

REVIEW

an education and advocacy resource

PHILOSOPHY



RELIGION



SOCIAL SCIENCES

Gillian Ober

2025-26 Teacher of the Year

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At the Members of Color Empowerment Conference on Oct. 18, Janicea Jones-Vance (Orange EA) makes a point during the workshop "She Leads: Navigating Your Role Within Your Union," while Lucille "Kitt" McSeed (Orange EA) and Sahid Jabbie (Sayreville EA) listen.



NJEA members honed their skills and celebrated excellent organizing and bargaining wins at the 2025 NJEA Jim George Collective Bargaining Summit.



FEATURES

20 MEET 2025-26 NJ STATE TEACHER OF THE YEAR GILLIAN OBER

Gillian Ober, a teacher in Freehold Borough, is the 2025-26 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year. Her path to the classroom in New Jersey winds through Spain and Thailand, where her experiences taught her what it means to be immersed in a new culture and not fully understand the local languages and idioms. Now she is an advocate for all students, including multilingual learners.

By Kathryn Coulibaly



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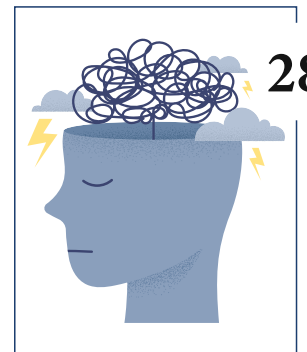
24 FROM CARIBBEAN FARMS TO NEW JERSEY CLASSROOMS

Alejandro Mejía's story spans from his childhood in the Dominican Republic to being named Union County Teacher of the Year. Along the way, he found lifelines in teachers, discovered resilience through language and identity, and committed his life to helping multilingual students feel seen, supported and celebrated in American classrooms.

By Alejandro Mejía



24



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28 MANAGING SECONDHAND TRAUMA AS EDUCATORS

Across the United States, educators are faced with a wide variety of challenges. In recent years, there has been an increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders in school-aged children. The trauma that students experience and bring with them into the classroom can have an impact on educators' mental health, career satisfaction and overall well-being.

By Dr. Alexandra Glover-Candee and Dr. Lauren Delisio

32 ROOTED AND REACHING FOR THE STARS

At Howell Township Middle School South, learning doesn't just happen inside a classroom—it flourishes in the students. Educators have helped shape a school culture where student-led inquiry, hands-on science and community partnerships thrive in harmony. They've relied on grants and practical support from outside organizations and the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO).

By Josh Langenberger



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36 NJEA CONVENTION PHOTO GALLERY

The NJEA Convention is the largest educational gathering of its kind in the world. Hundreds of professional learning programs, aisle after aisle of educational exhibitors, meetings of professional affiliated organizations and student talent all came together for two days in Atlantic City. Check out a selection of photos from the photo gallery found online at [flickr.com/njea/albums](https://www.flickr.com/njea/albums).



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Progress demands action



The number
111,124+

The number of NJEA members who signed a petition calling on the New Jersey State Legislature to pass and Gov. Murphy to sign Tier 1 for Everyone in the lame duck session that ends on Jan. 13.

Source: NJEA



Did you know? Save on holiday shopping

★ NJEA members can save on thousands of name brand retailers during your holiday shopping. Find discounts and earn cash back on apparel, electronics, gift baskets and more. Visit the NEA Discount Marketplace powered by Rakuten.



For more information, go to neamb.com/products/nea-discount-marketplace



Gillian Ober is the 2025-26 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year. Read about her journey across continents on pages 18 to 21.

PHOTO BY
Kathryn Coulibaly

REVIEW



180 W. State St., P.O. Box 1211, Trenton, NJ 08607-1211 • 609-599-4561 • NJEA.org

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VOLUME 99
NUMBER 05

Editorial Director Steven Baker
Art Director Gregg Poserina
Graphic Designer Jennifer Larson
Advertising Sara B. Ream

EDITORIAL & PUBLISHING OFFICES

The *New Jersey Education Association Review* (ISSN-0027-6758) is an official publication of the New Jersey Education Association, published monthly 10 times a year, September through June, plus one special *New Jersey Education Association Review* Convention issue, which will be published in September. Send correspondence relating to editorial material, manuscripts, membership or subscriptions to: 180 W. State St., P.O. Box 1211, Trenton, NJ 08607-1211. Periodicals postage paid at Trenton, NJ 08650 and at additional mailing offices. Email: NJEAReview@NJEA.org

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Advertising is printed as a service to readers but does not imply endorsement.

POSTMASTER

Send address changes to:
New Jersey Education Association Review
Attn: Membership Processing
180 W. State St., P. O. Box 1211
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Organizational Directory

NJEA headquarters, Trenton

To reach any of the offices at headquarters, call NJEA's main number, 609-599-4561.

Executive Office: includes NJEA's statewide officers and the offices of the Executive Director; Human Resources; Human and Civil Rights, Equity and Governance; Legal Services; Organizational Development; and the Labor Management Collaborative.

Business Division: includes the offices of Accounting and Finance; Information Systems, Facilities, Mailroom and Production; Membership; and Comptroller.

Communications Division: includes the offices of all aspects of the association's communications efforts, both internal and external. The division produces the NJEA Review and njea.org; manages the Hipp Foundation and assists local and county affiliates with internal and external communications.

Government Relations Division: includes the Office of Policy and Politics, which addresses legislation, administrative code, policy and advocacy at a statewide and federal level, and the Office of Member and Political Organizing, which works with members at the county and local level to organize around local, state, and federal issues that affect public education.

Professional Development and Instructional Issues: assists members and local and county affiliates with instructional issues and professional learning. The division also monitors state level and school level implementation of administrative code as promulgated by the New Jersey Department of Education.

Research and Economic Services: Provides information to support state and local association programs and activities, including collective bargaining and policy analysis. Offers guidance on retirement issues and administers NJEA Member Benefits.

UniServ regional offices

Provides extensive field services to members and local and county affiliates throughout the state, including negotiations assistance, contract administration and grievance adjudication, member organizing and local member consultation and representation. UniServ field representatives train local leaders and assist in the coordination of NJEA and NEA resources. UniServ regional offices are organized under four zones.

UniServ South

Reg. 1-3
Director's office
856-234-0522

Region 1 (Atlantic and Cape May counties):
609-652-9200

Region 2 (Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem counties):
856-628-8650

Region 3 (Burlington and Camden counties):
856-234-2485

UniServ Central

Reg. 7-9, 11, 13 and 29
Director's office
732-287-6899

Region 7 (Ocean County):
732-349-0280

Region 8 (Mercer County):
609-896-3422

Region 9 (Monmouth County):
732-403-8000

Region 11 (Middlesex County):
732-287-4700

Region 29 (Higher Education):
609-689-9580

UniServ Northeast

Reg. 15, 19-21, and 25
Director's office
973-321-3221

Region 15 (Union County):
908-709-9440

Region 19 (Hudson County-North and Newark):
201-861-1266

Region 20 (Hudson County-South):
201-653-6634

Region 21 (Essex County, except Newark):
973-762-6866

Region 25 (Bergen County):
201-292-8093

UniServ Northwest

Reg. 13, 17, and 27
Director's office
973-347-0911

Region 13 (Hunterdon, Somerset and Warren counties):
908-782-2168

Region 17 (Morris and Sussex counties):
973-515-0101

Region 27 (Passaic County):
973-694-0154

MEMBERSHIP

Active professional: \$1,127 (full time); \$225.40 (full time *low-earner); \$563.50 (part time); \$563.50 (on leave); \$225.40 (part time *low-earner). Active supportive: \$534 (full time); \$106.80 (full time *low-earner); \$267 (part time); \$106.80 (part time *low-earner); \$267 (on leave). Retired professional: \$97; \$1,850 (retired life). Retired ESP: \$50; \$905 (retired ESP life); NJAEA \$32. General professional (outside N.J. public education employment): \$250. Subscribing \$250. Only those in education positions in N.J. public schools and colleges are eligible for active membership. Payment of annual dues entitles a member to receive the Review for one year, from January through December. Dues include \$5 for the NJEA Review. *Low-earner threshold 2025-26 is \$23,800.



President's Message



Pursuing the mission and advancing members' priorities

With Mikie Sherrill as the governor-elect of New Jersey, I am filled with hope and inspiration for our schools and union. Governor-elect Sherrill will surely be an ally to public education, but this does not mean our work is done.

Our mission remains constant: we support students, educators and our communities and work with all stakeholders toward common aims.

I spent much of the last month traveling the state in support of Mikie Sherrill and all of our endorsed candidates for the New Jersey Legislature. I made phone calls, knocked on doors and visited schools with members like you. Everywhere I go, I am energized by NJEA members' dedication to their students, and their union!

Whether it was canvassing with NJEA member Anthony Angelozzi, who won his race for Assembly in LD-8, or visiting the Winslow Township Education Association and engaging in meaningful conversation, our members are united by a shared purpose: to improve the lives of our students and communities. In every community I've visited, members tell me their stories. They share their take on the challenges facing schools, as well as their victories and moments of joy.

And this issue is filled with these stories.

In this issue, you will understand why we have so many reasons to hope. You will read the story of Gillian Ober, the 2025-26 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year. Gillian is an ESL teacher with a global perspective; she's shaping the future with every lesson.

You'll read about Alejandro Mejía, a Spanish teacher who grew up in the Caribbean and was named the 2024-25 Union County Teacher of the Year.

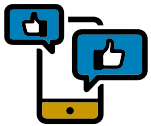
You will read about innovative environmental science projects funded through outside organizations, the NJEA Frederick L. Hipp Foundation, Sustainable Schools for Jersey and others.

And you will get a taste of the NJEA Convention as seen through the lens of our photographers.

Regardless of any election outcome, our mission stands: we will support each other, advocate for the advancement of public education and protect our students. This means we continue to strive for Tier 1 for Everyone and lead our union with equity and justice in every way we can.

We are, and always will be, stronger together.

Solidarity forever,



officers online

STEVE BEATTY

Facebook

@SteveBeattyNJEA: NJEA! We had a great night at the polls! From Mikie Sherrill to our endorsed Assembly candidates, and down ballot to many local Boards of Education, we made the case and showed up in force to make the difference! This is what Democracy looks like, and where our union steps up and organizes, showing our power! So - celebrate we will! And then the work continues; engaging with Governor-elect Sherrill and working with all of our elected officials to ensure our voices are heard and heeded! Thank you to all that made the effort these last months and to our locals that took great strides in stepping into their power!

On Nov. 5, NJEA President Steve Beatty celebrated the success of NJEA's endorsed candidates for governor. Later in the post, he thanked NJEA members for their work in helping to secure Sherrill's historic victory.

PETAL ROBERTSON

Facebook

@PetalforNJEA: What an amazing NJEA Convention! From the powerful keynote speakers to the dynamic workshops and the many vendors, there was truly something for everyone. I have too many memories for one reel so stay tuned

On Nov. 7, NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson shared a highlights reel from her two days with members at the NJEA Convention. She had so much to share that she created a Part 2 that she posted on Nov. 8.

TINA DARE

Facebook

@TinaDareforNJEA: One of my favorite stops at Convention — the BookSmiles booth! I love seeing educators pick out books that will inspire, engage, and enhance their students' education. Every child deserves access to great books, and BookSmiles helps make that possible. Learn more or get involved at booksmiles.org.

On Nov. 10, NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare shared photos from her visit to BookSmiles on the exhibit hall floor during the NJEA Convention. BookSmiles distributed free books for educators to pass on to students in their communities.

The ADVOCATE

RESOURCES FOR YOUR LOCAL ASSOCIATION

NJEA elections: voting registration for non-classroom teachers

All NJEA members who are not classroom teachers or active supportive (ESP) members must identify themselves in order to vote in the appropriate unit in NJEA's spring 2026 elections.

A "classroom teacher" is any person who is certified, where required, and a major part of whose time is spent in direct contact with students or who performs allied work that places that person on a local salary schedule for teachers. If one or more of the above characteristics does not apply to you as a professional staff member, consult the form found at njea.org/NJEAelections.

NJEA members who were considered classroom teachers in last year's elections, and who now consider themselves non-classroom teachers must complete and return a registration form by Jan. 9, 2026, in order to be included in the non-classroom teacher unit of representation. Visit njea.org/NJEAelections to download the form.

Are you interested in running for office?

Do you want to learn more about running for office and campaigning? Think about attending Ready to Run, offered by Rutgers' Center for American Women and Politics. This year, Ready to Run is scheduled for March 20-21, 2026.

NJEA offers scholarships for women to attend the program. This includes registration fees, a dinner meeting in New Brunswick and hotel accommodations (double occupancy) for those who are interested in staying overnight.

The conference is at the Douglass Student Center in New Brunswick. Preconference programs designed by and for Latinas, Black women, and Asian American women are held beginning at noon on Friday, March 20. The conference begins at 4 p.m. on Friday with a welcome and plenary session addressing digital strategies for candidates, campaigns and advocates.

Saturday's program offers two tracks: "I'm Ready to Run, Now What?" and "I'm Not Ready to Run Yet, But..."

More information is available at njea.org/readytorun. If your schedule does not permit you to arrive on time on Friday, you are still eligible to apply for a scholarship and attend the program.

Membership chairs: Use the Potential Member Reporting Form

The Workplace Democracy Enhancement Act (WDEA) requires boards of education to send local associations information about their respective and potential members.

Specifically, it requires public employers to provide—within 10 calendar days of hiring—the association the following information about a new employee:

- Name
- Job title
- Worksite location
- Home address
- Work telephone number
- Date of hire
- Work email address
- Any personal email address and home and personal cellular telephone numbers on file with the public employer.

Additionally, this information should be supplied to the association for all negotiation unit members every 120 days, preferably in September, January and June. Once processed by the NJEA Membership Division, local presidents and membership chairs will be able to reconcile their list using the WDEA Recon Tool found in their Web Apps.

NJEA requests that each month you have new employees, submit a Potential Member Reporting Form with the appropriate information. This form will be used to help keep your membership and potential membership records up to date. This form can be found on njea.org. On a laptop or desktop computer, hover over your name in the upper-right-hand corner of the homepage. Click on "Documents," then "Forms," and look for "Potential Member Report."

COOL STUFF



PROJECT CITIZEN SHOWCASE FOR GRADES 4-12

The annual statewide Project Citizen Showcase for students in grades 4-12 will be held on June 2, 2026, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. Conclude your school year by engaging your students in developing and presenting a solution to a public policy issue. It is the perfect culmination of a civics, social studies, history, sociology, science or language arts class. For more information visit civiced.rutgers.edu/programs/project-citizen or contact Craig Uplinger at cu88@scarletmail.rutgers.edu. There is no charge for having your class participate. A free Project Citizen workshop is offered for teachers on Dec. 9, 2025. To register for the workshop, go to civiced.rutgers.edu/events.



LAW FAIR/LAW ADVENTURE COMPETITION ENTRY DEADLINE IS JAN. 31

The New Jersey State Bar Foundations' (NJSBF) Law Fair and Law Adventure mock trial competitions help to fulfill the new state-mandated civics education requirements. In these competitions, students and their teachers write original mock trial cases according to rules NJSBF provides. Visit mocktrial.njsbf.org for competition rules; speakers' PowerPoint from the Oct. 21 Law Fair/Law Adventure workshop; quizzes, videos and past winning cases.



FREE CLASSROOM MATERIALS FOR THE SEMI-QUINCENTENNIAL

Looking for materials to use in your classroom as we approach the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, our nation's historic milestone, on July 4, 2026? Check out and order free posters "America By the Numbers" and "Road to Revolution" and NJSBF's new publication **Founding Documents of the United States**, which includes the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. Visit 250independence.njsbf.org.



NJHOF PROVIDES STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES AND EDUCATOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Subscribe to the New Jersey Hall of Fame's (NJHOF) educator newsletter at bit.ly/NJHOFEducator.

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Bring inspiration to life with an unforgettable, standards-aligned field trip exploring New Jersey's most outstanding achievers in arts, science, public service and more at the New Jersey Hall of Fame. Trips are booking fast for 2026. Reserve now to secure your date. For questions, email learning@njhalloffame.org.

2026 Areté Scholarship and essay contest

The application window for our 2026 scholarship programs is now open. Encourage students to apply at NJHalloffame.org/learn.

Free Professional Development with Montclair State University

Join NJHOF at American Dream for two dynamic professional development sessions presented in partnership with Montclair State University's ADP Center for Learning Technologies and Network for Educational Renewal. Participants will earn professional development hours.

Civic Leadership and SEL: Lessons from NJ Changemakers

Feb. 4, 4:30 p.m.

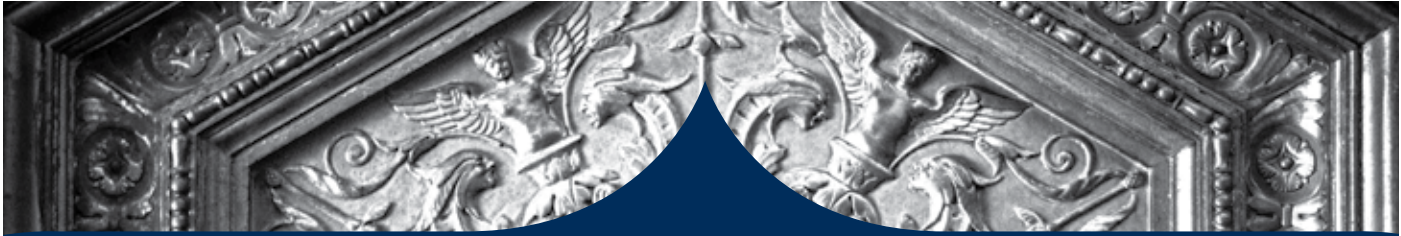
Connect stories of civic leaders to social-emotional learning and civic action.

Media, Identity, and Voice: From Radio Waves to Reels

Feb. 18, 4:30 p.m.

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Seeing others and meeting their needs

Meet Somerset County ESP of the Year Lisa Murphy

By Kathryn Coulibaly



Lisa Murphy wears many different hats. She's an instructional assistant in Hillsborough Middle School, a strong union advocate, a mother, an advocate for her students and colleagues and the 2025-26 Somerset County ESP of the Year, but she feels one of her greatest strengths is working with special education students.

"I have a long history of relationships with people with disabilities," Murphy says. "I grew up the family friend of the only known set of female savant twins. As a teenager, I babysat for a blind, deaf woman. My mother used to take us to events with children with disabilities to help us understand that people are people and kids are kids. That shaped me and my career."

Murphy began her professional life working in vocational rehabilitation, and then with people who had experienced head trauma. After her children were older, she went back to work in the schools so that she could continue to work with people with special needs while still being able to care for her children and be on the same school schedule.

"I love my job," Murphy says. "I've been working in public schools for 18 years with many different populations, but my first love is working in self-contained rooms. I have an ability to deal with students who have behavioral difficulties and who are a bit more emotionally charged."

Kathryn Coulibaly writes the monthly ESP column. She is an associate director in the NJEA Communications Division.

Murphy believes in the importance of respect in schools among the students, teachers and educational support professionals.

"Everything is about relationships," Murphy says. "If you want to be successful in any venture, you need to build good relationships. That's what makes me connect. I look past a lot of things and just try to get to know the person. Then we can work on whatever goals are requested of them or that they have on their own."

Murphy has a strong belief in leaving things better than you found them, whether that's a walk in the woods, on the beach, or in your job. That's part of the reason she is such an advocate for mentoring programs for educational support professionals.

"A lot of people don't understand what instructional assistants or paraprofessionals do," Murphy explains. "We don't teach one subject; we are with students in every subject. We don't specialize; we need to know it all."

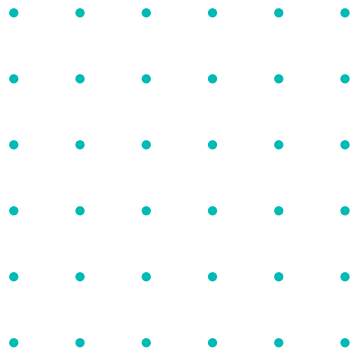
Murphy comes from a strong union family. Her father was a roofer and proud member of his local association. Murphy got involved in her local association so that she would be aware of things that were going on and affecting her and her colleagues. She also wanted to advocate for ESP issues, not only paraprofessionals, but also custodians, bus drivers, secretaries and others.

"The people who are behind the scenes are often forgotten, but without any of us, the machine doesn't run well – or at all!"

Murphy was honored to be named the 2025-26 Somerset County ESP of the Year.

"I was so proud to be recognized," Murphy says. "There's not enough recognition for educational support professionals, and that's something I want to work on. There are so many people in our schools who deserve accolades. I want to see more of them get the appreciation and respect they deserve."

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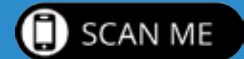
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New student transportation law goes into effect

By David Bander



In October 2024, Gov. Phil Murphy signed a new law that permits staff who are not licensed as school bus drivers to be designated as drivers for the transportation of students to and from school and school-related activities. The staff member can transport up to eight passengers.

To designate staff drivers for the current school year, districts were required to submit a list to the executive county superintendent by Aug. 22, 2025. Potential staff transporters must meet several requirements, including physical examination, a criminal background check and a clean driving history for the past five years. Drivers must also complete a training program for interacting with students with special needs. Any vehicles used for this purpose must have liability insurance in a minimum amount of \$1.5 million.

Since the beginning of the school year NJEA's Office of Legal Services has received a number of questions about the impact of this law. The law raises a number of negotiable topics or other concerns. To begin, assigning a school employee to be a driver without first negotiating with the local may be a violation of N.J.S.A. 34:13A-23, which prohibits a school district from unilaterally assigning an extracurricular activity to a school employee. An extracurricular activity is defined as "those activities or assignments not specified as part of the teaching and duty assignments scheduled in the regular workday, work week, or work year."

In addition to this concern, the law is silent as to whether the vehicles must receive regular safety inspections and maintenance, whether they must contain equipment that meets students' medical and mobility needs, if the rides will be recorded and what procedures are in place in the event of an accident or medical emergency. The law does not speak to who pays expenses such as gas, maintenance,



The law raises a number of negotiable topics or other concerns.

tolls, cleaning and so forth. There is also no discussion of additional compensation for work performed as a driver, or what potential disciplinary issues may arise. Many of these unanswered questions raise negotiable topics.

The New Jersey Department of Education has put out interim guidance (see below), but that guidance does not address the vast majority of these issues. A more comprehensive rule has been recently proposed. If your district has or is planning on designating drivers under this law, we recommend contacting your local leadership and NJEA UniServ Field Representative and demanding to bargain on these negotiable issues. 🗣️



**NJDOE
interim
guidance**

David Bander is an associate director of NJEA Legal Services and Member Rights in the NJEA Executive Office. He can be reached at dbander@njea.org.

the NJEA REPORT

NJEA advocacy in Washington and Trenton

By Aaron McClendon

It's been an exciting (and exhausting) couple of months in the political world. Here are the top issues NJEA's Government Relations Division has been monitoring in Washington, D.C. and Trenton.

The shutdown story

Ending at 43 days, the government shutdown of 2025 was the longest in U.S. history. Usually when Congress can't pass a new federal budget before October, it passes a bipartisan Continuing Resolution (CR) that temporarily funds the government. But trust and relationships between Democrats and Republicans have hit a historic low, making bipartisan negotiation almost impossible. This time, Senate Democrats refused to offer the bipartisan support needed to pass a CR without a guaranteed extension of health care subsidies that will expire this year, which Republicans firmly rejected.

On Nov. 11, eight Senate Democrats broke ranks and voted with Republicans to pass a CR to reopen the government in exchange for guarantees that fired federal workers would be rehired and a promise for a vote on health care tax credits. This deal ended the shutdown but also enraged Democrats throughout the country and could set us up for another shutdown fight when funding runs out in January.

Major impacts of the shutdown

SNAP/WIC: The disruption of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) funding caused significant pain for the country. SNAP alone has a \$2 billion economic impact on New Jersey, supporting over 5,000 businesses and providing vital food and nutrition assistance to schools, food banks and almost 850,000 New Jerseyans, including more than 267,000 children.

Aaron McClendon is an associate director in the Office of Politics and Policy in the Government Relations Division. He can be reached at amclendon@njea.org.

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Thanks to the amazing organizing power of our members, our strong relationships with legislators and our amazing wins this Election Day, NJEA is optimistic that we have the momentum and the power to turn these priorities into legislative victories.

Department of Education: The Trump administration used the shutdown to continue its campaign to decimate the Department of Education (ED), triggering layoffs targeting staff in the Office of Civil Rights, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The ED now has fewer than 2,000 employees, compared to about 4,133 employees at the start of 2025. Reduced staffing hurts ED's ability to ensure that its \$68 billion worth of grants are being spent appropriately, and it also jeopardizes our access to policy and legal experts who help our students get the services that they are legally entitled to.

Where was NJEA? Throughout this impasse, NJEA maintained communication with our federal representatives, sharing member concerns about the impacts of the shutdown and calling for bipartisan negotiations to end the crisis. At the same time, NJEA mobilized our members and worked with our external partners to organize food drives benefiting local food banks to support New Jerseyans impacted by the lapse in SNAP funding. At the NJEA Convention alone, members brought over 700 pounds of food.

Redistricting: The electoral arms race

Republicans hold a razor thin majority over Democrats in the House of Representatives (219-213). This means Republicans can only lose a handful of votes if they want to pass any legislation, and that Democrats have a serious chance of retaking the House in 2026.

To maintain control, Republican-dominated state legislatures are rearranging their congressional districts to make it easier for Republicans to win, and Democrat-dominated state legislatures are doing the same in retaliation. Today, 16 states have either changed their maps, started the process or are actively exploring how to do so.

What is New Jersey is doing? According to the New Jersey Constitution, the Legislature can't initiate the redistricting process. Only the Apportionment Commission can redraw our congressional map, and only when a new national census is completed.

What races are we watching in the midterms?

- CD-7: Includes all of Hunterdon and Warren counties, and parts of Morris, Somerset, Sussex and Union counties – Republican Tom Kean Jr. represents this seat, but Democrats have a solid shot at flipping it.
- CD-11: Includes parts of Morris, Essex and Passaic counties – Mikie Sherrill will vacate this seat in 2026. This may be competitive for the midterms.
- CD-12: Includes parts of Mercer, Somerset, Union and Middlesex counties – This district is typically a safe district for Democrats, but Rep. Bonnie Watson Coleman recently announced her intention to retire.

State: What's NJEA doing in Trenton?

Preparing for the transition: NJEA is proud to have helped deliver Mikie Sherrill's historic and decisive win in as New Jersey's next governor. As Governor-elect Sherrill's inauguration approaches, NJEA is preparing a transition memo advising her team on NJEA's top policy priorities. We look forward to serving as a partner and resource on the issues impacting our members, our students and our communities.

The fight in lame duck: Lame duck is the period between Election Day and the start of a new Legislature in January, a critical time for NJEA's advocacy. Time is running out for state legislators and outgoing Gov. Phil Murphy to push through any outstanding priorities before a new Legislature is sworn in and all legislation must be reintroduced.

NJEA's top priorities for lame duck include eliminating the high school exit exam, passing a legislative package that will bring long-overdue reform to New Jersey's charter schools and restoring pension justice for all of our educators through Tier 1 for Everyone legislation.

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Hudson County Community College Professional Association wins 2025 NJEA Jim George Collective Bargaining Award



HCCCPA accepts the 2025 Jim George Collective Bargaining Award. From left: NJEA President Steve Beatty, HCCCPA member Sean Egan, Vice President Sirhan Abdulla, Secretary Karen Hosick, President Michael Ferlise, member Lauren Drew, NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare, NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson and Hudson County EA President Marquisha Reynolds.

At the 2025 NJEA Jim George Collective Bargaining Summit, held on Oct. 24-25, the Hudson County Community College Professional Association (HCCCPA) was named the winner of the Jim George Collective Bargaining Award.

The HCCCPA members not only won impressive salary and benefits concessions, they also engaged and mobilized their membership, secured more release time for leaders, accelerated the tenure clock application process, built distance-learning and technology provisions into their contract, and used negotiations to include nursing faculty in the union. In all, they introduced 45 proposals, most of which were ultimately accepted.

HCCCPA President Michael Ferlise, Vice President Sirhan Abdulla, Secretary Karen Hosick, and HCCCPA members Heather Connor, Lauren Drew and Sean Egan accepted the award on behalf of the association.

The awards ceremony was a highlight of the conference, which brought together nearly 350 members from across the state to network, share ideas and learn new skills to help them advocate for themselves and their members.

Jim George Collective Bargaining Award finalists

The NJEA Jim George Collective Bargaining Award is presented annually to an association that has accomplished one or more of the following:

- Bargained one or more new contractual provisions not already found in another affiliate's contract.
- Conducted an extraordinary community organizing effort that resulted in a contract settlement.



Jim George's family attended the 2025 NJEA Jim George Conference. Pictured are (L-R): Marc, Marianne, and Bryan

- Used the bargaining experience to propel new members into association involvement and leadership positions.
- Achieved a particularly good settlement, in comparison to the state average, in salary increases, health benefits, professional development and/or member protection.

This year, after reviewing the 24 nominations, five finalists were selected. They were:

- Hamilton Township Education Association (Mercer)
- Hudson County Community College Professional Association
- Linden Education Association
- North Brunswick Education Association
- Washington Township Schools Support Services Personnel Association (Gloucester)



Who was Jim George?

Jim George was a driving force in NJEA's quest to secure collective bargaining rights for public school employees. His long relationship with NJEA began when he was a teacher and union leader in Cinnaminson. An activist at heart, he served the Cinnaminson Teachers' Association as its treasurer and then local president.

At the forefront in the fight for member rights, George is best known for his stirring remarks at the 1967 Asbury Park Rally for Teacher Rights. It was then that George spoke the words that would become the inspiration behind NJEA's Collective Bargaining Summit: "A new order is at hand. A new generation has been conceived—and we are not afraid."

George joined the NJEA UniServ staff in 1967 and served members in Burlington County until 1986 when he became a UniServ coordinator serving the southern portion of the state. For 28 years prior to his untimely death in 1995, George inspired NJEA members, leaders and staff. It was George who first suggested that NJEA hold a collective bargaining summit to invigorate the association's commitment to bargaining. His legacy lives on through the summit and award that bear his name.

This year, the attendees were treated to speeches from Jim George's sons, Bryan and Marc George. They spoke about their father's legacy and the importance of union activism and the fight for public education. They were joined by their mother, Marianne, who was also an educator.

NJEA announces 2025-26 Justice and Equity Fellows



Nine of the 2025-26 Justice and Equity fellows and leads at the NJEA Convention. From left: Karin Abercrombie, Melissa Perry, Aquaus Kelley, Jenny Sierra-Tuner, Gayle Nelson, Carolyn Hobbs, Robert Porch, Christal White and Augustus Macholl.

The NJEA Justice and Equity Fellowship represents a groundbreaking initiative aimed at empowering NJEA members committed to advancing justice and equity. This fellowship is designed to develop NJEA members into justice and equity leaders so they can affect just and equitable change within the organization, their communities and throughout the state of New Jersey.

Fellowship Leads are members who have experience participating in and doing justice and equity-centered work. Fellows are individuals who have a strong passion and interest in doing the work of justice and equity but may not have had opportunities to engage further. The fellowship is an opportunity to do so.

Meet the NJEA Justice and Equity Fellowship Cohort Two Members:

- Carolyn M. Hobbs – Fellow
- Malissa Ridley – Fellow
- Augustus B. Macholl – Fellow
- Robert Porche – Fellow
- Jenny C. Sierra-Turner – Fellow
- Aracelis Sevila – Fellow
- Melissa Perry – Fellow
- Aquaus Kelley – Fellow
- Nicole Cerqueira – Lead
- MaDonna Morris-Chisolm – Lead
- Christal White – Lead
- Karin Abercrombie – Lead
- Gayle Nelson – Lead



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AMPLIFYING THE VOICES OF OTHERS

MEET 2025-26 NJ STATE TEACHER OF THE YEAR

Gillian Ober

By Kathryn Coulibaly

Gillian Ober can pinpoint the exact moment she knew that teaching was for her.

"I was standing in my classroom in Thailand during monsoon season," Ober remembers. "It was pouring rain outside and about 110 degrees in the classroom. I was soaked to the bone, but somehow also sweating, and I thought to myself, how am I not miserable right now? I'm standing in a puddle, it's hot, and it's wet. The old me would not have enjoyed it, but as I looked around the room at my students engrossed in their project, I was filled with joy. Something had changed in me, and my discomfort didn't matter. I was teaching and filled with happiness watching these students succeed."

Ober's love of language and diverse cultures started at an early age. When she switched from private to public school in seventh grade, she already had been studying Spanish for several years and found she had a knack for it. In eighth grade, she was enrolled in a one-on-one Spanish class to meet her growing language abilities.

"My teacher was Ms. Palian. We would spend the whole period speaking and doing activities," Ober says. "By the time I left eighth grade, I was able to converse and function in Spanish. Ms. Palian encouraged me to apply to one of the magnet schools Monmouth County offers. I ended up going to Freehold Regional High School (FRHS) studying Spanish and Russian."

At FRHS, Ober encountered another educator who would open doors for her, this time to Russia.

"My high school Russian teacher was like our little babushka, a grandmother," Ober recalls. "Mrs. Holinko

was in her 70s and she took 20 teenagers to Russia. She was the teacher who taught me that the relationships you build with your students are sometimes more important than anything else you teach. Her job was not easy, but she got to know all of us and our families. She made us feel seen and like someone cared about us. Mrs. Holinko even came to my high school and college graduations! Mrs. Holinko passed away a few years ago, but I will carry her love of teaching and dedication to her students with me always."

Ober had another life-changing experience in high school. At 16, she spent the summer living in Barcelona.

"People thought my parents were crazy for letting me go to this summer academy at 16, but I just fell in love with the experience of being somewhere out of my element," Ober says. "I loved being a newcomer. Where I lived in Barcelona was right on the border with Catalonia. If I walked in one direction, people were speaking Spanish. In the other direction, people were speaking Catalan. I got to experience what it is like to be the person who people are frustrated with because I didn't understand the language. Fortunately, people helped me and receiving that kind of patience from others is a feeling I remember often now that I am an educator."

Ober attended Boston University, earning degrees in Hispanic Language and Literature and English. She got a writing fellowship that afforded her the opportunity to work with international students who needed assistance writing in English. Ober became the unofficial ESL tutor.

"I worked with a lot of students from China, and I loved working with them," Ober says. "They were so brilliant, but their ability to write and speak in English was holding them back. They were doing chemistry lab reports and high-level math, and other things that I could never imagine. The barrier for them was the English piece of it, so I became their go-to person. I felt fulfilled by it."

Kathryn Coulibaly is an associate director in the Communications Division. She can be reached at kcoulibaly@njea.org.



Gillian Ober with her seventh grade English language arts class of multilingual learners at Freehold Intermediate School.

Teaching in Spain and Thailand

After graduating with degrees in English and Spanish, Ober searched for the right next step. She was accepted to a program through the Spanish Ministry of Education to become a language and cultural assistant in Spain. Ober ended up working at a couple of middle and high schools in southeast Spain.

"I loved teaching in Spain," Ober says. "I was working with unbelievable teachers who welcomed me into their classrooms and into their lives. I tutored their kids, and they invited me over for lunch. It was a one-year program, and I loved the community I'd made there. I was surrounded by people from all over the world who had diverse experiences, but I didn't really know if I loved teaching or if I loved living there and speaking Spanish. I knew I needed to challenge myself."

In 2016, Ober applied for Princeton in Asia and was placed in Phang Nga, a town of 10,000 people in southern Thailand.

"Princeton in Asia is about building mutual understanding and taking part in authentic cultural exchange," Ober recalls. "Did I experience culture shock? Absolutely! I was making a local Thai salary. I had a simple house with no air conditioning. But I learned that year what I truly needed to be happy. This was the moment I had been waiting for. I was immersed in a beautiful culture, helping kids learn a new language and truly loving teaching."

Returning to New Jersey

After her year in Phang Nga, Ober returned to Colts Neck and immediately applied for graduate school at Monmouth University. One month after landing back in the U.S., she was studying education.

"It was super competitive to find a teaching job when I finished grad school in 2018," Ober says. "I studied Spanish and ESL because I wanted to have options. I worked as a graduate assistant at Monmouth University and helped publish some pieces with my professor, Dr. Chiu-Yin (Cathy) Wong. After graduation, Monmouth offered me a position as a professor. It was exciting to be a recent grad who was asked to come back and teach. It's a moment I am still really proud of."

While at Monmouth, Ober was awarded the Excellence in English as a Second Language Award and the Dean's Award for Completed Research. She also received the 2019 Distinguished Clinical Intern Award from the New Jersey Department of Education for her work student teaching at Ocean Township High School, where she credits her cooperating teacher, Cara Tevar, for the immense growth she made that year as an educator.

After graduation, Ober taught Spanish as a leave replacement in Manasquan from January through June.

"My time at Manasquan was amazing. I had a fantastic mentor teacher and an incredible supervisor. I felt that I got a full year of teaching experience in the six months I was

there thanks to the mentoring I received. I found myself gravitating more toward multilingual learners. There was something about teaching multilingual students that fills my cup in a different way. I wanted to help these students catapult their lives."

Ober began working in Freehold Borough with fifth-grade students at Park Avenue Elementary School in 2019. Despite navigating the challenges of COVID and post-COVID education, Ober maintained that love of teaching, thanks to her co-teachers and students.

"This year, I'm in a new position in the middle school teaching seventh grade," Ober says. "I worked with an incredible team during my time at Park Avenue and learned so much from my co-teachers and multilingual colleagues over the years. Now, I teach my own ELA class for emergent multilingual learners, and I push in to support my language learners in math classes. What's been incredible this year is that a lot of the students in my class were my students in fifth grade. Seeing these students who have been here now for a few years, and how they have grown, has been really cool to witness."

Advocating for students

For Ober, being named the Monmouth County Teacher of the Year was a shock.

"When I was named the Teacher of the Year for Park Avenue Elementary, I told my principal, Patrick Mulhern, that I was going to pursue Monmouth County Teacher of the Year," Ober says. "Patrick told me, if we're doing this, you're going to win. He wrote an incredible essay on my behalf, but I was still in shock when I won."

For Ober, it's still sinking in that she is the 2025-26 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, but one perk in particular stands out for her.

"I'm so excited to have a platform," Ober says. "I'm so eager to have an opportunity to advocate for my students, and all multilingual learners. Imagine being a child trying to find your place in a new country, learn a new language and hope that your story is met with empathy instead of barriers. I want to amplify the voices of my multilingual learners and my fellow educators, and to make sure to pass the microphone to those who might not get it."

Ober's family, which includes her parents and two sisters, is possibly even more excited for Ober than she is.

"My family has seen all the things that teachers do behind closed doors," Ober says. "They've seen the things we bring home, the things we carry with us, the things we are about, the things that we do that go unrecognized. I know so many teachers who could just as easily have won this, but I was chosen, so I want to use this to celebrate other teachers, particularly multilingual teachers. We don't always get the spotlight, so I'm really glad to have the chance to educate others about what we do and how important our work is."



Top: Gillian Ober pictured with her co-teachers in Phang Nga, Thailand, on one of the many field trips they took around the country.

Bottom: Ober with her high school students in Phang Nga, Thailand. These students were in her course called "English in the Real World," where students learned English for practical, real-life scenarios.

As New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, Ober will enjoy a six-month sabbatical where she will work with the New Jersey Department of Education in Trenton and throughout the state.

In addition to the sabbatical, courtesy of program sponsor Educational Testing Service, Ober also will receive \$3,000 worth of technology equipment. NJEA will provide a rental car, equipped with EZ Pass, to help her travel to speaking engagements and meetings across the state. NJEA also will provide complimentary access to all major NJEA workshops and training opportunities, a \$1,500 clothing allowance, media training and communications support and funding for a trip to Washington, D.C. to meet with the other state teachers of the year and the president of the United States. 🇺🇸

From Caribbean farms to New Jersey classrooms

A journey fueled by teachers, language and hope

By Alejandro Mejía



Alejandro Mejía and his two nephews at the 5th Annual Hispanic Heritage Night event at David Brearley Middle-High School.

I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, a Caribbean paradise full of warmth, rhythm and tradition, but also marked by deep poverty and limited opportunity. In our small rural community, school often took a backseat to survival. Many mornings, instead of sitting in a classroom, I was out on our family's plantations helping harvest crops under the relentless sun. My mother, raising five children on her own, would remind us, "El trabajo duro da frutos" ("Hard work bears fruit"), even when that work kept us away from school.

She did the best she could with what we had. For that, I'll always admire her strength. But she also knew that hard work alone wouldn't be enough. Wanting more for me—more stability, more education, more hope—she made the life-changing decision to send me to the United States. I was still a child when I boarded a flight to New York City, chasing a future that none of us could yet imagine.

A new world, a new language

When I arrived, I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing. The skyscrapers I had seen only on TV now stretched into the sky above me. But beneath the excitement was fear. I had entered a world where I couldn't speak the language and didn't understand the culture. The only English I could say was, "I do not speak English."

That language barrier quickly became a target. My accent and mispronunciations drew laughter, and the word "immigrant" was often tossed at me like an insult in school. What my classmates didn't know was that the quiet kid with the broken English would eventually become fluent and fiercely proud of where he came from.

I lived in Washington Heights, New York for five years—a mini Dominican Republic taking over a section of Manhattan. Empanadas on the corner, bachata floating

Alejandro Mejía is a Spanish teacher at David Brearley Middle-High School in Kenilworth and the 2024-25 Union County Teacher of the Year. He received the Educational Leadership Award at Union County's Hispanic Heritage Day on Oct. 5, 2024.

through open windows, Spanish spoken on every block—it felt like home within a foreign land. I was enrolled at Public School 115, where I found not just teachers, but lifelines.

Teachers who believed in me

Ms. Montgomery, my English language learner (ELL) teacher, showed endless patience and kindness. She never rushed me or treated me as less than. Instead, she guided me gently, helping me navigate both language and culture. And then there was Ms. Reynoso, the dance teacher who became my surrogate mother while mine remained back in the Dominican Republic. She didn't just teach me how to dance; she saw me, listened and made me feel safe.

Dancing into possibility

During my first year in the States, my school participated in a citywide ballroom dance competition that changed my life. I was still learning English, but I was also learning how to master the rumba and the swing. That journey became part of the documentary "Mad Hot Ballroom," which followed our school and others as we discovered discipline, grace and community through dance. Because of the film, I traveled to Japan for its premiere and even attended Sammy Sosa's birthday party in the Dominican Republic, flying on his private jet. For a boy who once harvested fruit to survive, it all felt surreal.

Back home, finding identity

But life, as it often does, took another turn. After struggling with rejection tied to my identity as a Dominican boy, I returned to the Dominican Republic to be with my family. While it felt like a setback, it gave me space to reconnect with my roots and appreciate my culture through a new lens. I attended school again, this time as a teenager—and formed friendships that helped me better understand myself.

A fresh start in Hazleton

Eventually, I returned to the U.S., this time to Hazleton, Pennsylvania, where I enrolled as a senior in high school. I was in a new town with new challenges, but one constant remained: education. That year, something extraordinary happened—I was adopted by a former educator with more than 30 years of classroom experience. He became my hero, encouraging me to believe that I was capable of more.

College and beyond

After graduating high school, I obtained a full scholarship to Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. From there, I transferred to Union County College, earned my bachelor's degree in Spanish from Kean University and my master's in education from Rutgers. I was even chosen



Top: Mejiá at age 9. His first year in the U.S.

Middle: Ms. Reynoso accompanies Mejiá as he receives the Alumni Award from Dancing Classrooms NYC.

Bottom: Mejiá with his grandparents and parents celebrating his BA in Spanish from Kean University. From left: Rafael, Maria, and Nidia Mejiá and Steven Silverman.



Mejjía at the NJDOE, honored as 2024-25 Union County Teacher of the Year. From left: Union County Education Specialist Maria Mendez, Kenilworth Superintendent Jeremy Davies, Mejjía, David Brearley Middle School Principal Madelyn Pavelchak, Union County Teacher of the Year 2023-24 Kristen Hickman and Union County Interim Executive Superintendent Daryl Palmieri.

as the commencement speaker at graduation, watching my mother and adoptive father beam with pride from the audience.

Teaching with heart

Becoming a teacher in the very country where I once felt invisible has been the most meaningful chapter of all. Teaching Spanish, my native language, has been both a challenge and a privilege. There is not a single day I go home without a story worth sharing. My students constantly remind me why I chose this path.

One student, newly arrived from another country, barely spoke. Teachers assumed he was shy or unmotivated. But I knew that silence—I recognized the fear behind his quiet eyes. I offered him space and support, and within weeks, he began to speak up and make a home away from home while at school. Not just in Spanish, but in his own voice. His story wasn't unlike mine; his story just needed time to breathe.

Another time, I sent a simple message home to a student's family, praising their child's effort. The next day, the student returned with tears in her eyes.

"My mom cried," she told me, "because no teacher ever said anything like that before."

That reminded me how often immigrant parents are misjudged. They're not disengaged; they're navigating a system that often feels foreign and intimidating. The jargon, the formality, the fast pace—it can be overwhelming. Sometimes a warm phone call, a translated note or simply



When we create classrooms where multilingual students feel safe, celebrated and supported, we are not just teaching a subject; we are changing lives.

acknowledging a parent's effort can go further than we think. Most parents didn't have formal schooling and cannot understand our generic mass emails or the colorful classroom newsletter we send out in English. Sometimes a simple step like providing a translated version goes a long way—believe me.

I've also learned that behavior is often misunderstood through a cultural lens. Some families view questioning a teacher as disrespectful. Others come from backgrounds where formal education wasn't accessible, so school can feel like uncharted territory. When a student doesn't make eye contact or a parent misses a meeting, I remind myself to ask, "What's behind this?" instead of jumping to conclusions. Could their mom and dad have multiple jobs to make sure they can provide for their children? Are children staying up late because they're caring for younger siblings?

And representation—seeing yourself in your teacher, your textbooks, your classroom walls—matters. One day, I handed out a short reading with a character named after a student. She lit up and said, "That's me!" That moment of recognition and visibility reminded me that our classrooms should be mirrors, not just windows.

Through it all, the greatest tool I carry is empathy. When a student falls asleep in class or shows up without homework, I try to look beyond the surface. Maybe they were up late helping siblings, translating for parents or working a shift after school. When we lead with understanding, we create space for growth and healing. I keep a secret stash of candy, which I give to those I notice are half asleep. I then reach home to make sure all is well and no deeper issues are going on.

Honored, humbled, inspired

In 2024, I was named Union County Teacher of the Year. Standing on that stage, holding the plaque with my name on it, I thought of my mother, of those early mornings on the plantation and of the long journey that brought me here. I thought of my students—especially those who feel like they don't belong—and how representation matters not just in stories, but in reality. That honor wasn't just mine; it belonged to every teacher who saw me, every peer who welcomed me and every student who trusted



Mejía, teacher Lily Morales, and students at the 3rd Spanish Conversation Café.

me with their learning.

That recognition deepened my commitment to helping students who arrive in our schools facing barriers invisible to many. These students often enter with limited English, unfamiliarity with school systems and the emotional weight of migration. As educators, our role is not just to teach content; it's to be interpreters of their experience.

Supporting every student

Building strong relationships begins with intentional listening. When a student is quiet, we should lean in, not pull back. We should provide opportunities for them to participate nonverbally—through drawing, gestures, visuals and movement—while their language skills catch up.

We also need to meet families where they are. That could mean using translation apps for quick communication, offering multiple ways to attend parent-teacher conferences (in person, by phone or virtually), or sending home short notes in their native language. Even small gestures like learning how to say “hello” or “thank you” in a family’s language can open doors.

Creating routines and visuals in the classroom can reduce anxiety for newcomer students. Simple things like a labeled classroom map, illustrated instructions or bilingual word walls can go a long way in helping students navigate their new environment with more confidence.

And perhaps most importantly, we must check our assumptions. If a parent misses a meeting, it doesn’t mean they don’t care. If a child isn’t turning in homework, it doesn’t mean they’re lazy. Our students may be translating bills at home, working late-night shifts or caring for younger siblings. Their resilience is immense, but they still need us to believe in them.

Educators may not always realize the depth of our influence. But when we create classrooms where multilingual students feel safe, celebrated and supported, we are not just teaching a subject; we are changing lives.

From student to teacher

I came to this country as a boy who didn’t speak the language, who missed school to work, who felt the sting of “otherness.” Today, I stand in front of classrooms as a proud Spanish teacher, helping students write their own stories, many of which begin where mine once did.

To every educator reading this: you might be someone’s Ms. Montgomery, someone’s Ms. Reynoso or even someone’s Mr. Mejía. You may be someone’s lifeline. Don’t underestimate what your kindness, patience and belief can do. 🇵🇷

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

Managing secondhand trauma as educators

By Dr. Alexandra Glover-Candee and Dr. Lauren Delisio

Across the United States, educators are faced with a wide variety of challenges. These challenges are ever shifting and oftentimes complex. In recent years, there has been an increase in anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders in school-aged children. Research has shown that as much as “60% of children have been exposed to crime, violence and abuse either directly or indirectly” (Compassion Prison Project, 2025).

Children who have experienced three or more adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are five times more likely to have increased absenteeism, are six times more likely to exhibit behavior issues in academic settings and three times more likely to demonstrate academic failure (Kaiser Permanente, 2025). As a result, the trauma that students experience and bring with them into the classroom can have an impact on educators’ mental health, career satisfaction and overall well-being.

Our goal in this article is to explain the impact of ACEs on student learning and social-emotional growth and well-being, as well as the impact of vicarious trauma, or secondhand trauma, on educators. Finally, we offer specific strategies and suggestions that you can apply to help manage and mitigate these effects on your own mental state and emotional well-being.

Let’s unpack adverse childhood experiences

Childhood trauma includes a spectrum of experiences that affect a child’s growth and development. These ACEs, whether real or perceived, can affect a child’s academic performance, sense of security and trust, and disrupt attachment to trusted adults. Adverse childhood experiences can also lead to physical symptoms like stress, headaches, inattention and chronic absenteeism, along with behavioral symptoms such as withdrawal, fear, anxiety, poor emotional regulation and exaggerated reactions to minor events or stimuli (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2008; Terrasi & Grande de Galarce, 2017, p. 36-37).

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2019), more than two-thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by the age of 16.

Dr. Alexandra Glover-Candee is a special education teacher at Holly Hills Elementary School in Westampton Township. She earned her doctoral degree in educational leadership from Rider University. Her research focuses on vicarious trauma, social-emotional learning (SEL), teaching students on the autism spectrum and interventions for teachers dealing with vicarious trauma. She can be reached at alexandraglover23@gmail.com.

Dr. Lauren Delisio is an associate professor of special education at Rider University. She taught special education and general education at the elementary level, and currently conducts research related to Universal Design for Learning, educational technology and interventions for students on the autism spectrum. She can be reached at ldelisio@rider.edu.



Furthermore, children who experience trauma may display emotional and behavioral challenges that make it harder for them to interact positively with adults (Ogundele, 2018). This type of trauma also affects teachers nationwide. The rise of ACEs in students shows a direct effect on educators' mental health, job satisfaction and professional retention (Oberger et al., 2023).

Characteristics of vicarious trauma in teachers and other professionals

Vicarious trauma is a critical issue in education today. Vicarious trauma is also referred to as secondhand trauma and can be defined as "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another" (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008, p.2).

Vicarious trauma is a common occupational hazard associated with other professions such as mental health, medicine (i.e., doctors and nurses), the military and first responder positions (i.e., police officers, firefighters and EMTs). The characteristics of vicarious trauma often mimic the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Whether or not we are aware, the trauma that our students endure regularly—and then display the residual effects of in our classrooms—directly affects us as educators.

Here are several indicators of vicarious trauma (NCTSN, 2011; Berger, 2022):

- Feelings of burnout, stress and anxiety
- Feelings of disillusion, anger and upset, cynicism and edginess
- Hypervigilance, hopelessness and inability to embrace complexity
- Inability to listen
- Sleeplessness, fear, chronic exhaustion and physical ailments
- Minimizing one's own psychological distress
- Guilt

Teacher Trauma in New Jersey

Dr. Glover- Candee, one of the authors of this article, recently conducted a study to analyze the effects of vicarious trauma on the mental health and career satisfaction of 25 early elementary (K-3) teachers in an urban elementary school. Participants were asked to complete a 31-question survey, which included questions about their professional satisfaction.

The researcher also conducted interviews with eight of these 25 teachers. The purpose of these interviews was to glean further insight into the lived experiences of teachers who have experienced vicarious trauma, as well as its specific effects on their mental health and emotional well-being. During the interviews, the researcher asked eight questions, such as, "Have you been exposed to



The trauma that our students endure directly affects us as educators.

traumatic events or stories involving your students?" and "What strategies do you use to cope with the impact of vicarious trauma on your career and instruction?"

The results of this study helped to add to the emerging body of research on vicarious trauma in educators and highlight its significant impact on them.

With regard to mental health, 82.6% of participants felt affected by the traumatic stress of their students, with 80% of participants reporting emotional exhaustion, burnout and frustration. Fifty six percent of participants indicated that exposure to their students' trauma adversely affected their job satisfaction.

Furthermore, a lack of support from administration and families contributed to burnout and higher attrition rates, as many educators struggled with large caseloads and challenging students. Notably, while many experienced vicarious trauma, they often lacked awareness of the implications for their careers. This raises the question: What actions can educators take to address vicarious trauma while still supporting their traumatized students?

Strategies for helping your students

Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into your classroom may feel like an added burden, especially when it can already be so overwhelming to fit everything into the school day. However, integrating SEL can significantly enhance the classroom environment and support the well-being of both you and your students—and it does not have to be one "extra" thing you have to somehow squeeze into the day.

SEL can be seamlessly and easily integrated into other content areas and small moments throughout the school day. Teaching SEL equips students with essential skills for adulthood, by focusing on self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, responsible decision-making, problem-solving and relationship-building. By prioritizing these skills, you can boost academic achievement, foster life skills, enhance classroom harmony and build your students' confidence.

So how can you implement SEL without taking time away from other activities and content areas? It's simple! You can incorporate SEL lessons into everyday activities, like discussing self-regulation and social awareness while students wait to wash their hands, wait in line for lunch or recess or are transitioning between activities or classes. This approach requires no extra preparation and helps keep students engaged, making it a win-win situation.



Additionally, you can set up a small area or even just one bin in your classroom where students can go to take breaks while learning how to identify their emotions and utilizing self-regulation tools. Many of these tools can be teacher-made or, if purchased, are typically very inexpensive.

You can lead the students through mindfulness activities, such as deep breathing exercises, during transitions from one activity to another. In the sidebar, we have provided a list of useful strategies and resources for easily integrating SEL into your classroom, whether you teach preschoolers or high schoolers, to help create a calmer, more harmonious classroom environment that can benefit everyone involved—including you!

Strategies for helping yourself

After we help our students navigate their own trauma, as well as the often devastating effects of ACEs, we may not realize we should also help ourselves. As the saying goes, “You can’t pour from an empty cup.” So how do you “refill” that cup?

Self-care seems like a term that has been overinflated and overused, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. But self-care for educators is essential. You need to recognize that the work that you do is hard, and it is an emotional role that knows no limits. Finding your tribe or network of support—both within and outside the professional setting—is important.

Seek out professional development or professional resources, such as therapy to help you navigate the effects of teaching students who have been affected by trauma. Begin to identify your own triggers for anxiety, stress and burnout. Finally, plan activities in your free time that allow you to reconnect with nature, connect with family and friends, decompress, and feel calm and relaxed. See below for some tips for self-care, to help you refill your cup! 🍷

SEL tools

“Calm Down” corners with a variety of tools
theotttoolbox.com/calm-down-corner

Bin of sensory tools
carescenter.ucla.edu/sensory-toolkit

Emotions wheel or emotions chart
bit.ly/mhck-wheel

Teaching about emotions through literature:
bit.ly/emotions-literature

SEL activities

Journaling with or without prompts
bit.ly/teen-journal-prompts

Reading positive affirmations
happierhuman.com/positive-affirmations-teens

Yoga and meditations
bit.ly/ck-yoga

Deep breathing exercises
copingskillsforkids.com/deep-breathing-exercises-for-kids

Self-care for educators

The first step is acknowledging that you need it

- Establish clear work-home boundaries: Office hours from 8:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. After that, you are no longer Mrs. “So and So.”
- Peer support: Who is that friend (or friends) who “gets it”?
- Utilize your professional friendships: Call on other professionals with your grade level, content area or job description to help alleviate the load.
- Develop your own self-awareness: What are your triggers? What makes you feel anxious?
- Heal and recover from your own trauma: How about talk therapy?
- Help in fostering a supportive school climate: What can you do to help increase morale?

Issues and solutions

You may be asking yourself:

- What about the classroom management issues that could arise when introducing a variety of new tools that students may take advantage of—or use as toys instead of tools?”
- “How am I going to fit anything else in my already overcrowded classroom?”
- “What if I am a teacher or support staff member who travels from classroom to classroom, or even from school building to school building?”

We have some ideas for navigating those issues as well.

Issues related to classroom space

Are you having difficulties finding space in your classroom for the “calm corner”? Do you share your classroom with other teachers?

Potential solutions

- Create a sensory tool bin or keep them in a large tote bag.
- Store sensory items in a closet.
- Keep items on a cart for easy relocation.

Issues related to misuse of sensory tools

Students using sensory tools inappropriately or in a potentially harmful/dangerous manner. Students using sensory tools when they don't actually need them or over-using.

Potential solutions

- Students must ask for and obtain a limited number of “break cards” or “chill passes.”
- Limit the number of tools you offer to students (two-three choices)
- Use the “responsive classroom” approach.
- Explicitly teach how and why to use each tool.

Issues related to time

You have so much content to teach. How can you integrate SEL into your already jam-packed day? You spend so much time planning your lessons for the core content areas there's no time left for planning SEL lessons and activities.

Potential solutions

- Allow students to complete assignments while in the “calm corner” or while using their sensory tools/fidgets/flexible seating.
- Incorporate “teachable moments” in natural environments throughout the day, instead of treating SEL as a separate content area you have to fit in.

- Begin or end class with “Talk Time” or “Class Check-in.” Discuss concerns and how they might be feeling (10-minute “talk time”).
- Individual check ins with Post-it notes/suggestion box.

Issues related to educator buy-in

Other educators who work with your students don't see the value in the “why” of using sensory tools or have trouble understanding how to use them.

Potential solutions

- Share this article and other resources.
- Show them a student using sensory tools successfully.
- Share your data about individual student triggers.
- Have open, honest conversations about perceptions around these types of supports and concerns related to their use. 📧

NEED HELP?

Why handle tough times alone?

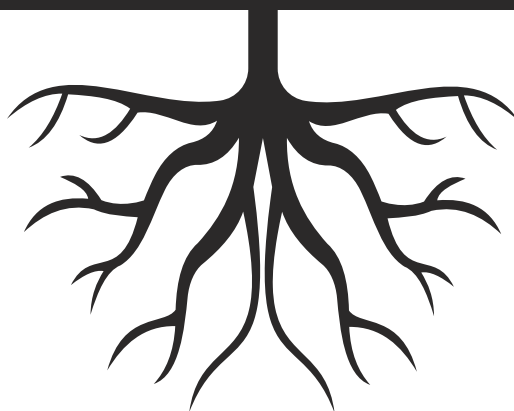
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AID NJEA is your 24-hour, confidential helpline. Staffed by NJEA members and professionals from Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, the helpline offers practical advice, direction, ideas and resources from those who have walked in your shoes.



ROOTED

AND REACHING FOR THE STARS



by Josh Langenberger

At Howell Township Middle School South, learning doesn't just happen inside a classroom—it flourishes in our students. My colleagues and I have helped shape a school culture where student-led inquiry, hands-on science and community partnerships thrive in harmony. To achieve these goals, I've relied on the support of outside organizations and the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO).

My colleagues and I share our passion for environmental learning with students. For example, outside of school, I'm a gardener and beekeeper, and those passions find their way into my teaching. With the help of supportive colleagues, students, families and organizations, we've transformed our school's outdoor space into a living classroom—what I call a "learnscape." It's a place where science is alive, rooted in real-world challenges and reaching toward the stars.

From a NASA Artemis I Moon Tree to a sustainable food forest, a greenhouse funded by the NJEA Frederick L. Hipp Foundation for Excellence in Education and supported by the PTO, and a pollinator garden built by an Eagle Scout, the Middle School South campus is now a living, breathing learning lab—and a model for what education can look like when rooted in purpose.

NASA Moon Tree: A living legacy from lunar orbit

After completing a competitive national application process, I was thrilled when our school was selected by NASA to receive one of only a few hundred Artemis I

Moon Tree saplings distributed across the United States. These remarkable trees were cultivated from seeds that traveled around the moon aboard the Artemis I mission, returning to Earth as part of NASA's initiative to inspire the next generation of scientists, explorers and environmental stewards. Our sapling, a sweet gum tree is a living, breathing connection between space science and Earth-based education. The Moon Tree is more than a science lesson, it's a symbol. It reminds students that they are part of a much larger story, one that spans ecosystems, generations and galaxies.

The food forest: A system that feeds minds and bodies

Thanks to a Sustainable Jersey grant funded by FirstEnergy, Middle School South established a diverse food forest just steps away from the Moon Tree. In collaboration with the Howell Green Team and the Shade Tree Commission, more than 30 fruit trees including apple, pear, plum and peach, were planted to create an edible landscape that students care for year-round. This space is more than a garden. It's a living lab where students explore permaculture, climate resilience and food justice while donating fresh produce to local food pantries.

Josh Langenberger is an environmental science teacher at Howell Middle School South in Monmouth County. He can be reached at jlangenberger@howell.k12.nj.us.



The team at Howell Middle School South built many partnerships. Pictured are representatives from FirstEnergy, Howell Township's Green Team and the Shade Tree Commission.

Greenhouse growth: Supported by a grant and the PTO

One of my many accomplishments was securing a \$5,000 grant from the Hipp Foundation for Excellence in Education, an award that turned a vision into reality. With additional support from our dedicated PTO, we constructed a fully functional greenhouse on campus that now stands as a hub of innovation and discovery.

The greenhouse offers students a chance to immerse themselves in hands-on learning all year long. They experiment with plant propagation, seasonal crop cycles and composting. Beyond just growing plants, we are integrating biology, engineering and sustainability in a truly interdisciplinary space by cultivating seedlings for the food forest, monitoring temperature and humidity sensors, or studying the impact of light and soil composition on growth. The greenhouse embodies what's possible when you combine grant funding, community support and students' enthusiasm. The greenhouse is not just a structure, it's a living classroom that cultivates curiosity and stewardship in every season.

Pollinator garden: Built by scouts, sustained by students

The pollinator garden at Middle School South began as an Eagle Scout project led by former student Mason Weiss. Designed to support native pollinators like bees and butterflies, the garden was carefully planned with

milkweed, flowering plants and herbs that create a vibrant, sustainable habitat. It is also a certified butterfly waystation and serves as a vital ecological addition to our campus, complementing the food forest and greenhouse by supporting the broader environmental system. These vibrant gardens serve as hands-on learning zones where students study ecosystems, plant reproduction and environmental interdependence.

Powered by partnership: Growing together

In April 2025, I received another Hipp Foundation grant, called Seed to Sanctuary, to expand the school's pollinator gardens and diversify the habitats available for native pollinators. This grant builds on the school's mission to support biodiversity and enhance ecological education. The success of these outdoor learning spaces is deeply rooted in community support. Two champions of environmental learning work, Andy Valdes, a Monmouth County master gardener, and Lisa Doud, chairperson of the Howell Green Team, have been instrumental in securing additional grant funding and educational support to grow these spaces thoughtfully and sustainably.

Science is about building connections between knowledge and compassion, between classrooms and communities, and between us and the planet. It's about global stewardship and planting the kind of hope that grows into lasting change.

Branching out: A 10,000 trees campaign on campus

In 2025, our school launched an ambitious campaign to plant 10,000 trees across our expansive campus. This is an initiative rooted in our commitment to climate action, habitat restoration and environmental education. Made possible through a Sustainable Jersey for Schools grant written by fellow educator and NJEA member Danielle Gianelos, this project is being brought to life by our Eco-Action Club, led by NJEA member and educator Steve Milkowski.

We're empowering students to lead environmental change, take ownership of their campus and reimagine what a sustainable school environment can look like. As students dig into the soil, educate their peers and track the growth of these trees, they are contributing to something far greater than themselves. I believe planting a tree you may never get to sit under is one of the purest forms of hope. It's about investing in a future you may never see and trusting that your actions today can grow into lasting change.

Conclusion: a living legacy of learning

At Middle School South, the commitment isn't just to planting trees, it's to planting the seeds of leadership, sustainability and lifelong curiosity. With every Moon Tree, greenhouse seedling and student-planted sapling, the school is cultivating not just environmental knowledge, but a generation of change-makers. This journey proves that when educators, students and communities unite with purpose, what grows is more than a garden, it's a legacy that reaches for the stars.

Educators interested in launching similar projects are encouraged to explore opportunities through the NJEA Hipp Foundation, Sustainable Jersey for Schools and NASA Artemis Education. With a clear vision and committed partners, your schoolyard can become a springboard for discovery and a legacy of learning. 🌱



Students learn how to be global stewards by partnering with Sustainable Jersey for Schools to plant a food forest and strengthen community food security.



Retired NJEA member Lisa Bissey provided mentorship to Langenberger on how to support local pollinators.

NJEA Hipp Foundation

Learn more about other Hipp grants and how to apply for an NJEA Hipp grant at njea.org/hipp. Applications are due March 1.

Sustainable Jersey for Schools

Learn about Sustainable Jersey for Schools' mission and apply for a grant at sustainablejerseyschools.com.

NASA Artemis Education

Learn more about NASA's resources for educators and enroll your students in the mission at nasa.gov/learning-resources/join-artemis.

STAFF NEWS

HIRES AND PROMOTIONS



NJEA welcomed **OMAR GIBBS-COLBERT** on Oct. 1 as principal clerk-bookkeeper in the Office of Accounting in the NJEA Business Division. Gibbs-Colbert is a familiar face at NJEA, having served

in a temporary position in Accounting since May 2025. Prior to joining NJEA staff, he has worked in various customer service, accounting and finance roles. Gibbs-Colbert earned a bachelor's degree in accounting from Wilmington University. He lives in Lawrenceville.



NJEA welcomed **EFRAIN MONTERROSO** on Oct. 16 as an associate director in the Office of Member and Political Organizing in the Government Relations Division. Prior to joining NJEA staff, Monterroso served as associate director for the Office of Policy and Legislative Affairs at the District of Columbia Executive Office of the Mayor Muriel Bowser. He also

worked at the Center for Advocacy and Political Action at the National Education Association. Monterroso started his career as a high school Spanish teacher at his alma matter, Hightstown High School, and was the co-chair of the Mercer County Education Association Legislative Action Team (LAT). He earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish and certification in secondary education from Montclair State University. He earned a master's degree in education policy and analysis from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



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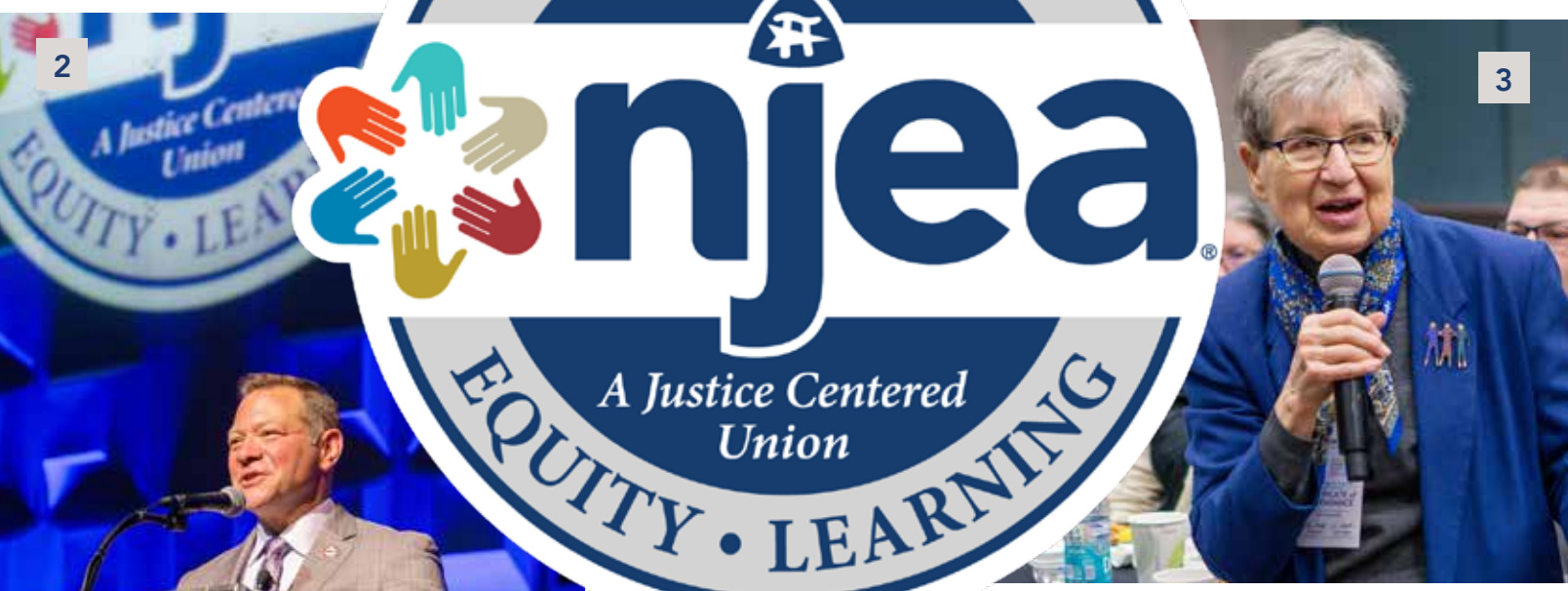
* 12 credits offered through Thomas Edison State University (TESU)

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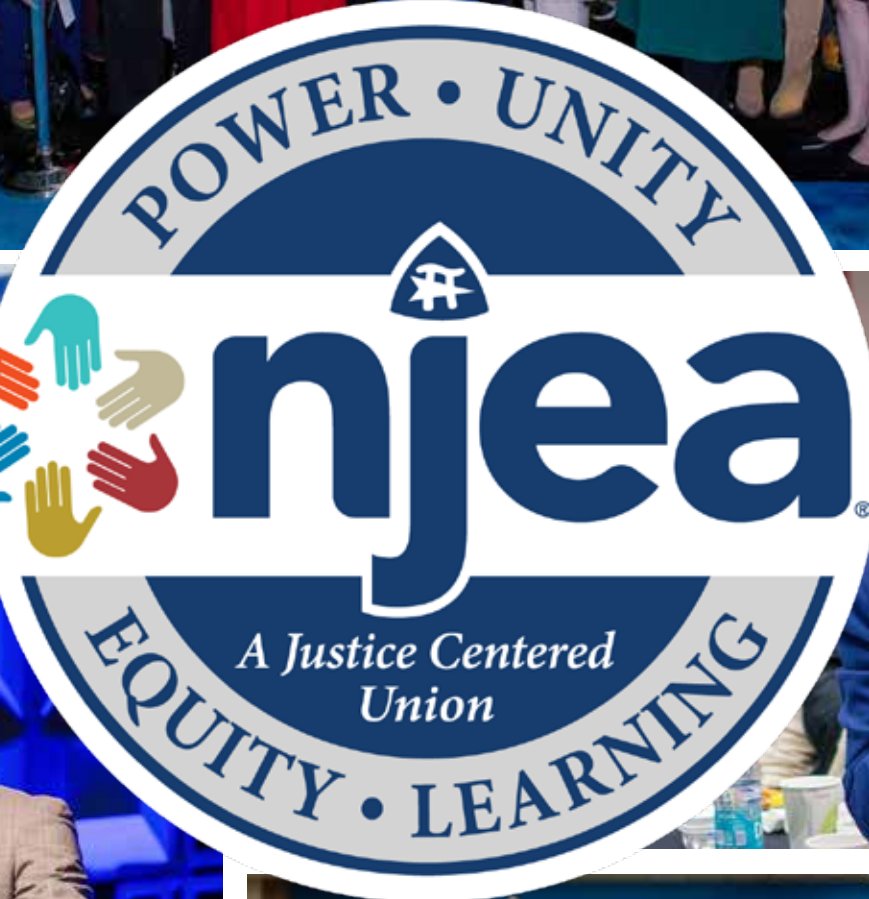
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1: NJEA President Steve Beatty, NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson (left center), and NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare (right-center) cut the ribbon to officially open the 2025 NJEA Convention, joined by national, state and local leaders in the association and public education.

2: NJEA President Steve Beatty opens the Friday keynote.

3: NJREA member Carol Watcher addresses members at the breakfast hosted by the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee.

4: From left: Franklin Township's (Somerset) Sujata Gandhi, Fawnya Gibson and Tosha Swami plan their day at the NJEA Convention.

5: Nobel prize winner Malala Yousafzai shared a panel with students and spoke about girls' education across the globe, her favorite teachers and the power of storytelling.

6: Author, television host and human rights advocate Padma Lakshmi speaks with Lisa Newcomb, the executive director of CROPS, about addressing food insecurity. CROPS was this year's convention charity.

7: The NJEA Convention Committee, with representatives from every county, works throughout the year with NJEA staff to produce the largest educational gathering of its kind in the world.

8: NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson (r), leads a panel discussion with members of the State Board of Education Dr. Claudine Keenan (l) and Dr. Ronald Butcher (l) and Commissioner of Education Kevin Dehmer.

For more convention photos, visit [flickr.com/njea/albums](https://www.flickr.com/photos/njea/albums).



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- 9: Burlington County REA President Toni Guerra waves the New Jersey flag at the NJREA Convention on Nov. 5 to celebrate Governor-elect Mikie Sherrill's victory.
- 10: A member creates an ornament at the Mud Girls Studio on the exhibit hall floor.
- 11: Members learn empowering and engaging strategies at a workshop sponsored by the New Jersey County Teachers of the Year.
- 12: New Jersey students perform at the New Jersey All-State Jazz Ensemble and Honors Jazz Choir.
- 13: NJEA's officers and staff leaders greet the members of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee.
- 14: NJAEA members Nicholette Gatto (Rowan) and Carly Cianciulli (Stockton) enjoy the photo booth on the exhibit hall floor.
- 15: NJEA President Steve Beatty leads members in a rendition of "Solidarity Forever" on Thursday afternoon.
- 16: Members practices STEM instructional activities for elementary students.
17. Dr. Jacynth Joyce Brown leads "7 Steps to Classroom Management Success."
- 18: Lieutenant Governor Tahesha Way addresses members on Friday morning.

For more convention photos, visit [flickr.com/njea/albums](https://www.flickr.com/photos/njea/albums).



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19: Lieutenant Governor-elect Dale Caldwell (center, blue blazer) is greeted by delighted members, including association leaders, on Thursday.

20: Members take in a workshop in the NJEA Consortium Area on the exhibit hall floor.

21: Members of the ESP Committee are easy to spot in their yellow shirts. From left: Marquisha Reynolds, Kitt McSeed, Joy Davis, Michael Boyd, Kathie Lynch, Derrick Watson and Scott Elliott.

22: The NJEA Members of Color Experience hosted a reception on Friday afternoon.

23: Members choose from among over 14,000 books donated by BookSmiles, which provides access to books for all students. Learn more at booksmiles.org.

24: Victor Stolberg, vice president of the Essex County College Faculty Association, at the NJEA Higher Education Luncheon.

25: A student performs at Friday evening's New Jersey All-State Chorus and Orchestra concert.

26: The 46th annual George M. Adams Boardwalk Run kicks off on Friday morning. Results, when available will be posted at njea.org and in the *NJEA Review*.

27: The NJEA Patriots Alliance held a breakfast for NJEA members who have served, or are serving, in the U.S. military.

For more convention photos, visit flickr.com/photos/njea/albums.

TARGETING BATHROOM HAZARDS

By Dorothy Wigmore

We all use them, usually several times a day. They should be clean, free of “bugs,” well-ventilated, free of hazards, accessible to all—and working. Too often, they’re not.

Whether for staff or students, school bathrooms should be included in a health and safety committee’s walk-through. Hazards in these spaces can spill over to affect other parts of the building and its occupants.

What are common bathroom hazards?

Maintenance is a big issue. Think dirty surfaces, broken doors and locks, inadequate or missing supplies, flooring problems or no water. Toilets or urinals don’t work or overflow. Sewers back up. Dampness and/or high humidity from water leaks can lead to mold and become a breeding ground for pests.

In addition, toxic chemicals from cleaning and disinfecting, pest control, perfumes, urinal and other air freshener plug-ins, and other sources are potential issues.

Water and air quality are key potential problems. School water must be tested for lead but other hazards, like forever chemicals, also may be present.

Then there are the germs found in bathroom air and on surfaces.

“Bathrooms are likely the number one place for disease transmission, not just in healthcare, but in schools and other workplaces,” says Barry Hunt, Executive Director of the Canadian Coalition for Community and Healthcare Infection Reduction (CHAIR). “You aerosolize everything all the time in the bathroom.”

These bioaerosols—invisible airborne liquid particles of micro-organisms, fragments, toxins and waste products from living things and viruses (e.g., influenza, SARS-CoV-2)—get into the air when people breath, talk, cough, etc., or flush toilets. They can settle on surfaces, where touching also leaves behind germs. Sinks also collect harmful biofilms.

Accessibility matters too, especially for those for whom bathrooms and/or stalls and urinals are impossible or difficult to enter or use.

Student bathrooms also have become a place where students harass and bully others, vape, use drugs, drink alcohol, or use as an escape for other reasons. This leads to potential hazards for monitors or staff expected to enforce the rules.

If you’re an outdoor worker, teaching in a temporary facility, or bus driver, too often it’s a question of where to find a bathroom, and if it’s usable. Women can face more obstacles than men. Lack of easy bathroom access leads to short- and long-term health hazards, some serious (e.g., affecting kidneys, gastrointestinal system) and problems for pregnant and menstruating women, or those with incontinence, irritable bowel syndrome or taking some medications.

Dorothy Wigmore is a long-time health and safety specialist and WEC consultant. She has worked in Canada, the U.S. and Mozambique, focusing on prevention and worker participation to fix job-related hazards.





And solutions are ...?

There are legal requirements about layout, maintenance and cleanliness. The state Department of Education's school building health and safety evaluation document focuses mostly on basics. Bathrooms must be working, with hot and cold (or tepid) running water, hand soap and something to dry hands. Stalls must have doors.

In addition, the code states, "Toilet facilities shall be available within a reasonable distance not more than one floor away and shall be equipped with an exterior operable window sash or mechanical exhaust ventilation."

Despite that rule, windows do little to replace air with infectious particles or other hazards, and nothing to filter it. Ventilation is needed, with fresh air brought in and extracted continuously. Filters also are needed to deal with both airborne particles and gases or vapors from vaping, perfumes or urinal plug-in deodorizers.

Cleaning and disinfecting can be done with microfiber cloths and low- or non-toxic products. Air fresheners should be removed given their toxic ingredients.

A fascinating future for school bathrooms

Ventilation and filtration may not be needed in the future. For example, CHAIR promotes Engineered Infection Prevention (EIP), a system of materials, technology and automation designed to continuously reduce exposure to harmful microorganisms below the minimum infectious dose.

Bathroom retrofits include antimicrobial surfaces (e.g., copper), self-cleaning sinks and a system of automatic door closers combined with sensors that determine when the space is empty, so auto-UV disinfection devices can "zap" it. This disinfects much more effectively and frequently than traditional cleaning and disinfecting practices.

"Auto-UV will get rid of most of your problem (of bioaerosols); you don't have to do much else with the ventilation because you've zapped everything in the air and on the surfaces," Hunt says.

Copper and some other materials for surfaces are effective antimicrobials that continuously deactivate many viruses and bacteria. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has registered copper for this purpose.

What can committees do?

- Ensure all bathrooms are included in walk-through inspections, advocating they at least meet legal minimum standards for maintenance, cleanliness and air and water quality.
- Include bathrooms in membership health and safety surveys, and follow up on issues raised, including student behaviors, advocating for short-, medium- and long-term solutions.
- Investigate the use of cleaning and disinfecting products used in bathrooms, advocating for substitution with the least toxic methods.
- Like other health and safety issues, push to be brought into planning and purchasing processes in time to advocate for longer-term solutions, including UV disinfection and copper or other antimicrobial surfaces, especially when renovations/additions are planned.
- Work to get easy bathroom access for bus drivers and others without it.

Resources



ASHRAE

"ASHRAE publishes Standard 241, Control of infectious aerosols"



Coalition for Healthcare Aquired Infection Reduction



NJDOE

"Health and Safety Evaluation of School Buildings Checklist 2025-2026"



NJEA

Health and safety manual



NJEA

"What's in your water? Part 2: Getting things fixed, reducing toxins"



New Jersey Work Environment Council,

NJEA and Healthy Schools Network, "Disinfecting can be hazardous to all staff & students" fixed, reducing toxins"

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Kindness is a gift that stays with us forever

By Kitty Sausa

We are approaching the season to be thankful, to share a kindness, to spend time with family and to prepare for a new year. The holiday season is a busy and joyous time, but not for everyone, so I would like to ask a special favor of you. Please consider volunteering your time to someone who needs it or find time to volunteer with an organization that interests you or donate to a reputable organization that benefits others. It doesn't have to mean a lot of time or money; it can be as easy as picking up the phone and saying hello to someone you have not spoken to in a while. Anything you can contribute will make an impact and, in the process, I guarantee it will raise your spirits.

Unfortunately, we are living during a moment in time where many people find themselves needing financial assistance, companionship or a simple helping hand. Although many of us are extremely fortunate, as retired educators we are used to giving our time and reaching into our pockets. In my religion when you do good deeds for others it is often called a mitzvah. I try my best to do as many mitzvahs as I can.

NJREA members answer the call

I am always amazed and proud of what our counties collect at their luncheons. NJREA members are extremely generous with their time and volunteerism. Whether PAC contributions, food donations for local pantries, clothing, toys, hand-crocheted blankets for veterans, when we ask our NJREA members, they give.

My wish for this season is for us all to be nicer to each other, to respect one another and be the best we can be.

Sometimes, I challenge myself when I walk into a store, and I see people who look unhappy. I smile and say a friendly hello. Unbelievably, people relax, smile and sometimes even say hello back.

As we approach this holiday season may you give kindness, a gift that stays with us forever and will warm you with happiness.

I wish you all a new year filled with health and joy!

Kitty Sausa is the president of NJREA.

Around the counties 2025-26

For questions and/or concerns, or if your county is not listed, please check your county newsletter, or reach out to your county REA for more information. For trip details, check your county newsletter.

Essex County REA

Feb 11: Annual winter luncheon meeting will be a Zoom Virtual Meeting. To attend, contact Deborah Thurmond for the Zoom link at 973-715-6591.

Hunterdon County REA

Dec. 11: Holiday brunch at Mountain View Chalet in Asbury. The entertainment will be provided by the North Hunterdon Choir. Reservation deadline is Dec. 1, and the cost is \$35. To attend, contact Maryann Sajor at 908-625-8911.

Morris County REA

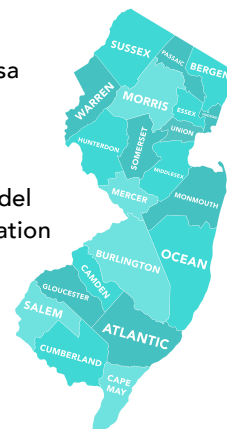
Dec. 10: General luncheon meeting at the Birchwood Manor in Whippany. Entertainment will be provided by the Frelinhuysen Middle School Choir. Reservation deadline is Dec. 1, and the cost is \$35 for members and \$55 for guests. To attend, contact John Williams at 609-504-9681.

Passaic County REA

Dec. 10: Winter luncheon meeting at The Brownstone in Paterson. The meeting is for members only. To attend, contact Kitty Sausa at 201-410-1325.

Union County REA

Feb. 24: Winter luncheon meeting at Casa del Rey in Roselle Park. There will be a presentation from NJEA Government Relations and Member Benefits. Reservation deadline is Feb. 15, and the cost is \$40. To attend, contact Luanne Lohman-DiCicco at 732-882-1688.





Teacher leadership and unionism

Rising for equity and solidarity

By Richard Wilson

In classrooms and communities across New Jersey, we find ourselves in a period marked by social division and political attacks on educators and public education at levels rarely seen. For teacher leaders, this creates unprecedented challenges in supporting their colleagues.

Teacher leadership is about the courage to support and advocate for colleagues and students through a non-administrative lens. In today's climate, colleagues who are members of color, immigrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and other marginalized groups, have been caught in the crosshairs of political attacks at the national, state and local levels. Teacher leaders have a responsibility to ensure that educators, and marginalized colleagues, in particular, are equipped to thrive in our profession.

Leadership in this context, especially when partnering with unionism, means working on two levels. At the systemic level, it means leveraging whatever power we have speaking truth to power when policies harm vulnerable colleagues and students. At the ground level, it means honing our craft and increasing our understanding of the struggles of others. This makes us more effective in holding space and supporting colleagues who are members of groups under attack.

The partnership between our union and teacher leaders is paramount. Our unions provide the collective power needed to turn teacher leadership into an agent of systemic change. This partnership can blend the teacher leader's focus on professional practice with the union's ability to build solidarity, provide collective action and advocate for the needs of its members.

Our union can advocate for professional learning, led by teacher leaders, that focuses on the needs of all students and staff, particularly those being targeted. Our union can advocate for instructional coaches who can partner with staff members who might be struggling. Our union

Richard Wilson is an associate director in the NJEA Professional Development and Instructional Issues Division. He is the coordinator of the NJEA Teacher Leader Academy. He can be reached at TeacherLeader@njea.org.



Teacher leaders must decide what to do with the time that is given to us and stand on the side of justice.

can advocate for curriculum development led by teacher leaders that aligns with New Jersey's inclusive curriculum mandates, despite outside forces. Through PEP (njea.org/pep) and FAST (njea.org/fast) grants, our union can provide resources for teacher leaders to support struggling families and community members. Together, teacher leaders and unions demand we look beyond ourselves, build community and use our collective strength for the common good.

Working at the ground level, this moment calls for some essential traits in teacher leaders. First, teacher leaders need the courage to confront injustice and resist efforts to silence conversations about equity and identity. Teacher leaders need to develop the empathy required for deep listening to their colleagues and their lived experience. Teacher leaders need the skill to create collaborative communities to build coalitions for support and change. They need the persistence and resilience to show up each day to sustain their important work.

In J. R. R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, the hobbit, Frodo, is reflecting on his fate, battling the forces of evil who seek to enslave the inhabitants of Middle Earth. "I wish it need not have happened in my time," he shares with the wizard, Gandalf. "So do I," Gandalf replies. "So do all who live in such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

Teacher leaders must decide what to do with the time that is given to us and stand on the side of justice. This is the leadership the moment demands. And it is the leadership we, teacher leaders and unions together, can provide.



STUDENTS BECOMING THE HOPE: RISING ABOVE EDUCATION FUNDING CUTS



At an event at Montclair State University (MSU), students held a forum calling on universities to provide more meaningful support to students. From left: Bobby Morgan, principal, Willingboro's Memorial Middle School; Dr. Tayna Maloney, associate professor at MSU; Dr. DaQuan Bashir, Associate Director of NJEA's Human & Civil Rights, Equity, and Governance Department; NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson; 2024-25 NJ State Teacher of the Year Stefanie Lachenauer; MSU/NJAEA Chapter President Abigail Rodriguez and Brittany Lamb, Cherry Hill High School West guidance counselor.

By Antonio Hernandez

As colleges and universities began the fall semester, many campuses are feeling the impact of recent federal funding changes. On Sept. 10, the U.S. Department of Education announced the end of discretionary funding for several Minority Serving Institution (MSI) grant programs — a loss of \$350 million that once supported countless students.

These cuts have left many questioning how to continue their education. In the face of uncertainty, students are stepping up to create hope for one another. Across New Jersey, Future Teachers and Educators' clubs are organizing events and workshops to empower their peers and strengthen campus communities.

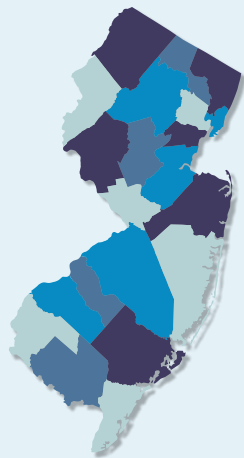
At Montclair State University, students recently held a forum challenging institutions to go beyond recruitment

Antonio Hernandez is the communications chair of NJAEA and a student at Passaic County Community College.

and provide deeper, more meaningful support. Bobby Morgan, Willingboro's Memorial Middle School principal, Dr. Tanya Maloney, professor at Montclair State University and Dr. Daquan Bashir, associate director of Human and Civil Rights, Equity & Governance at NJEA, gave their perspectives on the situation.

At the NJEA Convention in Atlantic City, students had the opportunity to connect with educators and hear inspiring messages from Malala Yousafzai and Padma Lakshmi. Yousafzai's message that the empowerment of girls in education is the key to having a better future resonated with attendees. Lakshmi's message was likewise clear and urgent: educators and students' futures are in danger and we must stand up and fight back.

Even in difficult times, these moments prove that students are not alone. Through leadership and solidarity, New Jersey's future educators continue to show that together, we will prosper.



SUSSEX TO CAPE MAY

Workshops and conferences

highlights

Poetry, prose, language and civics

SHOWCASE

Showcase experiences have been endorsed by NJEA's Professional Development Institute and are also posted on njea.org. Those seeking endorsement of a professional development experience that they will provide should email Dawn Howlen (dhowlen@njea.org) and Tamanyka Booker (tbooker@njea.org) in NJEA's Professional Development Division.

WINTER POETRY & PROSE GETAWAY

Jan. 16-19

Seaview Hotel

The Winter Poetry & Prose Getaway is a three-day conference where educators hone their creative writing skills and expand their teaching strategies. Held at Seaview Hotel near Atlantic City, Jan. 16-19, the conference is presented by Murphy Writing of Stockton University. The conference was founded by NJEA/NJREA member and author Peter E. Murphy, who believes that when writers leave behind the distractions of their busy lives to gather in an encouraging community, they can make important breakthroughs in their art.

Beginner and experienced writers may choose from workshops in fiction, memoir, nonfiction, poetry, songwriting, storytelling and more. Participants will receive craft discussion, writing prompts, writing time, feedback, motivation and inspiration.

Scholarships available for 2026 writers' conference

Tuition is available on a sliding scale from \$595 to \$795. South Jersey teachers may be eligible to have their districts pay their tuition when they register with ETTT hours. Scholarships are being offered to first-time participants.

Registration ends Jan. 11, 2026.

Visit stockton.edu/wintergetaway or scan the QR code for registration information or contact murphywriting@stockton.edu.



MORE TO LEARN

2026 NJTESOL/NJBE SPRING CONFERENCE

Unlock Your Potential: BE Multilingual

Intersectionality: Shaping Experiences and Creating Opportunities

The 2026 conference of the New Jersey Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages/New Jersey Bilingual Educators (NJTESOL/NJBE) will have two components: an in-person conference and a video library conference.

The In-Person Conference will take place at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in New Brunswick on May 19-21. You can register for one, two or all three days. The conference will feature three keynote speakers: Dr. Elsa Cárdenas-Hagan, Dr. Sharroky Hollie, and Dr. Margarita Machado-Casas.

In addition, you'll select from many presentations approved for the continuing education requirement, network with your colleagues, and obtain the latest information on state and national initiatives. You can also meet with representatives at the sponsors' and exhibitors' booths to find the latest and greatest teaching tools. You can earn professional development hours throughout the day.

The Video Library Conference is a select collection of library presentations you will have access to view starting on May 27 using our conference platform. There is no set schedule, and you will be able to view the workshops from May 27 to Aug. 20. By using your unique login, your hours will be tracked so that you can earn professional development hours. Please note that the select collection of presentations will not include the keynotes or special invited guest speakers.

Presentation topics will include Advocacy, Social Justice, and Policy; Supporting Newcomers, SLIFEs and Refugees; Family and Community Engagement; Dual Identified/Special Populations; Early Learning and Family Practices; Social Emotional Learning; Content-Integrated Approaches; Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking; Technology; Language Assessment; Program Administration and Evaluation

Registration and more information

Register early for a discounted rate. Registration includes one free year of membership.

Visit njtesol-njbe.org/spring-conference for more information and to register.

For other conference questions email Caia Schlessinger, Conference Coordinator, at conference-coordinator@njtesol-njbe.org.

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Rosemarie Blumenstein
current CASA / lifelong advocate

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Essex County – casaessex.org
Hudson County – hudsoncountycasa.org
Monmouth County – casaofmonmouth.org
Ocean County – casaofoceancounty.org
Passaic and Union Counties – casapassaicunion.org
South Central NJ – casasnj.org
(Burlington, Cumberland, Gloucester, Mercer and Salem Counties)

MORE TO LEARN (cont.)

FREE WORKSHOPS FROM THE NJ CENTER FOR CIVIC EDUCATION

Unlock Your Potential: BE Multilingual

Intersectionality: Shaping Experiences and Creating Opportunities

The New Jersey Center for Civic Education offers a series of free, all-day workshops for teachers during the 2025-26 school year.

Workshops will be held at Rutgers University's Piscataway campus from 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., with continental breakfast and lunch provided. Sessions are supported by state funding and are free to school districts.

The schedule includes:

- Project Citizen (grades 4-12) – Dec. 9
- Media Literacy (virtual, 90 minutes) – Jan. 14 at 4:30 p.m.
- We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution (for middle and high school) – Feb. 10
- Engaging Students in Civics in Middle School – Feb. 24
- Civics for K-5 – March 10
- The Development of Democracy in Ancient Civilizations (middle school) – March 20
- Infusing Civics, Economics and NJ into High School U.S. History – March 26

For more information and to register, visit civiced.rutgers.edu/events.

An era of accountability

By Jeremiah Kleckner



We are so close. Just around the next corner, in our very near future, there's a new era of accountability coming for New Jersey's public schools.

It's been 30 years since New Jersey passed its Charter School Law—30 years without a meaningful update. In that time, we've seen enough wasteful spending, mismanagement and backroom opacity in some charter schools to know the system needs to change. Problems like that would never be tolerated in traditional public schools—and shouldn't be tolerated anywhere public dollars are spent.

Right now, the state legislature is considering two critical proposals:

- **S4713/A5936** – sponsored by Sen. Vin Gopal—would set clear requirements for charter schools, their boards and the organizations that manage them.
- **S4716/A5935** – also sponsored by Gopal—would tighten rules on charter school enrollment, student placements, reporting and athletics.

These bills are about ending the double standard.

Charter school teachers are public school teachers. They deserve to know how their schools spend money so they can know if they're being paid fairly. Parents of charter school students are New Jersey taxpayers. They deserve to know how the schools teaching their children spend public money.

There must not be special rules for public charter schools.

I'm not against charters—far from it. In addition to being a public school educator for 20 years, I was elected to the board of trustees for the Elysian Charter School in Hoboken and did my best for the parents, teachers and students I served.

I also speak as a parent. My daughter went from public elementary school to charter middle school to a county technical high school. I understand the value. But value doesn't replace transparency or the need for oversight.

Jeremiah Kleckner is a language arts teacher at Perth Amboy High School and a secretary of the Perth Amboy Association of School Employees.

Here's the reality: while charter teachers are public school teachers, they often earn less than their district or county counterparts, face the same budget restrictions, and yet are locked out of the financial picture. Without transparency, there's no way to know if those budgetary concerns are unavoidable, the result of poor management or something more intentional.

NJEA leads this work. NJEA stands on four essentials:

- **Accountability** – Same standards for every public school.
- **Transparency** – Open books, clear reporting and public access to the facts.
- **Equity in access** – Fair enrollment and retention for all students, including those with disabilities, English learners and students from low-income or unhoused families.
- **Protection of public funds** – Strong oversight to safeguard every taxpayer dollar.

Every major public education union supports these bills because they know what's at stake. This is about making sure public education—no matter the model—operates in daylight.

Don't be funny with public school money.

If you believe in fairness, in protecting taxpayer dollars, and in giving every educator and parent the same right to know how those dollars are spent, this is your moment.

Support S4713/A5936 and S4716/A5935. Contact your legislators in Trenton and tell them to modernize the 1995 Charter School Law. Tell them to make accountability the rule, not the exception.

The era of accountability can't come soon enough. But it won't come at all unless we push for it—together.



Support S4713/A5936 and S4716/A5935. Contact your legislators in Trenton or scan this QR code and tell them to modernize the 1995 Charter School Law. Tell them to make accountability the rule, not the exception.

HOPES AND DREAMS FOR LGBTQIA+ EDUCATORS, STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Workshops and networking opportunities for educators seeking more inclusive and enriching schools for all students, including LGBTQIA+ students, were offered at the 2025 NJEA Convention. "Standing Up for Transgender and Nonbinary Students" and "Q-riculum LGBTQ+ in the English Classroom," were among the professional development opportunities.

The Rainbow Connection asked the presenters of these workshops to answer this question: What are you hoping the field of education will evolve toward with regard to supporting queer educators, students and families?

Here are the answers from two of the presenters.



Carol Watchler co-presented "Standing Up for Transgender and Nonbinary Students," at the 2025 NJEA Convention.

To know who they truly are and be glad

From Carol Watchler

What I long for...

A school/education environment (personal, local and more broadly reaching the whole society) characterized by deep respect and mutual empowerment. Student-centered so that everyone is committed to the mission of striving to affirm and empower every student to know who they truly are and be glad. Community-centered so that each stakeholder knows that they are giving/receiving the maximum possible, in collaboration with one another, to activate that mission and make it sustainable.

Carol Watchler, a lifelong human rights advocate, is the community outreach coordinator of the Bayard Rustin Center for Social Justice in Princeton. An NJREA member, Watchler is a retired physics teacher and internship placement coordinator from South Brunswick High School. NJEA has honored her leadership by naming one of its annual conferences the Carol Watchler LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Conference.

As ubiquitous as having a first name

From Collin Rossi

My utmost hope is that the LGBTQ+ community ceases to be seen as a shocking novelty. That we are as ubiquitous as having a first name. We won't have to struggle for positive, meaningful representation because it will just



Collin Rossi presented "Q-riculum: LGBTQ+ in the English Classroom."

be there. I hope that having a picture of my husband and me at our wedding will not be seen as an act of courage or defiance. It's just one more piece of flair that fades into the desk. I hope that I can teach an exciting, engaging and empowering curriculum that mirrors ALL of my students without fearing a parent will see it as an attack on their values.

Collin Rossi is an English teacher at South Brunswick High School and the high school membership chair for the South Brunswick Education Association.

Have an idea for Rainbow Connection?

Do you have an idea for a Rainbow Connection column? Would you like to share strategies that affirm and empower every student to know who they truly are and be glad? Are you finding new and creative ways to implement New Jersey's LGBT curriculum mandate in your subject area?



We'd love to hear from you. Write to RainbowConnectionNJEA@gmail.com.

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memberbenefits.njea.org

Questions? Email
Beth Buonsante at
bbuonsante@njea.org.

NJEA Delegate Assembly

A note about the minutes

On pages 54-59, you will find the minutes for two meetings of the NJEA Delegate Assembly (D.A.): Jan 24 and March 9, 2024. You may have noticed recently that some rather dated minutes have been published.

The D.A. formulates NJEA policy. It includes more than 120 representatives proportionally elected from each county and unit (e.g., Higher Education, NJREA, NJAEA, non-classroom teacher). You can find your county or unit's representatives by logging on to njea.org and clicking on "Committees" from the website dashboard.

The NJEA Review is constitutionally required to print D.A. minutes when they become available for publication. Due to a backlog in publication, the D.A. passed a New Business Item (NBI) establishing a timeline for publication of minutes. In last month's edition, the minutes for the May 2025 meeting were published, along with minutes from September and November 2023.

Going forward the *NJEA Review* will publish the most recent minutes, when available, followed by older minutes, until all previous minutes have been published.

Jan. 6, 2024

The NJEA Delegate Assembly met at the Hyatt Regency, Princeton, 102 Carnegie Center, Princeton, N.J. on Jan. 6, 2024 at 9:30 a.m.

The meeting was called to order by President Sean M. Spiller.

The roll call and the seating of delegates was taken by Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson. There were 121 members present and a quorum was met. Alternates were seated as follows: Primas for Jenkins (Atlantic); A. Policastro for Mendelson (Bergen); Nahill for Chiavuzzo (Bergen); Esposito for Rocha (Hunterdon); Barilka for Marino (Monmouth); Hernandez for Eckert (Morris); Jubert for Pizzuto (Ocean); Bliem for Wiemken (Ocean); Mitchell-Hall for Gani (Union); Esquivel for Shannon (Union); and Kanarkowski for Yuro (NJEA PreService).

Absent without alternates were the following: Shibli (non-classroom teacher).

Sturac Meyers, Camden County, gave the Inspirational Message and along with President Spiller, led the delegation in the Flag Salute.

President's report

Spiller asked for a moment of silence to remember Vince Giordano, Heidi Brache, Jim Loper, Regina Andrews Collette and Gerald Beatty, all of whom recently passed away.

Spiller highlighted the following:

- GR Updates
- State House Updates
- State Board of Education Nominees
- Legislative Dinners
- PAC
- 2025 Gubernatorial Race

Vice president's report

Vice President Steve Beatty did not have a report at this meeting.

Secretary-treasurer's report

Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson delivered the NJEA fiscal report.

Robertson highlighted the following:

- Good News
- Building the Budget
- Celebration of Women
- Membership Matters

Robertson reported on the audit of the organization's finances.

Executive Director's report

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher highlighted the following:

- PAC by the Numbers
- Membership
- Communications
- Research
- Legal Services
- National Institute of Retirement Security
- Education Law Center
- National Education Association
- Op-ed on book banning

Nondelegate speakers

Chris Cannella, Essex County, spoke as the chair of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Committee to express gratitude to the Constitutional Review Committee, for their support in recommending that the SOGI Committee be elevated from a special committee to a standing committee.

Reports of committees without recommendations

PAC Operating Committee

Spiller asked delegates to review the report from the PAC Operating Committee. There were no questions and the report was accepted as presented.

Reports of committees with recommendations

Constitution Review Committee

The Constitution Review Committee report recommended an amendment to the NJEA Bylaws to elevate the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Committee from a special committee to a standing committee. The committee reviewed a new business item submitted in January 2023 and, after consulting with the SOGI Committee and reviewing the bylaws, unanimously supported the change.

RULE RECOMMENDATION 1: that the NJEA Bylaws Section 29 be amended to incorporate the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee as a standing committee and the Bylaws in Sections 29 and 50 through 55 be reworded and renumbered to 50 through 56 to reflect this change as indicated below. (Additions appear in boldface underlined, and deletions are bracketed and struck out []).

29. Standing Committees

- Affiliation
- Budget
- Certification, Evaluation, & Tenure
- Constitution Review
- Editorial
- Educational Support Professionals
- Government Relations
- Human & Civil Rights
- Instruction
- Leadership
- Membership
- Minority Leadership and Recruitment
- Pension Policy
- Professional Development
- Professional Rights & Responsibilities
- Public Relations
- School Finance
- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
- Urban Education
- Working Conditions

50. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee – The Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee shall consist of no less than five members. This committee shall:

a. Deal with sexual orientation and gender identity/expression issues pertaining to all persons in the school community;

b. Advocate for and promote the inclusion and equality of LGBTQIA+ Association members and students in educational environments and society at large and work to address their concerns;

c. Support the implementation and application of anti-discrimination, anti-violence, civil rights, inclusive curricula, and other statutes and regulations that protect LGBTQIA+ Association members, students, and community members at large.

[50] **51.** Urban Education Committee

[51] **52.** Working Conditions Committee

[52] **53.** Rules of Order

[53] **54.** Association Employees

[54] **55.** Employee Security

[55] **56.** Amendments to Bylaws

Amal Hussein, Morris County, moved Rule Recommendation #1. The motion carried.

Educational Support Professional Committee

The Educational Support Professionals (ESP) Committee presented four key recommendations—two rule changes and two resolutions—all of which were approved by the Delegate Assembly.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 1: that the honors and opportunities provided to the NJEA ESP of the Year be enhanced to include Park Hopper tickets with the four-day trip to Disney World for up to four family members, including the honoree.

RESOLUTION RECOMMENDATION NO. 1: that NJEA encourages county associations to utilize NJEA's current funding formulas to hold county educational support professional roundtables, which will be developed and implemented within each county affiliate to identify, monitor, strategize and coordinate ways of meeting ESP needs and challenges.

RESOLUTION RECOMMENDATION NO. 2: that NJEA conduct a study to review options to enable all NJEA members to attend the NJEA Convention without loss of time and pay. The study will be due no later than the May Delegate Assembly meeting.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 2: that starting with the 2023-24 school year, NJEA will provide each NJEA ESP Committee member reimbursement for up to \$500 towards travel/transportation, plus cover the registration cost up to \$250 for a total of \$750 for NJEA ESP Committee members to attend the NEA ESP Conference. NJEA also will continue to fully fund reimbursable expenses for the NJEA ESP chairperson to attend the conference. NJEA encourages NJEA ESP Committee members to present and/or share the information that they learned at the national conference with members at local association, county association, and ESP Committee meetings.

Marquisha Reynolds, Hudson, moved to accept all recommendations as a block.

Susan Waldron, Middlesex County, moved to separate the rule recommendations 1 and 2.

Discussion on Rule Recommendation 1 ensued. Delegates adopted the rule.

Discussion on Rule Recommendation 2 ensued. Delegates adopted the rule.

Discussion on resolution recommendations 1 and 2 ensued. Delegates adopted the recommendations.

Member Benefits Committee and Pension Committee joint report

Diane Vistein, chair of the Member Benefits Committee, presented the joint report of the Member Benefits and Pension Policy committees. The committees made four recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION #1: that NJEA seek legislation or amendments to pending legislation to:

- Require all school districts to offer a minimum number of six 403(b) and 457 providers and notify employees of those options
- Require that each school district provides a choice of features, including self-directed annuities and mutual fund options
- Require that the selection of 403(b) providers and the requirement that compensation for sick leave upon retirement be deposited into 403(b) accounts be subjects of negotiations
- Require that a 403(b) provider cannot simultaneously serve as the district's third-party administrator (TPA).

RECOMMENDATION #2: that NJEA provide resources on the *njea.org* website to local leaders to assist in advocating for varied plan options, including a standard checklist for analyzing district offered plans, the 403(b) Model Disclosure Form developed by NEA and the National Tax Sheltered Annuity Association, and sample bargaining language.

RECOMMENDATION #3: that NJEA provide a checklist for members to help them analyze their own plan or other plan options, an educational video, and financial education through workshops and webinars.

RECOMMENDATION #4: that the NJEA Member Benefits Committee review and make recommendations on current NJEA policy regarding endorsement of supplemental retirement accounts or providers, including how to require a dedicated payroll slot in all school districts for a supplemental retirement provider of the employee representative's choosing; and that the NJEA Member Benefits Committee annually review NJEA policy on supplemental retirement accounts and providers.

Diane Vistein, Monmouth moved Recommendation 1. The motion carried.

Diane Vistein, Monmouth moved Recommendation 2-4 as a block. The motion carried.

The Professional Rights and Responsibilities Committee

The Professional Rights and Responsibilities (PR&R) Committee made seven recommendations:

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 1: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines to use inclusive, gender-neutral pronouns.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 2: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines to indicate the Director of Legal Services shall be the Legal Services Program Manager and shall have primary responsibility for the administration of the Legal Services to reflect current practice.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 3: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines to comply with amended NJEA Bylaws, Section 1(i)3 and Executive Policy regarding Leave of Absence memberships.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 4: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines that reflect the current practice of covering 1/2 of a local affiliates' share of certain arbitration costs upon submission of the proper paperwork to NJEA Legal Services.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 5: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines that permit, but do not require, the presence and ability to speak of the NJEA UniServ Field Representative at a member or local affiliate's appeal before the PR&R Committee. This more accurately reflects the current practice.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 6: that the NJEA adopt revisions to the Guidelines that permit, but do not require, the presence and ability to speak of the NJEA UniServ Field Representative at a member or local affiliate's appeal before the Executive Committee. This more accurately reflects the current practice.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 7: that the NJEA adopt the revisions to the NJEA Legal Services Guidelines as indicated and appended to this Report. A member is permitted to keep their leave of absence status, while maintaining their membership dues, through the exhaustion of the PR&R appeal procedure.

Amal Hussein, Morris County, moved the recommendations as a block. Cynthia Lota, Bergen County, moved to hold out recommendations 5, 6 and 7. Hussein subsequently moved to consider recommendations 5 and 6 in block and consider Recommendation 7 separately.

Delegates adopted recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Following discussion and amendments as indicated above, delegates adopted resolutions 5 and 6 as amended.

Following discussion and an amendment as indicated above, delegates adopted Resolution 7 as amended.

For the Good of the Order

Susan Waldron, Middlesex County, clarified the positive intent of her debate on ESP-related issues.

Lori Lalama, Passaic County, raised concerns about Proximity Learning, a virtual instruction model where students are taught by remote teachers via video. She inquired about the Technology Committee not being listed as a standing committee. President Spiller advised her that it is not a standing committee.

Anthony Rizzo, Burlington County, respectfully requested a moment of silence to honor the recent passing of Vice President Steve Beatty's father.

Theresa Fuller, Somerset County, asked whether the RA delegation allocation report would be coming out. President Spiller indicated that it would follow shortly after NEA's annual membership count on Jan. 15.

A motion to adjourn the meeting was made, and the motion was duly seconded, and the meeting was adjourned.

March 9, 2024

The NJEA Delegate Assembly met at the Hyatt Regency, Princeton, 102 Carnegie Center, Princeton, N.J. on March 9, 2024 at 9:30 a.m.

The meeting was called to order by President Sean M. Spiller.

The roll call and the seating of delegates was taken by Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson. There were 121 members present and a quorum was met. Alternates were seated as follows: Primas for Jenkins (Atlantic); A. Policastro for Murphy (Bergen); Hewitt for Chiavuzzo (Bergen); Jeffries for Robinson-Taylor (Camden); Lobasso for Giannotti (Essex); Acchione for Whitehead (Gloucester); Marques for Reynolds (Hudson); DeFilippis for Rhue (Hudson); Hopkins for Yaple (Mercer); Fields for Paprota (Middlesex); Barilka for Reichenbecher (Monmouth); Blim for Ryan (Ocean); and Alston for Shannon (Union).

Absent without alternates were the following: Crane (Atlantic); Curry (Hudson); Wiemken (Ocean); and Ferlise (Higher Ed).

Sturac Meyers, Camden County, gave the Inspirational Message on behalf of Brittany Lamb, Camden County, and along with President Spiller, led the delegation in the Flag Salute.

President's report

Spiller recognized 2024 NJEA ESP of the Year Maureen Kelly.

Spiller introduced all of the County ESPs of the year.

Spiller highlighted the following:

- State Board of Education
- GR Update
- Legislative Updates
- Federal Updates
- Elections

Vice President's report

Vice President Steve Beatty highlighted the following:

- NJEA Preservice and educator identification, recruitment, mentoring and retention
- Local Chapters
- Higher Education
- Dept. of Ed. and State Bd. of Ed.
- Affiliated Special Interest Groups (ASIG)
- NJ State Teacher of the Year

Secretary-Treasurer's report

Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson delivered the NJEA fiscal report.

Robertson highlighted the following:

- Good News
- Celebration of Women
- Freedom to Read
- NJREA

Executive Director's report

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher highlighted the following:

- PAC by the Numbers
- Membership and Growth Successes
- Communications
- Professional Development and Instructional Issues
- Government Relations
- NJEA Center for Honesty in Education
- Research and Economic Services

- Legal Services
- National Education Association
- Celebrate our Wins, Build our Power
- Essential Life Skills (i.e., Social-Emotional Learning) and Well-Being
- 2024 Candidate Comparison Tool
- Announced new staff and staff returning from leaves of absence
- Delivered a presentation on pension reform, highlighting the inequities between Tier 1 and Tier 5 pensions and the inadequacy of the DCRP plan.

Nondelegate speakers

There were no 11 o'clock nondelegate speakers.

Reports of committees with recommendations

Constitution Review Committee report

The Constitution Review Committee report recommended an amendment to the NJEA Bylaws to elevate the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Committee from a special committee to a standing committee. The committee reviewed a new business item submitted in January 2023 and, after consulting with the SOGI Committee and reviewing the bylaws, unanimously supported the change.

The recommendations reported were:

RULE RECOMMENDATION 1: that the NJEA Bylaws Section 29 be amended to incorporate the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee as a standing committee and the Bylaws in Sections 29 and 50 through 55 be reworded and renumbered to 50 through 56 to reflect this change as indicated below. (See minutes of Jan. 24, 2024, above, for the amended language to NJEA Bylaws Section 29).

Gail Maher, Monmouth County, moved the recommendation to make the SOGI Committee to a standing committee. The Delegate Assembly approved recommendation with the required three-fourths majority. The SOGI Committee is now officially a standing committee of NJEA.

Executive Committee

NEA Board of Director Nominations/Elections report

Spiller moved onto the NEA Board of Director nominations/elections and reported that there were three positions for NEA State Director

The Executive Committee submitted a list of nominations for the three open NEA Board of Director positions to be filled for three-year terms effective Sept. 1, 2024, and that there was no need to fill alternate positions at this time as they were elected last year. The nominations were:

Barbara Rheault, Atlantic County
Diane Mackay, Hudson County
Kayla Khaled, Union County
Temika Langston-Meyers, Cumberland County
Dawn Nichol Manning, Essex County
Lisa Simone, Ocean County
Laurie Gibson-Parker, Camden County

Lori Lalama, chair of the D.A. Rules Committee reviewed the process for the NEA Board of Director nominations and elections.

Peter Helff, Higher Ed, moved to close nominations. Spiller closed nominations.

The nominees were each allotted two minutes for speeches.

Barbara Rheault, Atlantic County; Laurie Gibson-Parker, Camden County; and Kayla Khaled, Union County were elected.

Recommendation to D.A. for *NJEA Review* from Executive Committee

On Jan. 5, 2024, the Executive Committee, as a result of the effects of a war in the Middle East which has had far-reaching implications, and negatively impacted members, students, families and school communities, by creating division and civil strife, voted to raise awareness of the rise of antisemitism and Islamophobia in schools, on college campuses and on social media, and provide resource links and materials for educators to use in addressing these incidents. After extensive discussion and review, the committee recommends the following:

Recommendation: that the *NJEA Review* shall produce two articles, along with electronic articles for the website. One article will make note of the rise in antisemitism and incidents in schools, on college campuses, and on social media, as well as provide some resource links and materials for educators to use for lessons and/or to address these incidents. The second article will make note of the rise in islamophobia and incidents in schools, on college campuses, and on social media as well as provide some resource links and materials for educators to use for lessons and/or to address these incidents. These articles should be published simultaneously.

NEA Activities Committee report

The NEA Activities Committee Chair, Tamara Beatty, Burlington County, presented the report and recommendations related to the upcoming NEA Representative Assembly. The recommendations were:

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 1: that the state delegate stipend for the 2024 NEA Representative Assembly be set at \$1,487 to cover food, incidentals, and travel, as indicated in Appendix A, with \$687 deducted for the cost of direct billing the hotel room for six nights based on double occupancy per delegate.

Members of the NJEA Executive Committee, Delegate Assembly Members, NEA Activities Committee, and NEA Issues Committee who have been elected as delegates at the state or local level will also receive this stipend.

Of the adjusted state delegate stipend, \$533 will be paid at the June caucus and the remaining \$267 balance will be paid at the conclusion of the Representative Assembly with the reading of the proposed titles of constitutional amendments for the following year.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 2: that the local delegate stipend for the 2024 NEA Representative Assembly be set at \$954 to cover a portion of food, incidentals, and travel, as indicated in Appendix B, with \$687 deducted for the cost of direct billing the hotel room for six nights based on double occupancy per delegate.

The adjusted local delegate stipend of \$267 will be paid at the conclusion of the Representative Assembly with the reading of the proposed titles of constitutional amendments for the following year.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 3: that all local and state New Jersey delegates to the 2024 NEA Representative Assembly who are eligible for NJEA funding, based on the amount determined

by the Delegate Assembly, shall be required to stay at an NJEA delegation hotel. Failure to comply with this DA policy without an approved waiver, shall result in a reduction of one-half the amount paid in the final NEA R.A. check.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 4: that all delegates shall be required to attend all business sessions of the NEA Representative Assembly in which NEA officers are nominated, issues are debated, and policies are formed. Failure of any delegate to fully comply may result in the reduction and/or withholding of the final convention check as recommended by the NEA Activities Committee to the NJEA president. Delegates and/or their affiliate locals who are found to have circumvented the requirements may face prospective penalties which could result in a loss of financial support, sanctions, or other penalties that may be recommended by the NEA Activities Committee to the NJEA president.

John Zurka, NJREA, moved to adopt recommendations 1 through 4 in bulk with the amendments to add \$100 to both the state and local stipends. The recommendations were adopted as amended.

Pension Policy Committee report

The Pension Policy Committee presented a legislative recommendation aimed at improving equity for members enrolled in the Defined Contribution Retirement Program (DCRP). The proposal sought to align employer accountability for DCRP with existing rules for PERS and TPAF, specifically requiring districts to share financial responsibility when they fail to enroll employees in a timely manner. Currently, DCRP members can be left owing large sums due to delayed enrollment, with no penalty to the employer.

LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATION: That NJEA seek a legislative amendment to the statute governing the DCRP, N.J.S.A. 43:15C-1 et seq. The amendment would add a delayed enrollment penalty for the employer for eligible DCRP members, mirroring the language that exists in N.J.S.A. 43:15A-7.1.

Dan Siegel, Mercer County, moved the recommendation. which was adopted by a two-thirds vote.

Public Relations Committee report

The Public Relations Committee presented a report revising PRIDE and FAST grant policies.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 1: that NJEA change the name of the community outreach program grants that are provided to locals and counties under the Pride in Public Education program to Public Education Partnership (PEP) grants. This will not change the overall name of Pride in Public Education program.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 2: that the [Pride] PEP funding Allocations & Grant Formulas be amended as follows: That and county be added to "local association" funding allocation formula and the policy include that "funding for local and county associations be accessible when the portal opens on July 1st and based upon the number of dues-paying members in each local and county association. And that all calculations will be made using only verified, dues paying members as indicated by the NJEA Membership Accounts Receivable System (MARS) as of April 1st, of the same calendar year.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 3: that NJEA [Pride] PEP Meal Reimbursement Parameters be amended as follows: That the local association per person dinner reimbursement be [~~\$33~~] \$40 per person maximum.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 4: that NJEA [Pride] PEP Meal Reimbursement Parameters be amended as follows: That for the one event per funding year, the county association will be allowed one meal allowance of up to [~~\$55~~] \$75 per attendee, inclusive of tax and gratuity. The meal expense must fit within the budgeted grant allowance for the fiscal year.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 5: that the [Pride] PEP Organizing grants be amended as follows to replace the current language: ~~[With an increased need for purposeful organizing in our local community organizing (a minimum of 35%) and marketing/branding expenditures (maximum of 65%). This distribution will move local associations further toward community engagement. To ensure that community organizing activities are completed, the required proportional split will be based on the specific funds requested for submitted proposals, not based on the money allocated for the year.]~~ with the following language: With an increased need for purposeful organizing in our local communities, local association Organizing grants must include detailed descriptions of the community organizing. The grants will be reviewed at all levels to ensure there are clear organizing activities outlined within the grant.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 6: that NJEA [Pride] PEP Organizing grants be amended as follows: That the grant portal "Marketing/Branding" be renamed as "Sponsorship."

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 7: that NJEA [Pride] PEP Organizing grants be amended as follows: ~~[A Sponsorship is simply a monetary donation to an entity, program, or cause that the local wants to support. Sponsorships up to \$1000 do not need to have an organizing component within them. If the local would like to provide more than \$1000 (not to exceed \$2500) there must be a 35% organizing component within the grant.] A sponsorship is simply a monetary donation to an entity, program, or cause that the local wants to support. Sponsorships are capped at \$2500 per PEP grant and one sponsorship per grant. The local's/county's yearly total sponsorship expenditures cannot exceed 35% of the local's total yearly PEP grant budget.~~

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 8: that NJEA [Pride] PEP grant Logistics be amended to include below as follows: Presenters funded by grants are capped at \$500 per presentation, and one presentation per event. Beginning July 2024 local and county associations can order stand-alone tents, banners, and signage every third year to promote the Association. Reimbursement extensions must be requested and granted in writing and will not exceed a period of 30 days.

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 9: that the NJEA [Pride] PEP grant application website portal be amended as follows: All local and county [Pride] PEP applications must be submitted for approval through the Pride application on the NJEA website. A link to the guidelines and to the Web Apps portal that contains the application – which is only accessible to associations presidents, Pride Chairpersons, and treasurers whose names have been submitted to NJEA – can be accessed through [njea.org/grants/\[pride\] PEP/](http://njea.org/grants/[pride] PEP/).

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 10: that NJEA [Pride] PEP grant application exclusions be amended as follows: • events taking place during the work hours of participating association members work hours • local/county Association fundraising activities • local/county Association awarded Scholarships • direct Sponsorship of School district clubs (School club events are permissible)

RULE RECOMMENDATION NO. 11: that NJEA [Pride] PEP grant reimbursement procedures as be amended as follows: • [evidence that a community information database has been started with access for both the local association and the regional UniServ office.]

RULE RECOMMENDATION 12: that NJEA formally adopt the Families and Schools Together Work for Children Program as identified in items I through N of this report designed to: • Ensure families feel welcome in schools as partners in their children's education. • Encourage family involvement in their children's education. • Enhance overall success by creating an environment that empowers families within our communities.

Michael Wildermuth, Middlesex, moved to refer rule recommendations 1 through 11 back to the Public Relations Committee. Nicole Del Popolo, Middlesex, seconded. Delegates approved the motion to refer.

Ann Marie Finnen (Morris) moved Rule Recommendation 12.

Denise King, Monmouth, moved to refer Rule Recommendation back to the Public Relations Committee. Susan McBride, Bergen County, seconded. Delegates approved the motion to refer.

For the Good of the Order

Diane Vistein, Monmouth County, who serves as the NJEA Member Benefits Chair announced the official launch of the NJEA Hardship Relief Fund portal, which provides financial support to members experiencing catastrophic loss at home or school. Diane issued a challenge to counties and locals to contribute to the fund, highlighting that \$119,000 had already been raised, with \$102,775 currently available.

Rocio Lopez, Essex County, expressed appreciation to Hudson County for hosting the first in-person Spanish-language pension workshop.

Peter Helff, Higher Ed, proposed adding a checkbox option to the NJEA dues form allowing members to contribute a small monthly amount (e.g., \$1 or \$0.50 per paycheck) to the Hardship Relief Fund.

Sharon Ortiz, Essex County, stated that on behalf of the West Orange Education Association, she brought a \$1,000 check for the Hardship Relief Fund.

Jacqui Greadington, NJREA, expressed concern about the lack of an automatic payment option for NJREA members to contribute to NJEA.

Peter Helff, Higher Ed, moved to adjourn. The motion was duly seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 3 pm.

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 <p>WEDNESDAY DEC 10 Executive Committee meeting</p>	 <p>SATURDAY JAN 10 Delegate Assembly</p>	 <p>FRI & SAT JAN 30-31 Winter Leadership Conference South</p>
 <p>SUNDAY DEC 28 NJEA founded in 1853</p>	 <p>TUESDAY JAN 13 NJREA founded in 1920</p>	 <p>WEDNESDAY FEB 04 Executive Committee meeting</p>
 <p>FRIDAY JAN 09 Executive Committee meeting</p>	 <p>SATURDAY JAN 17 MLK Jr. Human Rights Celebration</p>	 <p>FRI TO SUN FEB 06-08 ESP and Health & Safety Conference</p>

For more information go to NJEA.org.



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52nd ANNUAL MLK
Human & Civil Rights
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Luncheon & Program to begin at 1 p.m.

PROGRESS DEMANDS ACTION

Mikie Sherrill has been elected governor of New Jersey. She won this election with the overwhelming support of thousands of NJEA members around our state. At 92 phonebanks members made more than 50,000 phone calls. Members went door-to-door in scores of communities and sent more than 30,000 text messages—all to help ensure a Sherrill victory.

But these numbers only capture what we can measure. They can't capture the true scope of our collective impact—the attendance at rallies, the dollars donated to her campaign, the countless conversations in lunchrooms and hallways about the importance of standing up for New Jersey's public schools and the broader labor movement.

In short, NJEA members put in the work during this election cycle. And that worked paid off. Now our schools, and the students who depend on them, will continue to thrive.

Governor-elect Sherrill will be an ally to public schools and to the labor movement. She has many tough decisions ahead, but, as any NJEA member who has campaigned for her over the past months will tell you, she'll work with us, as educators, union members and residents of this state.

Gov.-elect Sherrill will support public education, but she cannot and will not do our work for us.

If we want progress we can see and feel, we must act. It's tempting to think that with the election over and our endorsed candidate in office, we can sit back, relax and watch good things happen. But that's not how political engagement works.

Here's the truth: the election is over, but our work has only begun.

If we want to win pension justice—if we want Tier 1 for Everyone—it will take work. The pension "reforms" enacted in 2011 by Gov. Chris Christie are deeply embedded in our state's financial system. It will take time, energy and member-power to root out these harmful policies that led to flashy headlines for politicians and a generation of financial strife for educators.

If we want to win evaluation reform by eliminating student growth objectives (SGO), we'll need to prove to the Senate Education Committee the waste and redundancy that SGOs represent. It's not enough to talk with one another. We must commit to telling our stories to elected leaders about how SGOs impede learning.

If we want justice in public education, we'll have to fight for it. Justice can feel like a big concept, but its many



The election is over. Our work has only begun.

implications are simple. Justice means fair treatment of all students and educators, regardless of race, ethnicity or creed. It means LGBTQIA+ students and educators feel safe, supported and included at schools. It means the children of immigrants can attend school without fear. It means educational support professionals earn living wages and enjoy health benefits and financial security. Justice means those who work in New Jersey's public colleges can work and teach without fear of losing funding, which could cost them their jobs and increase student tuition.

To build a public education system that works for the many, we must ensure the foundation is a diverse, thriving public-sector workforce.

We must commit to educating ourselves and staying informed about current events. We must attend rallies for our local associations and for causes we believe in. We must engage in the work of our union, and, in doing so, we will bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

A brighter, better future for our schools starts with each of us. And it starts now. 🌱



SOUTH

JAN. 30-31, 2026
HARRAH'S - ATLANTIC CITY
Registration Deadline: DEC. 8

NORTH

FEB. 20-21, 2026
SHERATON - PARSIPPANY
Registration Deadline: JAN. 12

CENTRAL

MAR. 6-7, 2026
DOUBLETREE - SOMERSET
Registration Deadline: FEB. 2

Workshops

1. Presidents' Roundtable
2. AR: Key to a Strong Organization
3. Legal Issues Affecting School Employees
4. Grieve, Don't Gripe: Contract Enforcement
5. Preparing for Negotiations: Collective Bargaining
6. Salary Guides and School Budgets: What Members Should Know **(NEW CONTENT)**
7. Bargaining Health Benefits Post Ch.44 **(NEW)**
8. Leadership Development 101: A Beginner's Guide for Association Leaders
9. When Life Throws You Curveballs **(NEW)**
10. Advanced Membership Chair Training
11. Power, Policy, and Storytelling **(NEW)**
12. Thriving in High Pressure Environments **(NEW)**
13. Bridging the Member Involvement Gap
14. From Timbuktu to Timbuctoo, New Jersey **(NEW)**
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