mondanaro, the school business administrator and board secretary at Roxbury Public Schools.

What has worked for districts in terms of easing the school bus driver shortage?

BYRNES: The shortage of bus drivers continues to be an issue in New Jersey. Districts have the advantage over contractors hiring drivers. The districts that are fully staffed pay high salaries and offer family benefits. Districts in northern New Jersey are paying upward of \$40 per hour. Contractors are rolling out large sign-on incentives for new hires, \$5,000 sign-on bonuses, paid time off and benefit options.

In this competitive market, the best way to bring in new drivers is to offer paid training. Looking toward retired civil service workers is a great place to start. Whether you have a certified training facility or pay to enroll a trainee, this will allow you to build your staff base over time and prepare for retirements or resignations. All boards of education will eventually need to address these questions: *How much should a bus driver make hourly? Where will the funds come from? Should they make more than an educator?*

Without the drivers, the students cannot get to school, which begins the supply and demand cycle of increasing the operational costs of managing an in-district transportation department.

How challenging is it for districts to transport special education students for districts, and what can be done to control costs?

MONDANARO: To start off, in comparing the full school year prior to COVID (2019) to last school year (2023), I have seen my special education transportation costs increase over 100%. For my district, that amounts to over \$1 million. Right after COVID, we were receiving quotes to transport some students that were over \$700 per day.

Another challenge is just trying to find a contractor that is willing to transport some of these students. These are students who are medically fragile and may require additional supports, such as a nurse and an aide. We also, at times, receive requests that a child can only be transported alone.

When you put it all together, the tuition, transportation, a nurse and other services may cost the district around \$300,000. That can cripple a smaller district's budget.

I work with the Educational Service Commission and the Sussex Cooperative. They put routes out to bid that will include students from surrounding districts who may be headed to the same school. This does help, as the districts then share in the total cost of transportation.

BYRNES: Transporting special education students is by far the largest expenditure. First and foremost, the student needs are driven by their individualized education plan. These accommodations are widespread and can include the need for medical vehicles, nurses and multiple bus aides to ensure safe transport. When students are attending out-of-district placements, the distance from home to school is another factor in rising costs.

Districts need to rely on their Coordinated Transportation Service Agencies to coordinate transportation with other local districts. Multiple students from surrounding districts attending the same out-of-district school placement can utilize the same route and pay a percentage of the transportation costs. Districts with their own transportation department and fleet can review their routing schemes to possibly transport to the out-of-district school. In addition, local districts can enter into jointure agreements to share the route costs. If these avenues are exhausted and costs continue to rise, a parent contract is a solution that provides consistency for the student and



Joe Mondanaro, the school business administrator and board secretary at Roxbury Public Schools

definite cost savings for the district.

It is critical that our student needs are met, and the proper supports are in place for safe transport. Business administrators along with district transportation coordinators and special services directors should work together to foster the best plan. Route coordination and looking for creative routing solutions is the only way to bring costs down.

What are the pros and cons of owning your own fleet versus relying on contracted providers?

MONDANARO: Contracted provider cons: You are at the mercy of contracted providers. You are stuck with the lowest bidder no matter what. You have very little control and have to communicate through many different layers when issues arise.

Contracted provider pros: You don't have to train or discipline staff. They are responsible for maintaining their fleet. You are not responsible for staff management.

Own fleet/own drivers' cons: Responsible for salary and health benefits, staff management, fleet management and fuel costs.

Own fleet/own drivers' pros: You *can* control costs. You can build a relationship with your hired drivers. Many of your drivers are also residents in the community. You provide consistency to your community with the same drivers and the same routes.

As transportation costs rise, are districts opting out of providing courtesy busing for students that live closer to the school than the statutory limit for busing?

MONDANARO: Trust me, I understand budgets are shrinking and this might be necessary. However, it is extremely difficult to stop providing a service that has historically been provided. If you choose to do this, be prepared for the community to come out to your next board meeting in droves.

BYRNES: Districts that have historically provided courtesy busing (grades K-8, two miles and under, grades 9-12, two-and-a-half miles and under) from school with the exception of a hazardous route policy are definitely beginning the conver-

sation of eliminating courtesy busing. The two main factors being rising costs and staffing difficulties. Districts are considering implementing subscription busing programs. This will allow the district to continue offering busing while passing along the entire cost or a percentage of the cost to the parents. Removing courtesy busing or beginning a parent paid subscription busing program will bring challenges from the community to the board. With rising costs, districts will need to explore this conversation and weigh the pros and cons as it will provide financial relief.

What are districts doing, if anything, to limit the costs of supplemental busing. For instance, field trip transportation, transporting athletic teams, etc.?

BYRNES: The costs of school-related activity busing continues to rise due to supply and demand. What was considered coveted extra work for drivers is now more difficult to cover. Districts with in-house fleets are forced to contract out trips and athletics because they cannot guarantee coverage of to and from school routes due to staff shortages. This drives the contractor's cost per trip up – if they even have the ability to cover the trips.

To bring costs down, districts can transport more than one team per bus to the same location. Districts can provide one-way busing. For example, the hockey team is transported to the ice rink for games and practices, and the parents can pick their athletes up. Moving game times to a later afternoon start would also open up more bus availability. When scheduling field trips, the cost per bus is factored into the trip and passed along to the parent in the total trip cost.

There has been a lot of talk about moving back the start time of school – perhaps even requiring schools to do so – to allow students to start at a later time. Is this a good idea?

MONDANARO: I understand that the research supports this idea for students. My main concern is what does that look like for transportation? We currently are able to tier our routes, mainly due to the starting time for the high school. We transport high school students first, then our drivers are able to go back out and pick up another round or multiple rounds of students. Currently, some of our drivers transport up to 200 students in their

morning run alone.

Again, we provide transportation for four other districts. A change in start times may not allow us to be able to continue providing those services. That's a major problem revenue wise for me – and what does that look like for the districts that I can no longer provide services for?

BYRNES: When it comes to transportation, it is known that a tiered routing scheme results in efficiency. Discussion related to starting high school students later will mandate the elementary and middle school population to start earlier. Buses must run routes in tiers, utilizing the same bus for multiple schools. The district will need to review all of the school times and come to a new overall schedule. If the high school were to require a single route, the cost factor will, at a minimum, double if not triple. If the delayed start time for high school would push the athletic game start times back, that in itself would decrease the transportation cost of athletics significantly. The struggle to get athletes where they need to be at 2:30 p.m. is a daily challenge for every staff member and contractor coordinating transportation.

How can districts work together or share services to cut transportation costs? Can you give any examples?

BYRNES: Districts need to look to each other for shared service options to cut costs. Here are some examples:

District A – Operates a bus garage with certified mechanics, District B – Operates a small fleet with its own buses. District A and District B enter into a shared service agreement for vehicle service and inspections. The agreement clearly spells out labor rates and mandated quarterly inspection rates. District A reaps the benefit of offsetting the expense of maintaining the garage, and District B's vehicles are maintained by district caliber staff.

District A – Operates a large Transportation Department. District B – Historically has contracted out its routes, but due to the contractor raising the route costs, the district is looking for alternatives. District B enters into a jointure agreement with District A. District A and District B school calendars and start times align. District A can tier the District B routes in with its existing routing scheme. District A offsets its existing route costs, and District B reaps the benefit of district-run buses transporting its students at a better rate.

District A – is a regional high school district that does not own buses. This district must bid its bus routes. District A contacts the K-8 districts that attend its high school. The three elementary districts agree they will bid the routes in a tiered bid. All four districts work with the CTSA to create bid specifications ensuring all routes get covered and the cost per route will be reduced by a minimum of half.

Problem solving together will always foster a better outcome. Now is the time to reach out to our expansive networks of transportation supervisors to find ways to share costs, allowing more funds to be allocated to educational programs. A district strong in shared-service agreements is an asset to the community.

What are your thoughts about districts using electric school buses?

MONDANARO: I understand that this will reduce our carbon footprint, however; I am not a fan of electric buses as they are today. I have attended many meetings on electric buses. My concerns are that they are costly, almost three times the price of a clean diesel bus. I also have concerns about the charging time. If we run buses for over three hours in the morning, is charging them for four hours in-between runs enough to get them on the road and through their afternoon runs? What about athletic trips and field trips? Where will they plug in? Can the power grid as it is today in Roxbury support the charging of 70 buses?

BYRNES: Electric school buses in New Jersey is a hot transportation topic. I have attended many meetings and events promoting the use of electric buses. I am aware that there are many grants available to offset the district cost. At this time, I believe there is a great deal of data collection needed to substantiate that the electric bus is, in fact, better than a clean diesel engine. The electric buses must be trialed in every region of New Jersey. We can agree they would be best suited for urban areas, with short routes that have upgraded power company grids. The longevity of the battery versus terrain and mileage distance needs to be further reviewed. The cost of a new electric school bus far exceeds that of a clean diesel. The current market value of a new clean



Janine Byrnes, president of the School Transportation Supervisors of New Jersey and director of the Sussex County Regional Cooperative in Hopatcong

diesel bus is \$150,000 versus a new electric bus at \$400,000. Even with grants offsetting a portion of the initial cost, small district budgets do not have the funds for this expense, especially with so many unknown factors.

Do you have any tips for districts trying to get the best price on school buses?

MONDANARO: I think districts need to look at a variety of things. If you have a larger fleet, try to stick with the same manufacturer, as many parts remain consistent even with different models. Look for districts that are in the process of eliminating their fleet. You don't need a bus with zero miles when some buses are good up to 100,000 miles or more with proper maintenance.

How has the interest rate affected how school districts approach transportation ... are we seeing districts delay the purchase of buses or contract instead of buying as a result of high interest rates – or has it been a nonfactor?

BYRNES: From my perspective, the interest rates are not delaying purchases. The supply and demand of the current market is challenging. Districts cannot wait to order buses, or they may not have vehicles to transport students. Districts are engaging in long- and short-term rentals from bus leasing companies while they wait to take delivery. Again, this is an unplanned expense causing negative impact on district budgets.

How do the challenges of rural and suburban districts vary – and is one better positioned than the other to navigate transportation costs and challenges?

MONDANARO: Rural district routes are much longer than suburban ones. Some rural district students may be on a bus for close to an hour. Suburban districts would have a much higher population of student walkers, unless, like here in Roxbury, our walking routes are deemed unsafe because of the lack of sidewalks.

BYRNES: Every district has its own challenges. Rural areas will have a larger footprint to cover, the route times will be longer, and there will be mini-

mal if any walker areas. The length of the route time will impact the ability to tier the routes. In a suburban area, there is likely to be a large population of student walkers, not requiring mandated busing. Tiering routes is easier in a suburban area. Rural areas follow a trend of receiving less state aid putting additional constraints on the overall budget.

Do you have any other suggestions on how school districts can ease transportation costs or make their transportation more efficient?

BYRNES: When looking for school transportation efficiency, always consider the following:

- Transport only mandated students when possible.
- Maximize ridership capacity of every bus.
- Route with a minimum of two tiers.
- Shared services equate to cost savings.
- Work with your local CTSA to coordinate the best possible service.
- Never compromise on student safety.

Do you have any final thoughts to share?

MONDANARO: There should be grants available to districts that engage in shared services. A district like Roxbury can provide more efficient services to surrounding districts, which ultimately can lower their transportation costs and lessen the burden on the local taxpayer.


BYRNES: School transportation is complex, and we can never lose sight of the precious cargo we transport. I would encourage every district transportation supervisor to look for resources to support them in their daily role. Student Transportation Supervisors of New Jersey is there for them to learn, grow and problem solve every day.

As the director of the Sussex County Regional Cooperative, I see daily route costs coming down in bids and unanticipated quotes. There is hope on the horizon. I truly believe that we can achieve greater results when we partner with our neighboring districts, CTSA's and contractors.

THOMAS A. PARMALEE IS NJSBA'S MANAGER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS.

School transportation is complex and we can never lose sight of the precious cargo we transport.

BY KURT REBOVICH JR.



PRINCIPLES OF NEGOTIATING WITH DISTRICT UNIONS

What board members need to know about PERC, mediation, impasse and super-conciliation procedures

One of the most critical functions of a school board member is overseeing personnel management, and one of the primary responsibilities of personnel management is negotiating with the district's bargaining units.

The relationship between the school board, administration, and union (most notably, the teachers union) is governed by the New Jersey Employer-Employee Relations Act, also called the Public Employment Relations Law or the PERC law. This law, passed in 1968 and amended several times since then, comprises statutes, regulations and case law. It is designed to prevent labor tensions between public employers and employees and provide a mechanism for swift resolution of labor disputes between the two parties. The intent of the law is to help the parties reach mutual agreements on employment issues that arise and prevent disruptions in the public services they provide.

The law focuses on the labor-management relationship, establishing parties' rights and responsibilities, conduct, scope, and procedures of negotiations, and how to resolve disputes. It also goes into the role and function of the Public Employment Relations Commission or PERC, an administrative agency in New Jersey whose purpose is to administer, clarify and enforce the provisions of the law. School board members (and those who bargain in the public sector) are affected by this law and should be aware of its impact on the collective bargaining process with public sector contracts.

A limited number of items can be negotiated between those who oversee the school district and those who are employed by the school district. This is called the scope of negotiations or what issues can be bargained. Items such as salaries, benefits and work hours are negotiable, while hiring, transfers, class size, and performance evaluation criteria cannot be negotiated. There are only two types of categories when it comes to bargaining in New Jersey: mandatorily negotiable and non-negotiable.

Mandatorily negotiable items must be negotiated if one party brings it to the bargaining table. PERC requires negotiations over items deemed "terms and conditions of employment." Over the years, case law has defined what generally falls under this category (such as grievance procedures, union representation fees, extra-curricular assignments and disciplinary review procedures). Just because an item is mandatorily negotiable does not mean one party must agree with another on one of these items; instead, it's an obligation to negotiate over an issue and act in good faith to bargain over that issue.

Non-negotiable items that fall outside the legal scope of negotiations cannot be legally negotiated even if the parties desire to negotiate them. This is because it severely impedes one of the parties' rights or is preempted by statute or regulation.

Examples of non-negotiable educational policy matters for management include class size, student grading policies and teacher lesson plan submission. Examples of statutory preemption exclusion for negotiations would include extending sick leave, pension contributions and seniority rights, because these items are already established explicitly in New Jersey statutes or regulations. PERC reviews disputes to determine the negotiability of a disputed issue and applies a test to determine whether an issue is mandatorily negotiable or non-negotiable.

PERC uses a three-prong test of negotiability established by the U. S. Supreme Court in 1982. To determine whether an issue is mandatorily negotiable or non-negotiable, an issue: 1) needs to affect employees' work and welfare intimately and directly; 2) must not be preempted by statute or regulation; and 3) would not significantly interfere with exercising inherent management prerogative about determining government policy. All three prongs must be met for an issue to be negotiable; if it fails one, then the issue is non-negotiable. On rare occasions, some issues fall under both negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of a contract. Part of an issue is negotiable in these cases, while another isn't. For example, class coverage may be non-negotiable, while the rate of paying a teacher to cover a class is negotiable. If there is language within a teacher's contract that is non-negotiable, then that language is unenforceable.

The scope of negotiations is a living item constantly being clarified and redefined through case law, statute and law changes. School board members must check with the resources available before and during the negotiation process to determine what is mandatorily negotiable and what is not. Boards must be mindful to meet their legal obligation to negotiate terms and conditions of employment. Failure to bargain over mandatorily negotiable items can lead to unfair labor practice charges alleging failure to negotiate in good faith.

MEDIATION PROCEDURES When face-to-face

negotiations appear to have reached a deadlock, either party may request PERC to initiate mediation. PERC will assign a neutral third party to conduct mediation of the negotiation's impasse; PERC will also bear the cost of the mediator's service. Mediation is a process in which an attempt is made to help the parties to reach their agreement. A mediator has no authority or power to make recommendations that will be binding on either party. Instead, the role and function of the mediator is to help and encourage both parties to find their mutually acceptable point of agreement. The mediator is not concerned with the fairness, equity, or implications of the parties' agreement; the neutral party's single purpose and focus is to get the parties to settle their differences. The mediator will use various conflict resolution techniques to encourage the parties to find a solution to their disagreement.

When mediation does not lead to a negotiated agreement, the continued disagreement triggers the process of factfinding. As a result of a July 2003 amendment, the PERC law now requires both parties to participate in mandatory fact finding conducted by a neutral party who is also under PERC's jurisdiction. Factfinding requires both parties to gather relevant, objective information to present a persuasive argument to a neutral third party, who will then analyze the facts and issue a written report and advisory recommendations for settlement. In practice, unless both parties object, the factfinder will first function as a mediator and attempt to resolve the dispute without "donning the robes" of a factfinder.

Suppose, however, that this "informal" stage does not result in a settlement. In that case, the factfinder will move to a more formal process that involves conducting hearings, where the parties support their arguments with factual documentation, the parties' submission of briefs, and ultimately, the factfinder's issuance of written advisory recommendations for a settlement. Despite the procedure's name, the report will not necessarily reflect a finding of facts. Still, it will be far more grounded on the factfinder's perceptions of what will be acceptable to both parties.

The scope of negotiations is a living item constantly being clarified and redefined through case law, statute and law changes. School board members must check with the resources available to determine what is mandatorily negotiable and what is not.

Factfinders' recommendations are advisory and nonbinding on either party. Thus, the factfinder's "success" lies in fashioning recommendations that both parties can support and accept. The factfinder's experience and the application of unwritten but well-accepted criteria will guide the neutral party's sense in fashioning a recommended settlement. The PERC law, even as amended in 2003, does not contain criteria or guidelines upon which the factfinder must

base his recommendations. Absent statutory criteria, factfinders have formulated their standards, which are tailored to the dispute in question and the parties' bargaining history. Generally, comparability is the most utilized criterion and most important to factfinders as this frequently estab-

lishes a basis for the parties' ability to find the recommendations acceptable.

By the 2003 amendment, after the hearings, a factfinder is to issue a report to the parties. Although the factfinder's recommendations are nonbinding, they narrow the differences between the parties and frequently lead to both parties' mutual acceptance and a new basis for productive continued negotiations that pave the way for a settlement. The report will be made available to the public within 10 days of the parties' receipt of the recommendations. The law then requires the parties to continue negotiating for at least 20 days after issuing the factfinder's report. If a settlement is not reached by that time, then PERC must appoint a "super-conciliator" to assist the parties in reaching a mutual agreement.

SUPER-CONCILIATION The 2003 amendment to the PERC law requires parties who have not reached an agreement within 20 days after issuing the factfinder's report to submit their dispute to super-conciliation. Super-conciliation, a process resembling mediation and factfinding, had previously been used by PERC to resolve crises in prolonged and intransigent negotiations. Under the 2003 law, however, the process became a codified, statutorily required procedure when post-factfinding negotiations do not produce a mutual agreement.

The law authorizes the PERC-appointed super-conciliator to schedule investigatory proceedings; discuss with the parties their differences; use means and mechanisms, including but not limited to, requiring 24-hour negotiations until a voluntary settlement is reached; and provide recommendations to resolve the parties' differences. The super-conciliator may also modify or amend the factfinder's report for the parties' reconsideration as one of the efforts to achieve a voluntary settlement and may institute any other nonbinding procedures found to be appropriate by the neutral party. If the actions taken fail to resolve the dispute, the super-conciliator will issue a final report. That report will be made available to the public within 10 days after the parties receive it.

The statutory collective bargaining process includes mediation, factfinding and super-conciliation. They are designed to assist the parties in reaching their own voluntary, mutually agreeable settlement. Neither the mediator, factfinder, nor super-conciliator has the authority to impose a settlement on the parties to negotiations. All

neutral parties assigned to the different levels of impasse procedures will be interested in only one factor: a settlement. None will be concerned with the equity of the agreement or its impact on a board's ability to manage its school or to fund the settlement. That responsibility remains with the board of education.

In facing impasse procedures, boards of education will be well-served by fully understanding the stages of the process. Understanding the criteria likely to be used in issuing reports and recommendations will be most helpful to boards' preparation of their briefs and positions for factfinding and super-conciliation. The NJSBA Legal and Labor Relations and Policy departments are your resource for the latest information and developments.

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BY THOMAS A. PARMALEE

CONTINUING A LIFETIME OF SERVICE



Bernadette Dalesandro Is NJSBA's 2023-2024 School Board Member of the Year

Bernadette Dalesandro, a longtime member of the Netcong Board of Education, president of the Morris County School Boards Association and the New Jersey School Boards Association's 2023-2024 School Board Member of the Year, remembers doing something a little crazy when she was in high school.

"It was 1976 when America was celebrating its bicentennial," she recalled. "I was in the band in my sophomore year and played the trombone, and these Revolutionary War uniforms were our band uniforms – we even had the tri-cornered hat. We were the Patriots."

Being a devoted New York Yankees fan and

knowing that the entire country was celebrating the nation's birthday, she took it upon herself to write the late George Steinbrenner, who owned the team, to let him know that she thought it would be a fine idea if band members from the Lenape Valley Regional High School marched onto his field prior to a game to play the national anthem

Bernadette Dalesandro, the NJSBA's 2023-2024 School Board Member of the Year, speaking at Workshop 2023 in Atlantic City.

PHOTO BY JAMES CONNOLLY



Left to right: Dr. Tom Connors, NJSBA's vice president for finance; Barry Fitzgerald, vice president of county activities; Chanta L. Jackson, vice president for legislation and resolutions; Karen Cortellino, M.D., president; Bernadette Dalesandro; Irene LeFebvre, immediate past president; and Dr. Timothy Purnell, executive director and CEO of NJSBA

for everyone at the ballpark.

"I remember writing a letter, and I said to my English teacher, 'Can you just check this to make sure this looks good?'"

Dalesandro can still recall her teacher's response.

"She said, 'You are out of your mind,' she laughed.

But Dalesandro told her that she had to try, and so the teacher looked, changed a few things and gave it back to Dalesandro to mail.

About a week later, Dalesandro was sitting in class when she heard her name called out over the loudspeaker, asking her to report to the office.

"I thought, 'What could I have done?'" she said. "And when I arrived, the superintendent and the English teacher who helped me with the letter were standing there. They said, 'You really did it this time – the board of education is never going to let this happen.'"

Confused, Dalesandro asked what they meant – and she learned that Yankees stadium had called the school wanting to take her up on the offer. In fact, someone had called wanting to speak to *her* but was passed on to someone else.

"They wanted us to come in two days," she said, which did not give the board of education much time to approve the trip.

"I explained to them I did not know what the board of education could or could not do," she said.

Somehow, the superintendent was able to arrange the board's approval over the phone, she said, and the performance actually happened.

The band played the national anthem before a packed crowd at Yankee Stadium, and their performance was broadcast on television.

It was the second time that Dalesandro became aware of the importance of a board of education.

The first time was all the way back in elementary school, when she learned that her best friend's mother was president of the Netcong Board of Education.

"I didn't really understand what that meant, but I looked up to her as a leader as this was in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and we did not have a lot of female role models," she said. "But she was the board president and the only female serving with a bunch of males. That was at the forefront of my mind."

CHOOSING TO SERVE Dalesandro didn't know it then, but those early experiences with a board of education – as distant they may have seemed at the time – left a lasting mark that ultimately got her interested in serving her community as a board member.

But first, she'd serve her neighbors and all of her fellow citizens in another way – as a member of the U.S. Marine Corps for 25 years.

Dalesandro, who is 62 and a lifelong resident of Netcong, says she's been asked many times over the years why she enlisted, and she tells the same story every time.

First, she really liked the uniform.

Second, she had a boyfriend, and the two got into their heads that after graduating, they would get married and join the Marines.

"I said, 'It sounds like a plan to me,'" she said.

And even though she ended up splitting up with her boyfriend a short time after that conversation, the idea of joining the Marines stayed with her, and she began talking to recruiters after turning 17.

Since she wasn't 18, her parents needed to sign her enlistment papers, so she set up a meeting at her house to meet with them.

Her father had served in the Army (including in the same unit as Elvis Presley in Germany), her uncle saw action during World War II on the Burma Road and her grandfather had served in World War I as a demolition expert, so there was a history of military service that made the conversation natural.

"But I remember my dad saying, 'I really want her to go to college,'" she said.

The recruiter told him "no problem" as she could join the Reserves and then decide what to do after graduating, which is what got her parents

to sign the papers.

"I left for boot camp the day after I graduated high school in June 1979," she said.

While attending college, she would spend a weekend a month with the Reserves as well as several weeks during the summers. After graduating from Springfield College in Massachusetts with a Bachelor of Science degree, she signed up for full duty.

"I had always wanted to be a Marine or a nun," she said. "But my father said, 'None of that nun stuff.' I remember asking the recruiter, 'Do you have nuns in the Marine Corps?'"

In the Marines, she'd serve as an O1, administrative specialist, before advancing to be a gunnery sergeant and eventually a first sergeant.

"There is no kindness in the Marine Corps, but I loved all my Marines and took care of them as if each one was one of my own children," said the mother of three girls and two boys, ranging in age from 29 to 39. "Some of them were the age of my own children."

CONTINUING TO GIVE BACK Dalesandro was still serving in the Marines when she began her board service at the Lenape Valley School District in 1995. "When my kids were in school, I took a look at being on the board and thought this was something I should invest my time in," she said.

A few years later, she joined the Netcong Board of Education, serving on both boards for several years.

Serving on two boards at a time, however, is not something she'd recommend in retrospect, as it was a challenging task, she said.

"I lost an election when serving on two boards," she said, which propelled her to focus on serving on just one board. "I came back a better and stronger board member," she said. "I concentrated on serving Netcong from there." She jokingly added, "Sometimes, I think that the residents put me out of my misery for being on two boards ... they helped make that decision for me that it was too much - and I was OK with that."

Asked how hard it was juggling being a Marine while serving on two boards of education, she said, "Life is a challenge. Raising a family under normal conditions is a challenge. But I had the support of my husband and my parents, who were there when I could not be - they really did make it easy for me."

After retiring from the Marines, Dalesandro put even more effort into community service.

In addition to being a board member, she is a member of the Skyland's Rotary, which has a motto of "service above self," she said.

As a member of Rotary, she came up with the idea to collaborate with the Netcong Education Foundation on its annual St. Patrick's Day Italian Style Dinner to raise funds to benefit the students and staff of the Netcong School District. Funds went toward a 1-to-1 Chromebook initiative, she said.

Over the years, the one issue she has been most passionate about is providing opportunities for students.

"I want students to have every opportunity to succeed," she said, noting that when her mom immigrated to the United States from Italy, she could not speak a word of English.

"And they didn't have ESL classes like they do now ... if you pronounced words wrong, you got hit on the knuckles. Believe me, she learned and succeeded in life, but she didn't have the help or the kindness like these kids have now, and I am glad to be part of that."

She's taken many of the lessons she learned as a Marine and applied it to her board service, she said. Those lessons include:

- Lead by example.
- Equip and empower others for success.
- Set high standards for behavior.
- Create a winning culture.

One of the teachings she learned in the Marines is that success and respect are never handed to you - they are earned. "And it is the same for being a board member," she said.

Later, she added, "It is about prioritizing board needs before your own and inspiring loyalty and admiration by attending school board training opportunities. By inspiring others to pursue training opportunities, board members invest in knowledge - and that pays dividends."

One of the ways Dalesandro has sought to lead by example as a board member is by being present. Since 2010, she has only missed one meeting as a board member, so she could attend the college graduation of one of her daughters in South Carolina. "Set the standard, and keep the bar high," she said.

Bernadette Dalesandro, NJSBA's 2023-2024 School Board Member of the Year, speaking at Workshop 2023 in Atlantic City.



As a result of her board service while serving, the Marines awarded her a medal recognizing her volunteer efforts as a board member and in local youth sports, including as an announcer of games.

The NJSBA, she said, has helped her at every step during her board member journey, giving her a wealth of training opportunities so she could be the best board member possible. "If you think you have taken all the classes and know everything, you are wrong," she said. "There is always something to learn – and NJSBA provides those opportunities."

Dalesandro is so committed to learning and training that she made sure the Netcong board did the hard work necessary to earn the Carole E. Larsen Master Board Certification, which the NJSBA bestows in recognition of high performing boards. To earn the certification, a currently certified board within the first two years of earning its certification must also complete at least 10 additional hours of training for a total of 26 board credits.

In addition to her board service at the local level, Dalesandro has gotten involved with state and county leadership, serving as a delegate to the NJSBA and as vice president and president of the Morris County School Boards Association.

One of her proudest moments as a board member with Netcong was helping bring a fully funded preschool program to the district at no cost to taxpayers. She also played a key role in helping pass a referendum, and she's proud of her contributions at the local and state level to implement changes in the state funding formula for the betterment of Netcong, she said.

Another noteworthy moment came about 15 years or so ago when she was part of opening a time capsule that had been placed inside the school in the 1920s – one that no one knew about until an elderly woman came forward and mentioned how she wanted to see the letter she had written come out of the time capsule before she died.

"No one knew it was there," Dalesandro said, noting that everyone was shocked when a camera was stuck into the cement and a copper box with various items, including the woman's letter, was found.

Today, the board houses its gavel in the copper box, Dalesandro said.

WORDS OF PRAISE Several board members, including numerous members of the Morris County School Boards Association, lauded Dalesandro's contributions as a board member in a

nomination letter that urged her to be named the 2023-2024 School Board Member of the Year.

The award has been given out since 2005 to honor a local board of education member who makes significant contributions to public education, exemplifies leadership in the field of education with a strong commitment to the children of New Jersey, demonstrates a strong commitment to their own personal and professional development as a board member and shows active involvement on school governance at the local, county and state levels.

An independent out-of-state panel reviews the nominations and identifies the individual who will be honored as New Jersey's Board Member of the Year.

Dr. Timothy Purnell, executive director and CEO of NJSBA, has been impressed by Dalesandro's commitment to furthering the education of all students. "Bernadette Dalesandro is a shining example of what it means to be a great board member," he said. "Not only has she faithfully served the Netcong Board of Education, she also has taken a leadership role at the county level, serving as president of the Morris County School Boards Association, where she has done additional work to promote student achievement and the efficiency of individual boards. I congratulate her on being our School Board Member of the Year. I also thank her for her service, not only to our students, but also to our country."

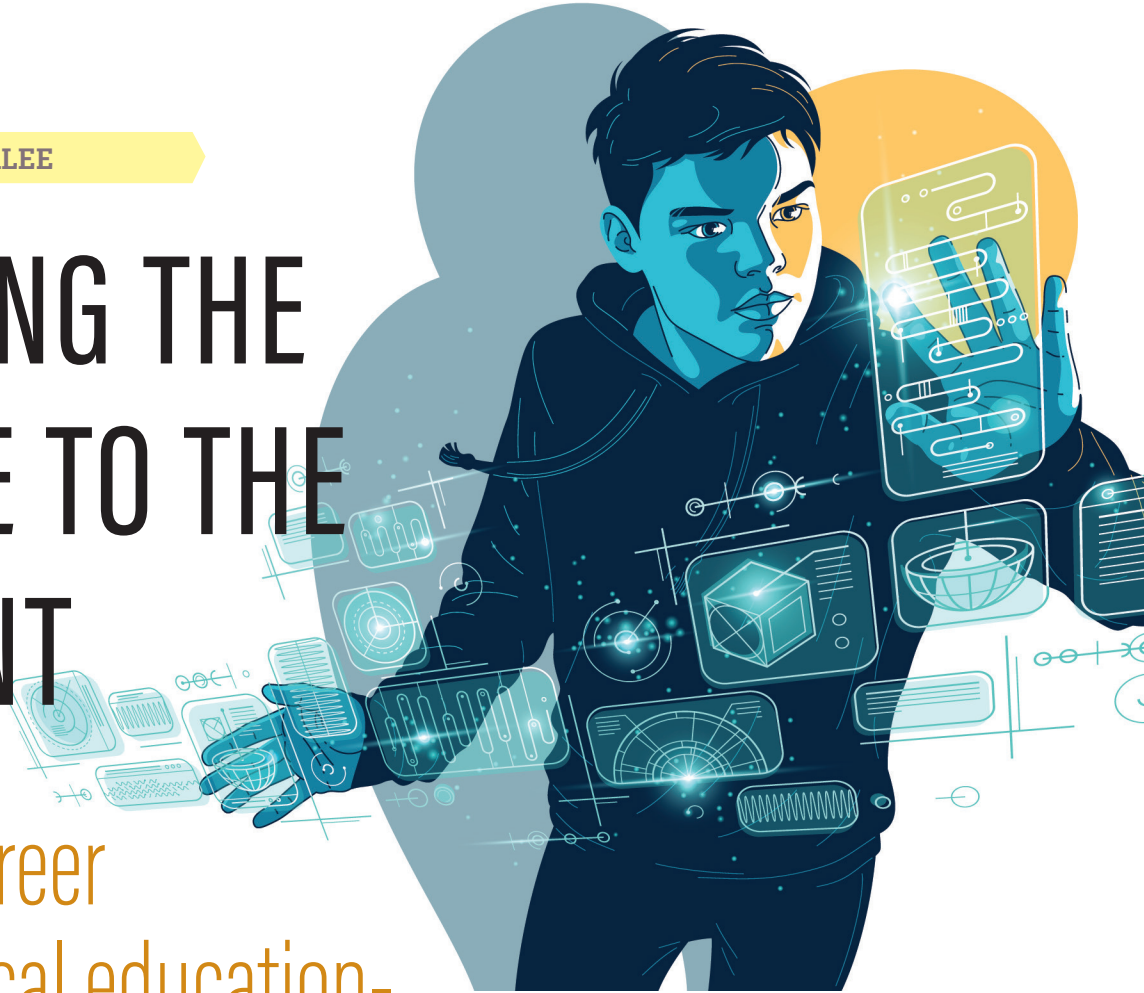
Dalesandro said she is humbled to receive the award, noting that one of its previous winners, Irene LeFebvre, immediate past president of NJSBA, has been "a true guiding force" and one of her role models. "When she presented this award to me in Atlantic City at Workshop, it was even more special," she said. "Without Irene – and don't let me forget Dr. Karen Cortellino (NJSBA's president), I would not have had the courage to lead at the county level." She added, "I share this award and accept it on behalf of every single board member I have served with over the last 27 years. I would not be the board member I am today without them. They have made me a better board member and a kinder, better person. I also accept the award for every student on my watch. I was merely a bystander who wanted nothing more than to ensure they had the tools to succeed."

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BY THOMAS A. PARMALEE

BRINGING THE FUTURE TO THE PRESENT

In these career and technical education-focused districts, educational technology gets priority status



When it comes to incorporating educational technology into the curriculum to promote the achievement of all students, school districts that focus on career and technical education may be leading the charge.

That includes the Burlington County Special Services School District and the Burlington County Institute of Technology, which are two separate school districts under a single board of education. BCSSD has about 530 students and BCIT has about 2,060 students. BCIT also has a postsecondary adult division.

Dr. Christopher Nagy, superintendent of the two districts, said he and his colleagues strive to think “like educational futurists.”

Tools in the educational landscape now mirror the world of students, he observed, which combines the science of learning with gaming, social media and immersive and extended reality tools.

Teachers should embrace the new tools that are available, said Danielle Hartman, director of curriculum and instruction at the Burlington County Institute of Technology, who said she’s surprised when new teachers enter the field with



A BCIT student in the criminal justice program learning on a MIOLO firearms simulator.

a lack of tech savviness.

Eder Joseph, the assistant superintendent who oversees BCIT, said helping teachers hone those skills is important. "And to be honest, there are some high schools that are still stuck in a very traditional model ... it could be fear of trying something new," he said.

But BCSSD and BCIT have strived to adopt technology early – particularly as it relates to immersive and augmented reality tools. And when artificial intelligence made significant strides, district leaders immediately asked, "How do we use this in the classroom?" Hartman said.

"It really has to do with the mindset," Nagy said. "We have constantly been talking growth mindset, innovative mindset, and we want to be risk takers and not worry about failing. We believe you fail by not trying – and we really do promote that."

It goes beyond "thinking outside the box,"

Nagy said. "Our mantra is to go where there *is no box* and create new pathways," he said. "Just by saying you want to work outside the box, you are already confining yourself in terms of the possibilities of where you can go."

With that philosophy in mind, BCIT began piloting educational virtual reality and augmented reality in the classroom about six years ago, Nagy said.

About 300 students in the criminal justice, allied health, and sports medicine programs use virtual reality headsets

The Burlington County Institute of Technology began piloting educational virtual reality and augmented reality in the classroom about six years ago.



from Envision Innovations at the Westampton and Medford campuses. Students can participate in 911-call simulations and much more, Hartman said. According to the district, the headsets provide several benefits:

- Promotes faster and more profound learning while extending memory retention.
- Creates engaging and enjoyable learning experiences, fostering a desire for in-depth learning and enhancing executive brain functions. This leads to tangible benefits such as reduced dropout rates, fewer behavioral problems and improved attention span.
- Adapts to diverse learning styles, paces, and abilities, offering a personalized approach.
- Serves as an alternative to traditional classroom methods, replacing textbooks and lectures with interactive content.
- Provides transformative learning experiences that are individualized, differentiated, self-reflective and intuitive.
- Offers memorable experiences through problem-solving, active engagement and interaction.
- Encourages empathy by offering a global perspective, helping learners understand the viewpoints of others around the world through practical applications.
- Delivers a 360-degree experience that remains fresh and unique with each viewing.

The partnership with Envision has been tremendous, Nagy said.

"I was introduced to the CEO (Alexander Cortez Jr.), who was mainly doing special operations training with proprietary software," he said. The conversation turned to how the technology could be used in classrooms, and he eventually visited the school district. "He selected us to be the company's beta incubator if you will," Nagy said. "Envision has provided us with that runway to have customizable virtual reality and extended reality applications."

It isn't just students studying criminal justice who get access to new technology. Students in BCIT's autobody program can think through how they'd paint a vehicle virtually, saving the district money on paint before they transition to the real thing.

Welding students get a similar opportunity. "Before they touch any steel, metal or other objects, they go through everything virtually,"

Nagy said. “We have saved a significant amount of scrap and money from that vantage point – and it has provided a great deal of confidence to our students.”

Autobody students use technology provided by SIMSpray, which combines virtual reality technology with innovative painter training simulations. Welding students use Vertex 360, Millers Augmented and guideWeld VR, Nagy said.

Educational technology is incorporated throughout both BCSSSD and BCIT so that everyone benefits. Among the technologies in place: an augmentative and alternative communication initiative with multiple apps for iPads to address students with a speech or language impairment to provide students with a voice; a Floreo Virtual Reality evidence-based program that utilizes Meta Quest headsets for learners with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and anxiety, so they can navigate scenarios in a safe environment; the Interactive Floor and Wall Projection System by Breeze Creative for multiple therapy modalities; Milo the Robot through AI; interactive learning tools provided by Teachers Pay Teachers and more.

Educational technology must be seen as “an investment,” Nagy said. District leaders should consider how many students will be able to use the technology, how it will boost engagement and how it will result in learning that would not otherwise take place.

“These tools have also been found to help considerably with students with disabilities, students who have trouble focusing and even students with autism,” he said.

For many applications, virtual or augmented reality is the only way for students to experience the material beyond the textbook, Nagy said. “There are certain things you just can’t pay for,” Nagy said. “This is where virtual reality and these other technologies come into play.”

As far as where the future of virtual and immersive technologies may lead, Nagy is excited about what’s next. “There is a possibility of leveraging artificial intelligence in such a way that a student would be able to extend their learning at home by working with an avatar of the teacher,” he said, explaining this could allay the teacher shortage.

Education, Nagy believes, is going through a major shift that will permanently change “the way we teach, learn and function in education” – one similar to the move to have one device for every

individual student.

“This has been a journey for us – of trying to bring the future to the present and to prepare our staff and students for that next generation of learning,” Nagy said.

GOING HIGH-TECH IN HUNTERDON A high-tech piece of equipment has been the star attraction at Hunterdon County Vocational School District’s biomedical science program, which was launched about eight years ago after the district received funding via a county Vocational School District Partnership Grant, which was offered by the New Jersey Department of Education to expand access and student opportunities in career and technical education for secondary students.

The Anatomage table, which is made by a company named Anatomage, is a technologically advanced 3D anatomy visualization and virtual dissection tool for anatomy and physiology education.

The table has been a game changer for students who would have otherwise had to rely on textbooks to advance their knowledge, said Jane Griesinger, director of curriculum and instruction and supervisor of academics.

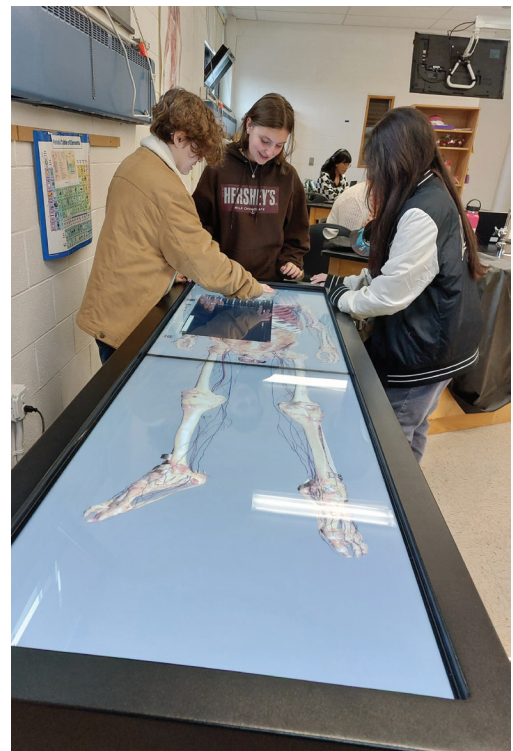
“It is essentially a virtual cadaver,” Griesinger said. “Instead of using a scalpel, they use their finger. “You can cut into the virtual cadaver. You can remove layers. If you want to look at the skeletal system, you can just look at that.”

The Anatomage table allows students to look at specific organs or the front or rear view of a person’s body. “The Anatomage table allows us to take what is typically reserved for medical school or a cadaver lab and take it into the classroom,” she said.

The advanced technology is so much better than looking at pictures in a textbook, Griesinger said.

“It is difficult to look at pages in a book and know where something is situated,” she said.

Hunterdon County Vocational School District’s Biomedical Science Academy students using the Anatomage table. Pictured from left to right are: Alex Ford, Mackenzie Holk and Ysabella Leonelli.



"This allows our students to interact in a more hands-on way."

The investment has been worth it, Griesinger said. Students in the biomedical science program and health care science program students all have access to an Anatomage table.

"We have one at each school," she said. "Once you get more than five or six students on it at a given time, it is not as hands on," she said, noting that classes will often rotate groups of students to give everyone a chance to use the technology.

Dr. Jean Kovacs, an instructor with the Biomedical Sciences Academy who earned a Doctor of Chiropractic degree and worked in private practice for 15 years before earning a teaching certificate, tells students that books and diagrams only teach so much. "When you see it in real life, in person, it just looks so different," she said. "So, it is amazing to get this firsthand experience."

The images on the Anatomage table are "actual images from a cadaver," Kovacs said. "We treat it as though we are in a regular dissection lab."

Photography is not allowed. "This is a real living person who gave permission to be photographed and put into the system," she explained.

The Anatomage table delivers an experience almost like the real thing, Kovacs said. "You can't pull on a muscle and move it to give you an idea of where you are, so you lose that tactile portion of it – and there is no smell to it, which in a way is better," she said. It's a great "lead in" to the real thing, allowing students to get the type of exposure they'll find in a university setting, she said.

District staff members were all in on the technology from the beginning, Griesinger said. "All of our staff members are people with a medical background or are in the biomedical field themselves," she said. "That said, we did not do a tremendous amount of training, but the equipment is fairly intuitive."

Using the tables is like "operating a big, giant iPad," Kovacs said. "There is nothing you can really mess up," she said. "You can go back and go forward."

Older students who are familiar with the Anatomage table come back to help younger students. "We partner with our seniors, who work with the freshmen," Kovacs said. "They show them how to operate and start it. The older kids have become a great resource, which is amazing ... it binds them together and helps them because when they are ready to step up to university, they

will be dealing with older students."

The Anatomage tables have been a great resource, but it may soon be time to buy new models to take advantage of updates, Griesinger said. "Technology only has so much of a useful life, so we might need to think about whether we need to invest in a newer model," she said, noting that an Anatomage Table costs somewhere between \$50,000 and \$100,000, with the average cost of the 8.0 model being about \$72,000.

While the technology comes at a cost, it gets ample use, with about 50 students having most recently come to freshman orientation. Overall, there are about 200 students in the Biomedical Sciences Academy. "Some kids also come back after school and use it more," Kovacs said. "They can do independent work on it – and you can also do different games and quizzes and things."

The board of education has been "fantastic" in supporting the inclusion of technology into the curriculum, Griesinger said. "Because we are a career and technical education school, there is a general recognition that our equipment and technology must be cutting edge," she said.

Enthusiasm from students indicates that investing in the technology was a great idea, with one student doing a capstone project that revolved around creating a manual for the Anatomage table, complete with lesson plans to promote learning.

"I think we need to be smart about what we do with technology – the way vocational schools are structured in New Jersey makes them a unique environment," Griesinger said. "There is some technology that every district should incorporate, but I also think there may be some technology that is very specific to a specific career and may be very expensive." She added, "But there is something to be said for county vocational schools leading the charge and partnering with some comprehensive school districts to make those resources available."

FOCUSING ON MANUFACTURING AND APPLIED SCIENCE

Students in the Academy of Biological Sciences at the Gloucester County Institute of Technology, which is a four-year vocational-technical public high school in Deptford Township that is the only school in the Gloucester County Vocational-Technical School District, also have access to an Anatomage table.

An array of other technology, however, is incorporated into its Advanced Manufacturing & Applied Science Academy, which serves students

pursuing careers in innovation, automation, robotics, 3D modelling and 3D printing, new manufacturing technologies and more. Students in the program can earn college credits and industry credentials.

The academy was introduced in 2018 with the passage of the 2018 Securing Our Children's Future Bond Act, which provided \$275 million to grow career and technical education to support New Jersey's economy.

Michael Dicken, superintendent of the district and a former president of the New Jersey Council of Vocational-Technical Schools, noted that the advanced manufacturing program welcomed its first cohort of 26 students in the fall. The academy is expected to eventually serve about 200 students.

"This current freshman class was recruited without a building," Dicken said. "We are expecting a much higher application pool this year than last year."

The bond act was instrumental in getting the academy up and running, he said, with the county commissioners agreeing to pick up 25% of the cost of its \$16 million building housed on the campus of Rowan College of South Jersey in Deptford. The district's main campus is right next to the college campus.

Schoolwide, Gloucester serves about 1,600 students, and the district strives to help the students of the advanced manufacturing program feel connected to the main campus. "We shuttle them back and forth to assemblies and athletics," Dicken said. "We are trying to create a balance between being on the main campus and not missing out on a true high school experience but also giving them the intimacy of their own school



where they are able to develop their own culture."

Matthew Woodrow, a teacher of engineering at Gloucester County Institute of Technology, is impressed with the technology available to students. "There are a wide variety of technologies and equipment available to students in Advanced Manufacturing," he said. "There are portable trainers for learning AC/DC circuits, pneumatics, hydraulics and electric relay controls. There are larger pieces of equipment for learning mechatronics, programmable logic control systems, and electric motor controls. We also have a 3D printer and a tabletop CNC machine."

The technology encompasses a variety of areas, such as:

- An alternating current/direct current circuit tool that students can use for wiring, to turn on bulbs etc.
- An electromagnetic system tool with which students can learn about relay controls that can be used to build programmable, logical controllers.
- Pneumatic technology that is used by airlines and in other fields.

"We have all kinds of sensors and equipment – students need to understand all of that," Woodrow said. Students are often amazed when he tells them that they should eventually be able to assemble something that resembles one of the

Brynn Nolan and Emma Davidson working with a Skill Boss Logistics machine, which does a buffing operation.



Students at Gloucester County Institute of Technology's Advanced Manufacturing & Applied Science Academy have a wide variety of technology and equipment at their disposal.

technology trainers that they use.

Whether it is 3D printers, a computer-aided design machine that allows students to digitally create 2D drawings or 3D models of future products, hydraulic equipment or a vertical mill that can cut aluminum and other material, students get to enjoy an immersive technological experience.

"We also have a pretty robust advisory committee, which includes some petroleum companies," Dicken said. Those members can give the school deep insights into what skills companies are looking for from students when they graduate.

Teachers are heavily invested in using technology to teach students, Woodrow said.

"I was a mechanical engineer who created programmable logic controller systems prior to teaching, so I'm not simply a teacher – I'm an engineer who teaches," he said. "So, for me, it is getting used to what the equipment is."

The challenge in running the advanced manufacturing program is that it touches so many different fields, Dicken said. "We have so many different types of students ... there is an engineering piece and a traditional trade piece."

Keeping up with technology can be difficult for any school district, Dicken said. "But given our mission, we dedicate funds in our general budget to have the most up-to-date equipment," he said. "People come here to learn careers – and we want to make sure they learn on the most modern equipment possible."

With that said, Dicken recognizes that his mission leading a vocational school is slightly different than traditional K-12 districts. "As a vocational school, we have to make sure our students are prepared to learn in the workforce," he said.

Students love being able to learn with the assistance of the latest technology, Woodrow said. "The 26 students we have right now are very engaged," he said. "I do not have to fight anyone to get work done. They know how class runs: They come in, open up their laptops and get to work. They get on the trainers as their skills go along and they meet different objectives through the online curriculum. It has turned into a self-directed course, where I come in and make sure everyone understands. Right now, we are learning about logic controls. This is stuff I did not see until I was a sophomore at Drexel – and

they are seeing it in the second month of their freshman year."

Woodrow continued, "I don't envy academic teachers who have to sit and lecture – not that I don't have to lecture and provide background information. But when you use theoretical knowledge and combine it with practical application of that knowledge, it makes teaching much easier."

Even with that hands-on piece, however, there is a lot of knowledge students need as a foundation, Woodrow said. "Right now, the math is at about an Algebra 1 level where a typical freshman would be," he said. "Kids also need to kind of understand 'What does 1/1000 of an inch look like?' and 'How do I equate that to things I have to apply that measurement to?' It's more of a practical experience."

The district's board of education has been supportive in helping the district weave the latest technology into the curriculum, Dicken said. "We strive to get grants if we can't find money in the local budget," he said. "My advice to boards is to reach out to your community and reach out to anyone who can donate items. I also encourage districts to apply for Perkins funding. Look for those resources."

Take an honest look at how your district fits into the community, he said. "Are you in an agricultural area and do you want to build programs around that? Or do you focus more on academics?" he asked. "Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are many organizations that will help you or donate equipment."

"The money is out there," Woodrow agreed. "You just have to go and find it, but it takes some effort. Our engineering academy has partnered with Lockheed Martin and every year or every other year, depending on what is available, they donate \$10,000 to \$15,000. You don't always have to go to your taxpayers – private industry will invest in the future."

More school districts should focus on incorporating technology into the curriculum, Dicken said. "You have to recognize that the world is changing, and it is only going to change and evolve more in a high-tech environment," he said. "It is important to give students the tools they need."

THOMAS A. PARMALLEE IS NJSBA'S MANAGER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS.

BY JANET BAMFORD

INTRODUCING 2023'S UNSUNG SCHOOL SUPERHEROES



NJSBA shines a spotlight on the often-overlooked staffers who are the heart and soul of their schools

It takes a whole team to create a positive and conducive learning environment in a school.

In New Jersey there are long-standing — and well-deserved — recognition programs for teachers, administrators and even board of education members. However, the contributions of essential staffers in several categories are often overlooked.

That's why the New Jersey School Boards Association started the "Unsung Superheroes" awards program in 2023. The name is a play on the Workshop 2023 theme, "Today's Students, Tomorrow's Superheroes," and the program honors staffers who work tirelessly behind the scenes, making an immeasurable impact on our schools and local communities.

Staff members in 10 categories were recognized, including administration/secretary; bus driver/aide; cafeteria/food services; coach/club

adviser; crossing guard; custodian/maintenance/building and grounds; librarian/media specialist; paraprofessional/aide; school nurse; and school security personnel. There was also a football chain official recognized for his contributions.

These individuals strive to provide a safe and nurturing environment for our students.

NJSBA received more than 200 nominations from 112 districts throughout the state. "This speaks to the appreciation that students and staff have for these school staff members who are typically overlooked," said Dr. Timothy Purnell, executive director and CEO of the NJSBA.

Join us in congratulating the inaugural recipients. Each winner in this article is pictured with Karen Cortellino, M.D., president of the NJSBA.:



CHARAE THOMPSON-PERRY, Camden City School District, was the winner in the administration/secretary category. She is the senior director of community partnerships in the Camden City School District. With over 30 years of dedication to the very district that nurtured her, she embodies the essence of prioritizing students. During her free time, she coaches a group of over 60 young individuals in cheerleading, and personally provides students in need with food and clothing.



VERNON BERUBE, Beach Haven School District, was the winner in the bus driver/aide category. He has served Beach Haven Elementary School since 2009. A member of the community since 1960, he takes care of his bus and the school's children as if they were his own. He takes time to get to know each student and family, and continuously evaluates and adjusts his procedures to ensure the utmost safety for children. A beloved member of the district, he also gives back to the community by supporting the PTA and many local businesses.



ANTHONY FINK, Hamilton Township School District, was the winner in the cafeteria/food services category. He is the food service supervisor for the Hamilton Township School District. During the pandemic, he developed and implemented programs to ensure students received nutritious meals, whether they were attending school in-person or on a hybrid basis. He was instrumental in establishing efficient breakfast and lunch distribution programs, giving students access to quality meals even in uncertain times.



LAURA CHEGWIDDEN, Kinnelon School District, was the winner in the coach/club adviser category. She is the head coach of Kinnelon High School's cross country and track teams. "Coach Chegs" is highly acclaimed by her superintendent, students and board of education members. She openly and proudly praises her athletes at board of education meetings.



JAMES SCHROEDER, Verona Public School District, was the winner in the crossing guard category. He has been stationed at the street corner of Forest Avenue and Hillside Avenue for almost 20 years. Every day, regardless of weather conditions, he responsibly and cheerfully guides children across the street. He knows each child and their parents by name, greeting them with a smile every day.



THERESA DIGERONIMO, Hawthorne Borough School District, was the winner in the librarian/media specialist category. She is the media specialist at Hawthorne High School and has served in this role for 18 years. She has created a media center that has invaluable resources for every student and staff member. She encourages student input on library materials, notifies teachers of the resources available to them and ensures media center materials are aligned with the curriculum. She updates the school's social media and produces a monthly media center newsletter.



KRISTIAN BYK, Watchung Hills Regional High School District, was the winner in the custodian/maintenance/building and grounds category. He has served as the director of operations for buildings and grounds at Watchung Regional High School for the past four years, though he has been an employee for 21 years. He ensures students learn in a safe environment and is always available, going above and beyond his responsibilities daily.



JENNIFER VOLI, Bloomingdale School District, was the winner in the paraprofessional/aide category. She has been a paraprofessional within the Bloomingdale School District for 16 years and currently works at Samuel R. Donaldson Elementary School. Described as a "godsend" by teachers and administrators, she can be counted on for everything and has a deep, genuine love for supporting all students. She embraces what a student needs

to be successful and encourages them to be active participants in the community.



LAURYN HOOVEN (ABOVE), Weymouth Township School District, was the winner in the school nurse category. She is described as an exemplary nurse and employee. Every member of the school relies on her expertise. Even in emergencies, she maintains a calm and professional demeanor. She goes out of her way to check up on students' well-being, both physical and emotional. She plans proactive health events for the school and is an integral member of Weymouth Township School District.



OFFICER NICOLE DEBIASE, Somerville School District, was the winner in the school security personnel category. She is a community police officer who serves Van Derveer Elementary School. She participates in school functions. She understands how building relationships with the school community strengthens the overall safety and security of the school. Described as one in a million, she does all that she can to support the academic and emotional growth of all Van Derveer students.



There was also a special recognition for **JOHN PRUDENTE**, a football chain official at Somerville School District. Prudente has served Somerville High School for 50 years as the chain official, part of the school's "chain gang." He has the very important responsibility of ensuring the school's football games are tracked accurately from the sidelines. Over the years, he has been part of four undefeated seasons and eight state championships. He has missed only one game in his decades-long career of being a chain official.

Nomination information for the 2024 Unsung Superheroes awards will be announced in *School Board Notes* in Spring 2024.



The Unsung Superheroes with NJSBA's officers and Dr. Timothy Purnell, far left, the executive director and CEO of the NJSBA.

LEGALLY SPEAKING continued from page 14

sible instructions to school employees on how to handle matters with significant legal implications. Your board may already have a broadly worded policy prohibiting discrimination against legally protected groups, including transgender students, so shouldn't that suffice? Consider this: Most employees probably know how not to discriminate against students based on race, nationality or gender. But would a rank-and-file school employee, or even a high-ranking administrator for that matter, know what the LAD requires by way of transgender accommodation? If not, then what are your board's expectations for how staff will treat transgender students in the absence of a policy to guide them?

How you answer those questions will drive your board's decision on whether to keep at least some policy in place, even if it conflicts with the state's position. One thing is certain: Leaving employees to figure this out for themselves virtually guarantees inconsistency and arbitrary treatment with inevitable legal exposure.

In closing, the definitive legal requirements for transgender student accommodation under the LAD are whatever our appellate courts eventually tell us they are. Until then, school leaders must balance respect for community values, sensible risk management and their own sense of right and wrong in doing what's best for kids. Hopefully, this article has offered a framework for thoughtful decision-making.

DAVID B. RUBIN IS OF COUNSEL TO THE BUSCH LAW GROUP.

LABOR LOOKOUT continued from page 17

the report (e.g. county, enrollment group, etc.) that can be viewed in a table on the screen, downloaded into a printable .pdf report, or downloaded into a spreadsheet.

The data contained within the Portal is obtained through surveys to each district's administration office and through an interpretation of the submitted contract and salary guides. It is important to

note that not all districts respond to the submitted survey or send in their collective bargaining agreement. NJSBA strives to keep members up to date with current negotiations trends and relies upon each district's continued contributions for this data collection endeavor to be as complete, and meaningful, as possible.

The table accompanying this story

displays a selection of recent settlements reached over the past 12 months or so. Additional data is available in the NJSBA *Negotiations Data Portal*, where settlements and salary guide data is accessible to members (password required).

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WEST-WINDSOR PLAINSBORO REGIONAL'S DUAL-LANGUAGE IMMERSION PROGRAM

The initiative was honored with a *School Leader* award

The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District was honored as an exemplary program in the 2023 *School Leader Awards* for its "Dual Language Immersion Program." The program is designed for K-5 students.

The district offers two programs: Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. At the K-3 level, Mandarin Chinese is offered at Maurice Hawk Elementary School and Spanish is offered at Dutch Neck Elementary School. At the fourth- and fifth-grade level, both Spanish and Chinese are offered at Village Elementary School.

All WW-P students are eligible to apply for the program prior to the start of kindergarten, with the district welcoming a robust blend of new language learners and students who already speak the language in the dual language immersion kindergarten program each fall.

The mission of the DLI program is to support students as they learn core academic content and skills while learning both English and the target language. The program seeks to foster strong intercultural competence in every learner, with the district encouraging students to appreciate other cultures and develop a deeper understanding of their own cultures – all while learning how to communicate effectively across global communities.

"WW-P's Dual Language Immersion Program was born as an actionable program from one of our district's four strategic goals, 'Embracing a rapidly changing world, we will empower learners to assume active roles in their communities,

to face and engage global challenges and to contribute proactively toward a more peaceful, just, inclusive, and secure world,'" said Dr. David Aderhold, superintendent of schools. "To see the program grow from four kindergarten classrooms to six grade levels and over 530 students speaks to the staff and community's belief in our strategic goal work guiding our school and classroom practice."

Dr. Ashley Warren, WW-P's supervisor of world languages and dual language immersion, said the program welcomed its first four classes of kindergarten dual language immersion students in September 2018. "Since then, we have opened a new grade of dual language immersion each year," she said. "Watching our students 'grow up' in the program has been a joy! Two of the challenges that we have found are finding certified bilingual staff and developing appropriate curricular resources in Spanish and Mandarin."

The program recently had 532 students, with both programs being equally popular, Warren said. Asked about how proficient the students are in either Spanish or Mandarin, Warren explained, "Our DLI program is home to both new language learners and students who already have a proficiency in Spanish or Chinese. If a child already speaks/understands the program language, then their participation in the DLI program allows them to maintain and strengthen their home language while developing biliteracy in English and their home language. If a child does not yet speak or understand

Spanish or Chinese, the student will learn the target language from their teachers and peers in the program."

The program is aligned to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards in English/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, world languages and all other content areas. "Our DLI program follows a 50:50 model. In this model, students experience 50% of the day in English and 50% in the target language: Spanish or Mandarin Chinese," according to the district's entry letter.

Community response to the program has been tremendous, Warren said. "Our kindergarten DLI classes are full, and we have started using a waitlist due to the strong interest in our program," she said. "Once in the program, our DLI families are very supportive! Year after year, I enjoy watching how families partner with our staff to strengthen and further develop our program. Perhaps the greatest sign of family commitment to the program is the dozens of siblings that we now have enrolled in our K-5 DLI program."

The DLI program is helping the district encourage students to embrace a rapidly changing world, Warren said. "Ultimately, DLI programming helps students to grow in their knowledge and appreciation of other cultures, to develop a deeper understanding of their own cultures and to learn how to communicate effectively across global communities in multiple languages," she said.

THOMAS A. PARMALEE IS NJSBA'S MANAGER OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS.

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