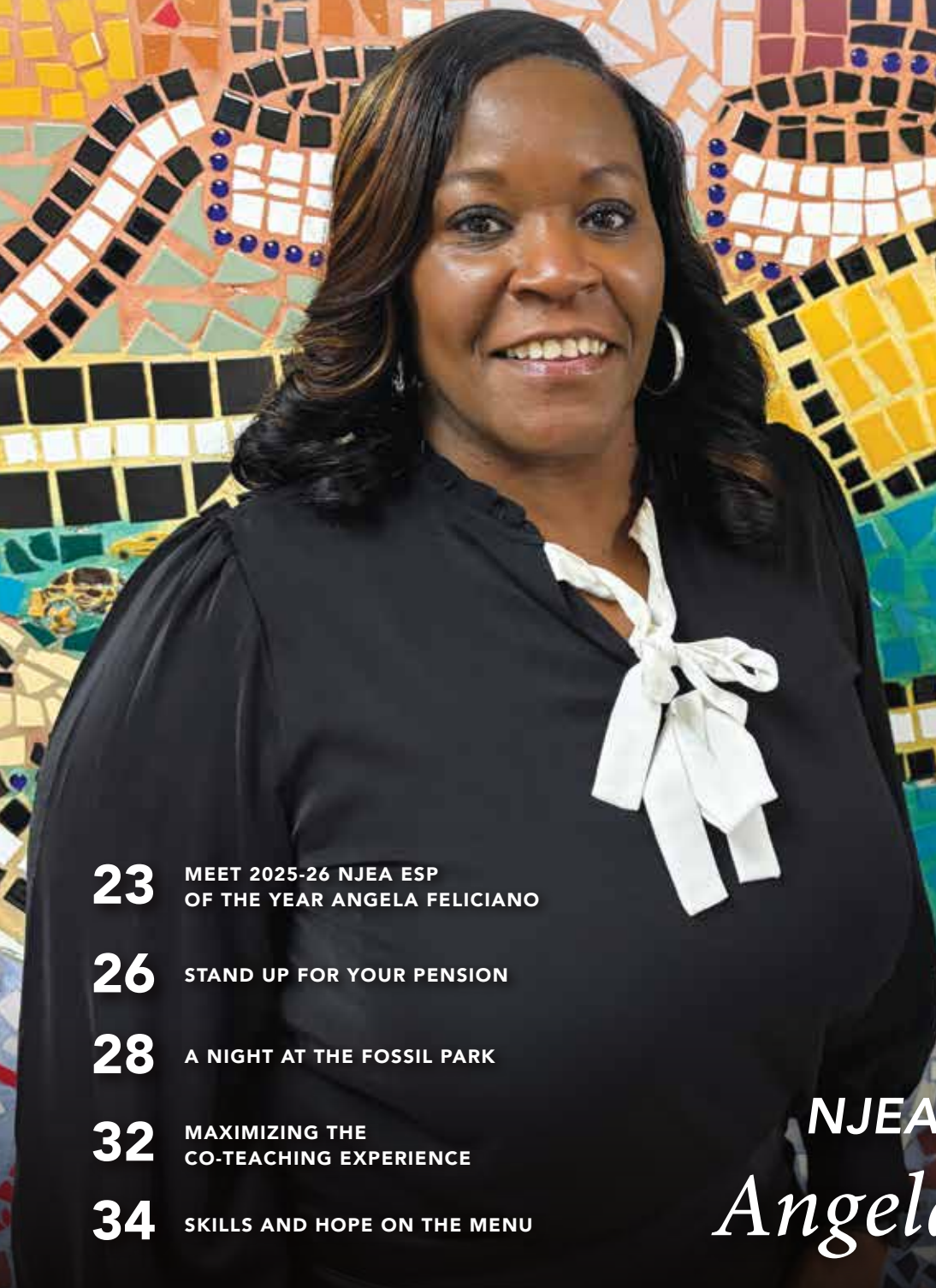


REVIEW



an education and advocacy resource

REVIEW
FEBRUARY 2026



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OF THE YEAR ANGELA FELICIANO

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28 A NIGHT AT THE FOSSIL PARK

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CO-TEACHING EXPERIENCE

34 SKILLS AND HOPE ON THE MENU

Meet 2025-26
NJEA ESP of the Year
Angela Feliciano

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North Plainfield EA member Renee Heller enjoys a makeover at the Jones Road Beauty event in Montclair on Dec. 17. Jones Road Beauty is an NJEA Member Benefits partner. Learn more about NJEA Member Benefits at memberbenefits.njea.org.



The Lenape District Support Staff Association partnered with the Medford Police Department to collect for Toys for Tots.



FEATURES

23 MEET 2025-26 NJEA ESP OF THE YEAR ANGELA FELICIANO

Angela “Ms. Angie” Feliciano, a beloved Camden instructional assistant, has dedicated 28 years to nurturing preschoolers, supporting families and strengthening her community. Honored as NJEA ESP of the Year, she embodies compassion, resilience and advocacy, inspiring students, colleagues and parents alike.

By Kathryn Coulibaly



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26 STAND UP FOR YOUR PENSION

The fight for pension fairness demands your engagement and advocacy. It’s the only way to win fair, stable, secure and fully funded pensions for all members.

By Marybeth Beichert



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28 A NIGHT AT THE EDELMAN FOSSIL PARK AND MUSEUM

A sixth-grade English teacher explores Edelman Fossil Park & Museum. She reflects on curiosity, value and hope, and shows how fossils inspire students to build confidence, create enduring stories and envision transformative futures.

By Jami Centrella



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32 MAXIMIZING THE CO-TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Co-teaching thrives on five principles: communication, respect, consistency, community and academic strategies. Collaboration, trust and structured routines empower educators to build inclusive classrooms that maximize student success, strengthen communities and showcase the transformative power of teamwork in education.

By Rodney Lane



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34 SKILLS AND HOPE ON THE MENU

The OCVTS Culinary Arts Academy is more than a training ground – it is a community hub where students learn, grow and give back. Through its bakery, restaurant, competitions and Feed the Need campaign, the program offers a holistic education that blends skill development with social responsibility.

By Kathryn Coulibaly



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The number 487

The total number of grants the NJEA Frederick L. Hipp Foundation has disbursed to educators since 1993. Learn more and apply by March 1 at njea.org/hipp.

Source: NJEA Frederick L. Hipp Foundation for Excellence in Education



Angela Feliciano, an instructional assistant in Camden, is the 2025-26 NJEA Educational Support Professional of the Year.

PHOTO BY
Kathryn Coulibaly



Did you know? AID-NJEA can help



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REVIEW



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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: responsible for 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
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Region 1 (Atlantic and Cape May counties):
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856-628-8650

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

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Director's office
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Region 7 (Ocean County):
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Region 8 (Mercer County):
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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

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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



Educating for truth, leading with compassion

This month, as we celebrate Black History Month, we renew our commitment to educating ourselves and our students about the whole, inclusive history (and future) of our nation. As educators, it's incumbent upon us to ensure we are teaching a complete, accurate history of our nation. As union members, we use our shared power to advance our inclusive policies and practices that make our schools better.

In this issue, we also explore how learning extends beyond the traditional classroom. We learn about Angela Feliciano, a remarkable NJEA member who we named the 2025-26 NJEA Educational Support Professional of the Year. Along with Angela's inspiring journey, you will read fascinating stories about students working with real-world

fossils, culinary arts teachers working with students to help the hungry in their community, and the art, science and dance of co-teaching. And so much more.

February can be a tough month for educators and all people. As we traverse through the depths of winter, it's important that we remember to have compassion and understanding for each other and those in our lives. I encourage all NJEA members to take special efforts to practice self-care this month and, as always, to check in on friends and loved ones. Preserving our collective mental health is crucial for the success of our schools, and together, we can ensure no educator feels alone.

In Solidarity,



officers online

STEVE BEATTY

Facebook

@SteveBeattyNJEA: Lobby Day! Out in the packed Statehouse during the last days of lame duck in support of our legislative initiatives: Pension justice, charter schools reform, and long-term disability eligibility.

Great turnout from many local and county leaders as well as a contingent of retired members - our "daytime face." Thanks for being there!

On Jan. 5, NJEA President Steve Beatty shared images of educators gathered at NJEA's headquarters and the New Jersey Statehouse for the first Lobby Day of 2026. Educators showed up to speak with legislators and advocate for bills to support NJEA's legislative initiatives.

PETAL ROBERTSON

Facebook

@PetalforNJEA: Want to know how NJEA decisions are made and how you can make your voice heard? Join us on Jan. 21 and invite a friend. Questions can be submitted when you register and will be answered live!

On Jan. 7, NJEA Vice President Petal Robertson shared an image and registration link to promote the next information session in the Do You Know series. January's topic was, "Do you know how decisions are made for NJEA?" Each month, Robertson and NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare host the sessions to educate members about various aspects of the association's work. Members are encouraged to share topics for consideration in future sessions.

TINA DARE

Facebook

@TinaDareforNJEA: Huge congratulations to Quay, vice president of the Glassboro Support Staff Education Association, who ran a write-in campaign and was officially sworn in tonight to serve on the Clayton Board of Education.

We're proud to celebrate Quay and all NJEA members who are newly elected or currently serving on Boards of Education. Thank you for stepping up, leading, and helping keep our public schools strong!

On Jan. 6, NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare shared images of Glassboro Support Staff Education Association Vice President Quay Foster being sworn in to his position on the Clayton Board of Education. The post also included a video congratulating him and all the educators being sworn in after winning their school board election. She noted how exciting it is to have educational support professionals (ESPs) who not only work in schools all day long, but who want to be part of the board of education in the town they live in.

The ADVOCATE

RESOURCES FOR YOUR LOCAL ASSOCIATION

D.A. to hold NEA director election

Nominations for three of New Jersey's nine representatives on the NEA Board of Directors and for alternates will be accepted by the NJEA Executive Committee in February and submitted to the Delegate Assembly (D.A.) for its March 21 meeting.

The NEA Board of Directors is responsible for setting general policies between annual NEA Representative Assembly (NEA RA) meetings. It consists of at least one director from each state affiliate, at-large directors to meet representational guarantees, and representatives for students and retired members. Each state is entitled to an additional director per 20,000 active and life members.

The elected board members will serve three-year terms from Sept. 1, 2026 to Aug. 31, 2029. Elected alternates will serve one-year terms beginning Sept. 1, 2026.

The NJEA Executive Committee may submit nominations to the D.A. Additional nominations may be made by D.A. members from the floor. No nominating speeches are permitted.

Any NJEA-NEA member, who is also a member of their affiliated local and county association, where eligible, may run. Any D.A. member who is requested to place a name in nomination by any such person must do so, in order to comply with the "open nomination" requirement. Nominations shall include the nominee's name, school district or higher education institution and county or other unit of representation.

If there are more than three candidates in either category, an election will be held at the March 21 D.A. meeting. If the D.A. meeting is conducted virtually, the D.A. rules provide that D.A. members will subsequently vote by mail to elect the NEA directors and alternates. The D.A. rules detail the nomination and election process.

The March 21 D.A. meeting will be held at the Hyatt Regency Princeton unless it is moved to a virtual format for health and safety reasons.

Under the D.A. rules, when nominations for New Jersey NEA director are taken at a virtual meeting, candidates will be given an opportunity to submit a recorded speech that may not exceed two minutes. The recordings must be submitted to a provided site within four days of the D.A. meeting. All speeches that meet the time-limit requirements will be uploaded to a site that will be

shared with D.A. members. The recordings will be listed by position and in alphabetical order based on candidates' surnames.

Anyone interested in being nominated as an NEA state director or alternate should contact their NJEA Executive Committee member and/or their Delegate Assembly representative, who can be found on the NJEA website under "committees." For more information, contact the NJEA Governance office at 609-599-4561, ext. 2297.

Interested in presenting at the 2026 NJEA Convention?

Presenting at convention

Beginning Feb. 1, 2026, the NJEA Professional Development and Instructional Issues Division (PDII) will be accepting presenter proposals for the 2026 NJEA Convention to be held Nov. 5-6, 2026. All proposals to present at the NJEA Convention must be submitted electronically. The deadline for submission is April 25, 2026.

Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Each room is equipped with standard equipment, which includes two handheld microphones, a projector and a screen. Presenters are responsible for providing their own laptop or other presentation device; NJEA does not provide computers.
- NJEA does not reproduce any program materials and will not reimburse you for reproductions costs.
- If you are a member, please have your PIN and password ready.

Submit your proposal

NJEA has implemented a new proposal submission system. Information about the system, including access and submission instructions, will be posted on njeaconvention.org as soon as it becomes available. You can also check njeaconvention.org for updates to submission deadlines.

Starting Feb. 1, NJEA will begin accepting submissions at njea.org/conventionproposal.

For questions or additional information, email Convention@njea.org.

Attend the NJEA Higher Education Conference and Collective Bargaining Summit

The 2026 NJEA Higher Education Conference and Collective Bargaining Summit will be held March 27-29 at the DoubleTree by Hilton Monroe Township Cranbury, 390 Forsgate Dr., Monroe.

Higher Education Conference – March 27-28

The conference begins with registration at 2 p.m. on Friday followed by workshops, dinner and keynote address. On Saturday, the conference continues with more workshops and concludes with lunch.

Higher Education Collective Bargaining Summit – March 28-29

The summit will immediately follow the conference beginning with registration at 3 p.m. on Saturday followed by workshops and dinner. The summit will continue Sunday and conclude with lunch.

The summit is an interactive program that will address current issues facing negotiations teams. Strategies and techniques for strengthening your local to improve bargaining position will be explored.

The costs to attend are:

Conference Only

Single: \$325; Double: \$255; Commuter: \$180

Summit Only

Single: \$145; Double: \$75; Commuter: \$0

Conference and Summit

Single: \$465; Double: \$325; Commuter: \$180

For more information, go to njea.org/higheredconf.

Registration must be completed by March 12, 2026

Members must register themselves for the conference. There is no group registration using the online platform. Payment will be required by credit card only. When registering, members will need to know their NJEA PIN. For questions, and if you need help with your NJEA PIN, call the Region 29-Higher Education office at 609-689-9580.

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COOL STUFF



TEENARTSNJ OPEN CALL FOR STUDENT ARTISTS

Creative Change Makers is an annual open call to artists, grades 9-12, seeking to submit work inspired by the theme that year, in literary, visual or performing arts. Students may submit as an individual artist, collaborative group artists or community arts advocates artists. This year's open call category is Sustainable Arts: Creating with Consciousness.

This will result in a group art exhibition in the spring each year. The exhibition will feature visual artwork, such as painting, sculpture, installation, etc. There will also be a video screen on display, featuring recorded performing art pieces, spoken word and documentation of projects. Performing artists will be invited to perform on-site. There will be at least one additional artist talk, panel discussion, additional live performance event, or workshop with participating schools and students during the exhibition. The exhibition, and all events corresponding with it, are free and open to the public.

For more information, visit teenartsnj.org/what-is-creative-change-makers.



REVOLUTIONNJ OFFERS RESOURCES FOR THE SEMI-QUINCENTENNIAL

RevolutionNJ, New Jersey's official 250th committee, has a wealth of free resources for educators. For those working with students in grades K-5, the Foundations of Democracy toolkit provides guidebooks and activities to make abstract concepts like democracy and rights accessible and engaging for younger audiences. At the secondary school level, RevolutionNJ offers History Happened Here, a flexible program that empowers students in grades 5-12 to choose their own topics from 250 years of local history. New Jersey schools that have registered with the Revolutionary Schools program can borrow the Revolutionary Lives traveling exhibit at no cost and access its accompanying lesson plans tiered for grades 3-12. All of the RevolutionNJ's educational offerings were developed in partnership with the NJDOE and meet the 2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards. Learn more about these offerings at RevNJ.org.



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Field Trips

At the New Jersey Hall of Fame (NJHOF), 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. 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.

A+ EFFORT

FROM CURRENT EVENTS TO HISTORY

Six decades in education

By Chris Roth



My father, Robert Roth, began his teaching career in January 1968 as a student teacher at Englewood Middle School. A graduate of Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) with a bachelor's degree in economics and a minor in German, Roth later earned a master's in history and government from East Texas State University

and returned to FDU for his New Jersey teaching certificate.

After completing student teaching, Roth moved to Butler Middle School, where he taught history and math to sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders. His commute from Fort Lee was often delayed by traffic or flooding on Route 23. Butler offered him a contract beginning in September 1968, but Roth had already signed with Toms River High School for \$7,200 a year, turning down a slightly higher offer from Tinton Falls. For perspective, his apartment rent was \$180 a month.

Roth began teaching at Toms River High School—later renamed Toms River High School South—in September 1968. He taught in Room D8 until 2005, when he moved to Room D2. In 1971, Roth met Caroline, a school secretary, and they married in 1973.

Early in his career, Roth advised a folk music club called "The Experience," which performed at nursing homes. He also served as senior class adviser. Just last year, he

Chris Roth is the son of Robert Roth and a seventh- and eighth-grade science teacher at Brigantine Community School. He is currently in his 25th year teaching in New Jersey public schools.

“

Respect must be earned and reciprocated. I give respect to get respect back.

appeared as the Pope in the school's production of "Sister Act" and was named an honorary thespian.

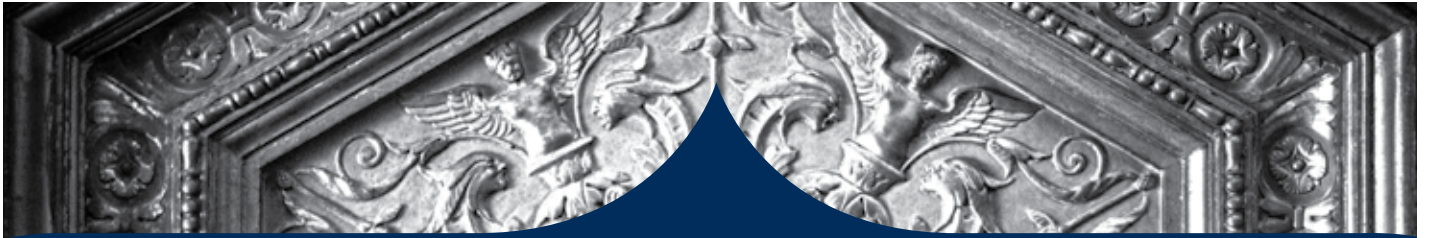
This September, Roth began his 58th year teaching high school and his 44th year as an adjunct professor of economics at Ocean County College. He has worked under at least seven principals and five superintendents. Some of his former students have gone on to teach full careers and retire.

Roth emphasizes connecting with students personally. He supports social-emotional learning, noting that both students and teachers have difficult days. He believes today's parents are more positively involved in their children's education and often ask how they can help.

Respect, Roth says, must be earned and reciprocated. He values learning from his students and hearing their ideas. He avoids using the classroom as a platform for personal beliefs, instead focusing on creating a space where students can learn and enjoy themselves. He has expressed interest in teaching geography and architecture, and in tying art and music into history lessons.

Roth is currently the longest-serving teacher at Toms River High School South and in the entire district. Research is underway to confirm whether he holds the record for longest tenure in the 134-year history of Toms River Schools, which opened in 1891. The district now includes 19 schools and learning centers.

Though he no longer wears a sports coat daily, Roth continues to dress in a button-down shirt and tie. As his son, I joke, "Dad, you've been teaching so long that when you first started, history was current events."



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Leading with laughter and love

Meet Essex County ESP of the Year Lou Ann LoBasso

By Kathryn Coulibaly



Lou Ann LoBasso knew she was going to succeed in her new position working with a non-verbal student at Fairfield Elementary School when she literally flipped head over heels.

Filling in for the student's permanent aide as a substitute, LoBasso joined the student and his class outside in the school garden. She failed to see

a planter behind her and flipped over backwards. The student looked down at her and asked, "Are you some kind of crazy?" They both started laughing and he helped her up.

LoBasso didn't intend to work in public education, but after helping to care for a nephew with special needs, she was encouraged to apply for a job in the local public schools. She began working as an office aide and immediately gravitated to students with special needs.

During her first cafeteria duty, she noticed a student laying across the lunch table. She approached him and imitated his stance on the lunch table before asking, "What are we doing?" The student responded to her, amazing the principal who told her later that the student didn't speak to anyone. When the student's aide was out, the principal asked her to fill in, leading to the infamous day in the garden.

LoBasso kept her balance with the district and eventually became the president of the Fairfield Education Association, an all-inclusive local association of teachers, educational support professionals and other certificated staff. LoBasso was the first educational support professional to be president.

"I was very knowledgeable about union issues," LoBasso says. "My father was a union leader. I've been

reading contracts since I was 15 years old. I had a good understanding of things and good relationships with administration. I could talk to them when they were in violation of the contract, and we could work things out."

LoBasso's time in Fairfield ended when her husband got sick and the family needed benefits, which Fairfield didn't provide.

"I didn't want to leave the district, but I ended up in Bloomfield working as a secretary, and I'm very happy here, too," LoBasso says. "The staff and administration are fantastic."

LoBasso continues to be a strong union leader. She is involved at the local, county and state level. She serves as the legislative representative of the Bloomfield Education Secretary's Association and works closely with the other associations in the district.

At the county level, she is the chairperson for the quad overnight conference, which includes Essex, Union, Bergen and Passaic.

"I think it's very important for union members to be involved at the county level," LoBasso says. "When you operate in your local association, it's only one piece of the puzzle, but when you get involved in the county level, you get to know what's going on in other districts. We are like a family. It's great to attend together."

LoBasso encourages members to be involved in their union regardless of their political affiliation.

"Your political affiliation does not matter," LoBasso stresses. "We should all be fighting for the collective good. Right now, we are under attack. We have to protect our pensions and our profession at every level. It affects all of us, regardless of job description."

LoBasso was flattered and humbled to be named the 2025-26 Essex County ESP of the Year. She emphasizes that every job in a school district is important.

"You can't run your office without educational support professionals. You can't run your building. You can't run your classrooms. Every single person employed by a school district is important, from maintenance to buildings and grounds to office aides. Everybody has an important role to play."

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



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School Ethics Commission lawsuit

By David Bander

A lawsuit was recently filed in the New Jersey federal district court that could affect the operation of the School Ethics Commission (SEC).

The plaintiff is Gail Nazarene, an elected member of the Alloway Township Board of Education in Salem County. Nazarene made a number of public comments, both in person and online, about school-related matters such as the budget, taxes and state funding. In these comments Nazarene indicated that she was speaking in her personal capacity and not as a representative of the board.

According to the complaint, after these comments the board president contacted Nazarene to “kindly remind [her] about the importance of adhering to the board’s bylaws and the Code of Ethics when speaking publicly at meetings,” and that board members should “refrain from speaking on behalf of the board of education.” The board president warned that “any statements made outside of this framework could potentially create misunderstandings or misrepresentations” of the board’s policies and wanted to make sure that Nazarene “understand[s] the importance of maintaining the integrity of the board’s collective voice by complying with the Code of Ethics.”

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.

Another board member filed a complaint against Nazarene with the SEC, alleging that she had violated portions of the School Ethics Act. In response to the ethics complaint, the board president and others, Nazarene has “stopped speaking publicly or engaging with her constituents.”

Citing several recent cases, Nazarene’s lawsuit asserts that the SEC’s interpretation of the School Ethics Act forces her to either “continue self-censoring or risk state sanctions for communicating with constituents online to effectively represent them” on the Alloway Township Board of Education. If Nazarene were to continue speaking publicly, she “faces the prospect of reprimand, censure, suspension, or removal” by the SEC. She alleges this violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which provides that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people peaceably to assembly, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” The lawsuit asks the court to declare unconstitutional the SEC’s interpretation of the School Ethics Act with respect to “all applications to speech by board members on matters of public concern,” and specifically with respect to Nazarene.

If successful, the lawsuit could lead to more unstructured discussion of board matters and a more restricted role for the SEC in regulating board members’ speech. NJEA’s Legal Services Division will monitor the matter closely and will publish updates as needed.

NJEA REPORT

NJEA and NJSIAA partner to spotlight “Coach for All Seasons” honorees

By Stephanie L. Natera-Smith, MSW, LCSW

NJEA and the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) continue to team up on the “Coach for All Seasons” recognition program to spotlight multi-sport high school coaches across the state. The initiative honors coaches who guide student-athletes in more than one sport over the fall, winter and spring seasons, highlighting their year-round commitment to school athletics. Each month, one coach is selected and featured jointly by NJSIAA and NJEA.

The September, October and November “Coach for All Seasons” honorees were recognized in person on Nov. 30 during the state football championships at SHI Stadium in Piscataway. NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare joined the ceremony to congratulate the coaches and present certificates of recognition.

By elevating multi-sport coaches from September through June, NJSIAA and NJEA aim to show that year-round support for students strengthens both school climate and athletic programs.

NJEA and NJSIAA encourage athletic directors, principals and colleagues to submit nominations so that more coaches can be honored as a “Coach for All Seasons” in the months ahead. Candidates can be nominated using the QR code below. Please provide details about the coach’s roles and impact on their programs.



A Coach for all Seasons

Susan Andris—Burlington City High School
30 years coaching
Girls Soccer, Girls Softball

Daniel Egorow—Cresskill High School
13 years coaching
Girls Tennis, Boys Basketball, Boys Tennis

Vincent Buccigrossi—Allentown High School
5 years coaching
Cross Country, Winter Track, Spring Track

Stephanie L. Natera-Smith is an associate director in the NJEA Communications Division.



NJEA and NJSIAA highlighted “Coach for All Seasons” honorees at SHI Stadium at Rutgers University. NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare joined the honorees on the field. From left: Susan Andris, Dare, and Vincent Buccigrossi

Gloucester County Education Association hosts ESP overnight

By Kim Crane



The Gloucester County Education Association held an event to celebrate, support and empower ESP members.

The Gloucester County Education Association (GCEA) held an educational support professional (ESP) overnight Dec. 5-6 in Swedesboro. The event was designed to celebrate, support and empower ESP members. The overnight began with an NJEA Member Benefits fair followed by a formal dinner program featuring remarks from GCEA President Stephen Whitehead, GCEA Vice President Roberta Rissling, NJEA Associate Director of Organizing and Development Bob Antonelli and NJEA Secretary-Treasurer Tina Dare.

Whitehead explained why this is one of his favorite events of the year. "This is a great opportunity for ESP members to 'fill their cup' and de-stress, and for us to celebrate our essential support professionals and recognize their achievements."

The first night of the event concluded with a two-hour wellness program focused on rejuvenation and self-care

for ESPs. Participants rotated through stations including yoga, massage chairs, functional movement, Zumba and reiki. A tarot card reader was on site to conduct readings.

Saturday's breakfast buffet was followed by a dual-workshop format. In the workshop Building Power Through Conversations, members gained the tools and confidence to lead meaningful organizing conversations. Participants learned how one-to-one dialogue can build trust and mobilize collective action as union members.

Running concurrently was the Responding with Care: Mental Health and Conflict Management Skills workshop, an interactive session that offered practical strategies for recognizing signs of student stress and responding with empathy. Members practiced de-escalation techniques and explored ways to support students while maintaining safe, positive environments.

By offering thoughtful programming, wellness opportunities and high-quality professional development, the Gloucester County ESP Overnight reflected the GCEA's strong commitment to honoring and uplifting ESP members.

Kimberly Crane is an NJEA Communications Consultant and former president of the Highland Park Education Association. She can be reached at kcrane@njea.org.

NJEA Patriots Alliance leads effort to secure military service credit for ESP

By Daniel Staples

The NJEA Patriots Alliance is an affinity group for veterans and active-duty service members working in New Jersey public schools. Founded in 2017, the alliance is a statewide network that supports, educates and advocates for NJEA members with military backgrounds. Much like the Marine Corps I proudly served in, the alliance was built on camaraderie, shared purpose and decisive action.

Since its formation, the Patriots Alliance has hosted an annual breakfast at the NJEA Convention, facilitated workshops on veterans' pensions and military service buyback, and promoted school-based initiatives such as Walls of Honor to elevate the contributions of veterans in our public schools.

One issue has always been at the heart of our advocacy: military service credit. New Jersey statute grants certificated staff a salary guide step for each year of honorable military service. After reading about the law in the *NJEA Review*, I contacted my NJEA UniServ field representative, received a legal consultation and successfully asserted my right to four additional steps on the salary guide.

That experience reinforced the importance of understanding the law and of a union that educates and empowers its members.

But the statute's limitations are obvious. It only applies to certificated staff. Educational support professionals (ESPs) with the same military service received no such credit. As a UniServ consultant, I worked to negotiate military service credit into local contracts where possible, but the inequity persisted statewide.

The Patriots Alliance Planning Board agreed that this injustice requires legislative action. Military service should not be valued differently based on job title.

Planning board member and former Marine Sandi Wilcox, a proud paraprofessional and past NJEA ESP of the Year, led the charge by meeting with legislators and sharing her personal story.

After a meeting with Assemblywoman Andrea Katz, the assemblywoman agreed to introduce legislation. NJEA Government Relations launched an alert for members to take action and members mobilized to support the bill through outreach, testimony and advocacy.

Dan Staples is a math teacher in Manchester Township, a local president and a former Marine. He is also a Region 7 UniServ consultant.



Dan Staples testified in favor of military service credit for ESPs. Pictured with Kimberlee Shaw, president of the Lakewood Education Association and Jen Breyta, president of the Barnegat Education Association.

During the December 2025 lame duck session—the same day NJEA delivered 112,000 Tier 1 For Everyone petitions to the Statehouse—NJEA Patriots Alliance Staff Contact Mike Kaminski delivered testimony on Wilcox's behalf before the Assembly Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. I also testified, sharing both my experience and the collective voice of veterans working in our schools. The committee voted unanimously to release the bill, and shortly thereafter the full Assembly passed it 76–0.

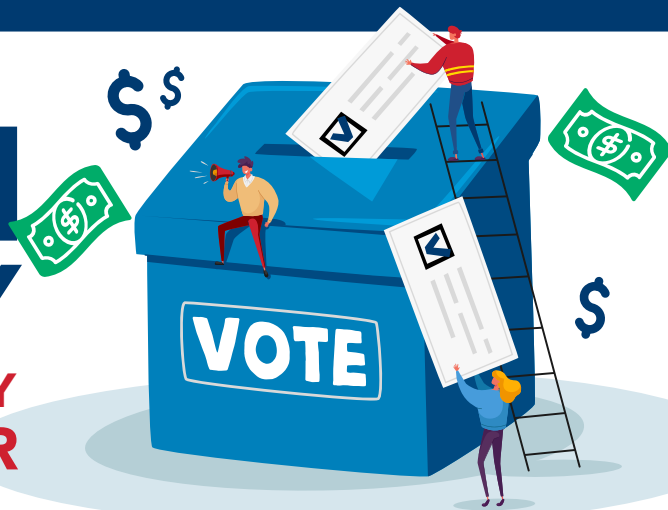
A week later, the Senate Higher Education Committee heard the bill, advancing it with strong support.

Our efforts on behalf of ESPs and military veterans illustrate the power of member-driven advocacy and the strength of NJEA's organizing model. The Patriots Alliance identified a need, built a strategy, collaborated with Government Relations, mobilized members and is working to achieve meaningful, statewide change.

This is what happens when educators—and veterans—stand together, take action and fight for justice. It is the essence of unionism, and it is the work NJEA members do every day.

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- Are not running as a candidate in this election.



WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- You may be asked to work during the in-person early voting period and on Election Day. Hours and days may vary.

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The Education Association of Morris leads community response to student food insecurity

During the government shutdown, more than 1,350 students in the Morris School District faced food insecurity and the sudden loss of SNAP benefits. In response, The Education Association of Morris (TEAM), together with district staff, parents and community partners, played a pivotal role in ensuring no child was left without support.

Superintendent Anne Mucci convened community leaders, administrators and staff to develop a coordinated plan. From that meeting, two major initiatives emerged, both strengthened by TEAM's leadership and commitment to students.

Initiative 1: Grocery Gift Certificate Distribution

- Parents and community organizations partnered with the district to donate 1,600 \$25 supermarket gift certificates.
- These were distributed before the NJEA Convention, helping sustain students through the extended weekend.
- The district expressed gratitude to parents, the HSA, the board of education, the Presbyterian church, the Rotary Club of Morristown and Kings Supermarket for their collaboration.

Initiative 2: Emergency Food Bags

- The second phase was spearheaded by TEAM, whose members initiated and organized the Emergency Bag program.
- Debora Petrucci, TEAM's chair of community outreach, coordinated the effort in partnership with the Interfaith Food Pantry and the Presbyterian church.
- Together, they distributed 420 Emergency Bags, over six tons of food, to families whose benefits were interrupted.
- TEAM's members donated food, volunteered time and coordinated school-based efforts through ARs.
- High school teachers delivered bags to schools, while students from Student Government, National Honor Society, Interact Club and Key Club joined in assembling them.

Community Partners Supporting TEAM's Effort

- Morristown and Chester ShopRite donated bags.
- Crossfit 13 Stars contributed boxes of cereal.
- The Interfaith Food Pantry supplied more than 150 completed Emergency Bags.
- Nourish.NJ provided supplemental meals.
- Penske generously donated a truck to transport materials.

A Unified Effort, With TEAM at the Heart

While many organizations came together, it was The Education Association of Morris that mobilized staff, coordinated logistics and ensured families had immediate relief. Their leadership exemplifies the power of educators not only in the classroom but also in safeguarding the well-being of their students during times of crisis.



...

NJEA organizes first Human and Civil Rights Statewide Day of Service

More than 100 NJEA members registered to volunteer for the first NJEA Human and Civil Rights Statewide Day of Service.

On Dec. 5, members in NJEA's central region donated 25 bags of food to Fulfill NJ Food Bank. Fulfill provides resources for residents of Monmouth and Ocean counties.

On Dec. 6, members in NJEA's north region donated more than 100 bags and 10 boxes of food for Benny's Bodega. Located in Newton, Benny's Bodega is a community hub of support for senior and veteran populations.

Also on Dec. 6, members in the south region donated and assembled 1,200 kits and 25 boxes for individuals impacted by period poverty.

According to Fawnya Gibson, chair of NJEA's Human and Civil Rights Committee, "This was more than a day of service. This was a day of solidarity and hope."

In particular, Gibson recognized HCR committee members and service day leads Angela Deluccia (North), Bridget James (Central) and April Newman, Ebony Freeman and Qiana Stanard (South). Gibson also thanked the staff members in NJEA's Human and Civil Rights, Equity and Governance Division for their assistance.



The final drop-off at Benny's Bodega with the volunteers in the north.



Top: One of the collections of food items for Benny's Bodega. Members donated more than 100 bags and 10 boxes of food.

Middle: More than 100 volunteers participated in the NJEA Human and Civil Rights Statewide Day of Service.

Bottom: Members donated more than 25 bags of food to Fulfill NJ Food Bank on Dec. 5



LOVE AND IMPACT

MEET 2025-26 NJEA ESP OF THE YEAR

Angela Feliciano

By Kathryn Coulibaly

Angela Feliciano, or Ms. Angie as she is known in the Camden school community, is a loving and tireless advocate for her students. An instructional assistant at the Riletta Twyne Cream Early Childhood Center, Feliciano delights in doing everything she can to enhance her student's learning experience.

"I grew up in Camden, and I always wanted to give back to the community," Feliciano says. "I know the children, I know the parents. I see the positive impact I can have on their lives. It's my passion to see them grow and thrive. I want them to do more things and see more things. I want them to see what they can accomplish. My motto is: I want to plant a seed and after a year, I want to see the flower blossom."

Inspired by a teacher's love

For the past 28 years, Feliciano has been pouring her love and encouragement into her students. She was inspired to go into education by her fifth-grade teacher at H.B. Wilson School, Mrs. Cooper.

"Mrs. Cooper was so genuine and loving, she encouraged me to go into education," Feliciano recalls. "I grew up thinking that I wanted to be like her. She told me I would be a good teacher. We maintained our connection and I even invited her to my wedding. I was ecstatic to have her there."

Feliciano's mother passed away when she was 14 years old, and she went to live with her grandparents. In 1997, she began her professional career in education right around the corner from where Mrs. Cooper taught.

Feliciano has worked with students in preschool, kindergarten, fourth and fifth grades, but her heart is with her preschool students. She also has assisted the school community by substituting in different classrooms and helping the principal with different assignments, including assisting parents with late arrivals and dismissals.

"Ms. Feliciano is always willing to lend a hand with instructional support and classroom management, sharing her expertise and positivity to create a collaborative and effective learning environment," Principal Medinah Dyer writes. "Our administrative team has come to rely on her in the daily operations of our school. She is flexible, supporting our main office operations, routine transitions, teacher coverages, classroom instruction and family engagement activities, which happen outside of the school hours. Anytime we are faced with potential challenges, she is a valuable thought partner that our administration team collaborates with for decision-making."

Beyond the classroom

Feliciano has been a major part of community outreach efforts to share information about the early childhood program. She volunteers her time on weekends to attend community events to talk about the benefits of the program. As a result of her efforts, Principal Dyer credits her with helping to increase enrollment from 120 students to 350 students over the past four years.

Feliciano also is a resource for families well beyond the school day. She reaches out to families to offer support and guidance and has helped to foster a strong sense of partnership. She pays attention to their needs and remembers details that help make connections.

In addition, her generosity is well-known in the community. Staff members talk about her selflessness in purchasing toiletries and other necessities for students to make sure they have what they need to succeed.

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



Feliciano provides a guiding hand and a caring heart as she works with her students.

I want to plant a seed and after a year, I want to see the flower blossom.

While pursuing her career in education, Feliciano also raised a family with her husband, Noel. Their two sons, Ja'Quan and Da'Juan are both now grown. Feliciano takes great delight in her role as a grandmother to Malani, Ja'Quan Jr. and Jex Feliciano. At the same time, Feliciano has continued to pursue her education, eventually earning her bachelor's and master's degrees.

A guiding hand and caring heart

It's important to Feliciano that her students know how much she cares about them.

"I like to nurture my students," Feliciano says. "I know they don't always get that all the time, so I let them know that someone really, really cares about them and wants to be with them and give them that love and impact."

At the same time, Feliciano believes all students need firm guidance and clear expectations.

"My colleagues say that I'm stern with the students' behavior, but I'm loving with them, too," Feliciano says. "Classroom management is so challenging. Everyone brings their students to me to talk to. I try to remain calm and patient when I'm dealing with challenging behaviors. I use positive reinforcement and set clear and consistent expectations. But I also sit down and talk to them about what's going on, what their triggers are.

"I want to understand the underlying cause of their behavior. Are they hungry? Why are they upset? I let them open up and talk to me. I help them get it out, and find constructive solutions with them, but then they have to go back to the classroom and learn. My door is always open to them: lunch time, prep time, whenever."

Champion for educational support professionals

Feliciano sees the important role that educational support professionals play in conjunction with teachers.

"The biggest thing to understand is that we're part of teaching, as well," Feliciano explains. "We are there to back up the teacher and help teach the student in a different way. We give them both direct support."

Feliciano's colleagues cannot say enough good things about her and her impact on the school community.

Camden Education Association President Pamela Clark writes, "Ms. Feliciano's encouraging spirit and compassionate nature inspire those around her—students,



Feliciano and teacher Carey Hiatt are joined by cafeteria employee Larvon (Tuty) Page and their students.

staff, parents and community members alike. She brings light into every space she enters and continually seeks ways to uplift others and improve the educational environment for all. Her voice, ideas and tireless advocacy make her not only an exceptional educational support professional but also a true leader and role model in our community.”

Feliciano is very involved in her local, county and statewide unions. At the local level, Feliciano has served as a building representative and continues to volunteer in activities for students including the Night Before Christmas, Trunk or Treat, Read Across New Jersey and Autism Awareness Day. Feliciano volunteers for the Camden County Council of Education Associations’ Breast Cancer Awareness event. She is a member of NJEA’s Members of Color Experience. She encourages and invites her colleagues to become more involved in their union.

It is no wonder, then, that she has been named the 2025-26 Camden County and NJEA ESP of the Year, but Feliciano doesn’t see it that way.

“I was in shock when I heard I was the Camden County ESP of the Year,” Feliciano recalls. “I never expected it. It means something that someone picked me. I’m just here for the community and the children.

“I love shaping young minds and watching scholars grow and succeed knowing that I played a significant role in their learning journey,” Feliciano says. “I love when they smile and make a connection. It lights me up and makes me smile—we’re both excited! It’s a privilege to make a meaningful impact on students’ lives while providing

them with the guidance and support they need to reach their potential.”

As the 2025-26 NJEA ESP of the Year, Feliciano has already been nominated for the NEA ESP of the Year award. She will attend the NEA ESP Conference and is entitled to a Disney vacation, funded by NJEA. Feliciano will also receive an ESP of the Year ring and will be a featured speaker at the NJEA ESP Conference. 🏆



Feliciano loves shaping young minds and watching scholars grow.



Spend a day with Ms. Angie at her school. Visit njea.org/AngelaFeliciano

Video by Danielle Earle, NJEA Communications.

STAND UP FOR YOUR PENSION

Your financial future depends on it

By Marybeth Beichert

New Jersey's public employee pension systems have often been misrepresented in the news as being too generous, too costly to the taxpayer and too severely underfunded. There is nearly always a call for pension reform – casting public employees as greedy takers. The 50-year attack on public employee pensions is real and relentless.

It seems whenever the state finds itself in an economic jam, it decides to skirt its responsibility to fund the pension, and pit public employees against workers in the private sector.

Even after the financially crippling consequences of his Chapter 78 legislation, former Gov. Chris Christie still called the pension system an “insatiable beast.” Christie looked to blame pension recipients—especially New Jersey's educators—for the pension crisis that was caused by years of government mismanagement, missed payments and underfunding of the pension system. It is the reason New Jersey educators have five pension tiers – each new one worse than the one before.

During last November's gubernatorial election, one candidate proposed forcing educators out of the defined benefit pension system and into a 401(k)-style savings plan, framing it as giving them “choice” over their financial future. Yet this so-called choice was offered only to educators – most of whom are women. Meanwhile, he

pledged to fully fund the defined benefit pensions of police and fire employees, a clear attempt to pit public workers against one another. Fortunately, voters saw through this divisive approach, and he did not win the election.

NJEA members know that whenever there is a fiscal crisis at the national or state level, the first to feel the financial cuts are public employees. It is the main reason the pension has a huge unfunded liability and our NJREA members have not received a COLA in 14 years.

When former Gov. Phil Murphy was elected, he vowed to right some of the wrongs to the pension by making it a budget priority. And he kept that promise before he left, he budgeted five full pension payments: the first governor to do that since 1996. He has done much to put the pension on the road to stability, but it will take many more governors willing to make many more full pension payments before the pension will be on sound footing.

As NJEA members continue to advocate for pension fairness for all members, it is important to speak to the facts about your pension and why this is every member's fight.

A public employee pension is deferred compensation.

- Educators understand that while their salaries may not keep up with the private sector, they are willing to take home less pay now in return for a secure retirement later.
- Public educators in New Jersey pay 7.5% from each paycheck toward their pension – even though they will not see a return on that investment for years.

Marybeth Beichert is an associate director in the Communications Division. She can be reached at mbeichert@njea.org.



A fair, stable and fully funded public employee pension helps to recruit and retain an experienced workforce that provides the taxpayer services citizens depend on.

- Education for K-12 and community college
- Emergency and first response services
- Police protection
- Firefighting
- Public works
- Health care services
- Child welfare protection
- Health inspections
- Prison and correctional services.

These services are public goods but, unfortunately right now we are seeing staff shortages and high turnover rates in these jobs, especially in public education.

- Reliable retirement benefits attract high-quality educators to a profession they may otherwise pass over due to the comparatively low salaries.
- Because of the division of New Jersey’s pension tiers, especially Tier 5, we see more and more experienced educators leaving the profession.

A fully funded public pension system is vital to the economy.

- Pension funds are a continuous source of economic stimulus to every state, city and town.
- Local and state economies depend upon investments from the pension system.
- Retirees spend their pension checks in the local community. One person’s spending becomes another person’s income, creating a ripple effect in the economy.
- Each dollar invested in the pension system results in more than four dollars spent in the state’s economy.

Pension funding should be a budgetary priority.

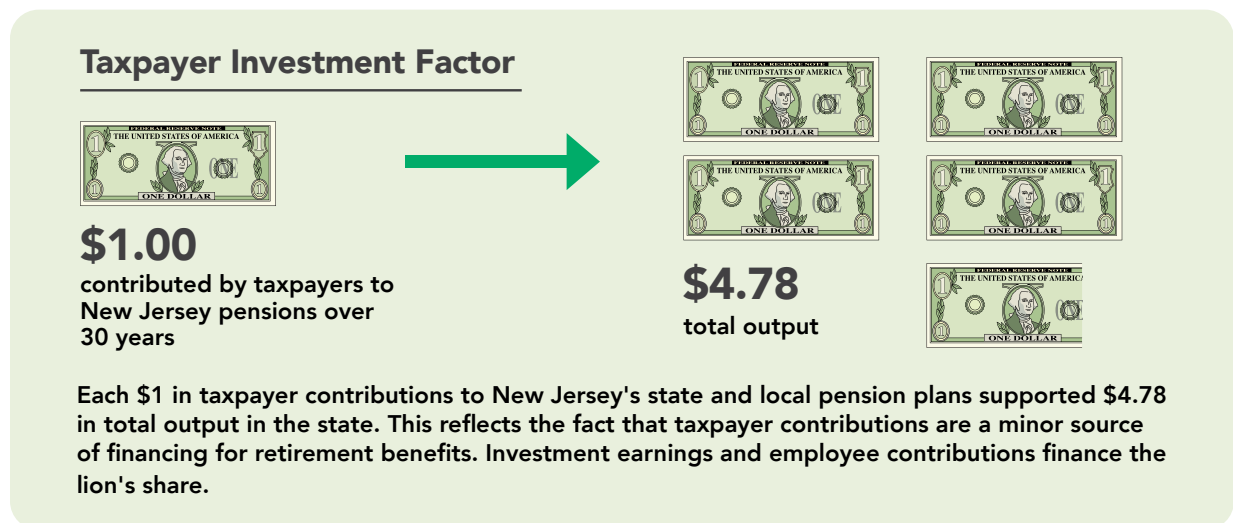
- Pensions get into financial crisis when the state does not make its obligatory payments, not because pension plans are too expensive. The vast majority of the pension received by a retiree is from the interest earned on the pension payments made by public employees every time they are paid.
- Prior to Gov. Phil Murphy’s five consecutive budgets with full pension payments, no New Jersey governor had made a full pension payment since 1996.
- That is why electing a pro-public, pro-labor governor and state Legislature matters.

No teacher or educational support professional is getting rich from their pension. In fact, most must rely on other savings or Social Security when they retire. In fact, a teacher’s average pension is around \$3,000 and for an ESP it is about \$1,900 a month.

A 2024 survey conducted by the National Institute on Retirement Security found that Americans are highly supportive of pensions for all workers. In fact, 86% of Americans say that all workers, not just those employed by state and local governments, should have a pension.

NJEA members, just like all public employees, must stand guard and protect the pension and health benefits they have earned. No member can assume they will always be secure.

That means as union members we must be politically engaged because the pension depends on the governor and Legislature deciding whether pension benefits are fully funded every year. The phrase “show me your budget and I will show you your priorities” shows a government’s true values. If our pensions are fully funded, it shows the work our members do is valued by those in office. If not, we have a lot more organizing to do in the future. 🇺🇸





A night at the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University

By Jami Centrella

In October, the East Greenwich Education Association (EGEA) hosted a night of discovery at the newly opened Edelman Fossil Park & Museum in Mantua Township. The EGEA provided free admission to all students, families and staff of the East Greenwich School District. They reserved the Rowan University museum for a family-centered evening of exploration through local fossils and prehistoric discoveries long preserved in New Jersey's soil.

As an EGEA member and sixth-grade English teacher at Samuel Mickle School, I spend my days guiding students through stories, ideas and worlds both familiar and strange. I myself am a "wanderer" by nature, and I try to teach my students that curiosity should chart their course, much like Alice following the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole. Most of the time, my wandering is just a good excuse for getting lost, but I like to think of it as pursuing life's side quests. So, an evening spent wandering through a museum seemed perfectly suited to me, yet I had no idea it would awaken a dinosaur of questions I hadn't even known I was carrying.

Every day in the classroom, I strive to bring one message to my students: you matter, and what we learn together matters too. It is a simple message that guides the work of every teacher in the East Greenwich School District. However, as I wandered among the prehistoric displays that evening, I found myself reflecting on the true weight of that message. In today's world, value often feels conditional. Too often, it seems to be defined by how we look, act, think or believe. Yet standing in this world of fossils, a world full of stories begging to be told, I couldn't help but wonder whether true value might be something far deeper than the constructs we have created around it throughout time.

Jami Centrella is a sixth-grade English teacher at Samuel Mickle School in East Greenwich. She can be reached at jami.centrella@gmail.com.



Jami Centrella, a sixth-grade English teacher at Samuel Mickle School in East Greenwich, stands in front of the entrance to the Jean & Ric Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University in Mantua.

Layers of time vs. layers of worth

There is a sense of mystery that floods your spirit as you enter the doors of the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum. As you approach the first exhibit on the main floor, the air starts to feel slightly humid, and the walls around you display the unique landscapes of the time. The amber lights make you feel almost like you are an outsider entering a world and a time that is no longer yours. The larger-than-life displays truly transport you back in time to the prehistoric era, tracing how the dinosaurs that once roamed the earth navigated their way from thriving to surviving to, ultimately, their extinction.

One display, in particular, caught my attention: two dinosaurs locked in a battle, the full-scale replica freezing that moment in time. The jaw of the attacked dinosaur hung open, as if it were letting out a nearly audible cry for survival. It was at that display that I turned to a member of my family and asked, "Can you imagine living in a world where the only reason you exist is to survive?" The question haunted my thoughts as I continued to wander the exhibits, surrounded by the laughter and curiosity of children exploring and asking questions, their fascination blending with a newfound sense of discovery. Lost in the energy of the experience, I found myself returning to the question of value.

When so much around us feels upside down, when it seems unclear who or what is considered "most important," am I helping my students see that their existence is more than just survival? Do they know that simply being a human being makes them valuable? As educators, our primary focus is always our students. We focus on their needs, those that are both seen and unseen, and we hold the responsibility to use lessons from the past to inspire the future. We are helping to close the gap between what was and what could be, and sometimes they're the ones that show us exactly how to do that. Watching the next generation find joy in understanding the mysteries of the past reminded me that hope begins with curiosity and that value is often discovered over time. For me that raised the question: how do we help our students not just search for meaning, but notice that they are creating their own legacy every day?

Preserving stories

Following the main-floor exhibit, visitors can proceed to the lower level of the museum, where they can examine artifacts, explore "please touch" displays and even encounter some living creepy crawlers with origins dating back to a "land before time." The lower level also features exhibits on Darwinism, the origins of man and displays that pose the timeless question: Where on Earth did we come from?



Top: Centrella was inspired by the Amanda Gorman quote that is featured at the museum, "Know that the future of this wise planet lies right in sight: right in all of us."

Bottom: Centrella shows some of the displays that students enjoyed during their night at the museum.



Science and history
roar to life at the
museum.

My favorite part of this floor was the glass-walled room where visitors can watch museum curators clean and preserve fossils discovered on the museum grounds. While the preservation work was not actively happening during our visit, a museum worker patiently explained the process to young explorers outside the space. Preserving a fossil is meticulous work. It is a painstaking task filled with purpose. Its purpose is to reveal a story worth sharing.

In many ways, our students are like those fossils. With guidance, attention and care, their curiosity, ideas and actions can be preserved and shaped into something enduring. Every day, we are helping them learn to create a story worth telling. A story that, like fossils, can endure over time. And how much greater is their story than that of the dinosaurs of South Jersey?

I saw this potential firsthand at one of the origins of man exhibits. A young community member confidently opened a drawer found in the display, nudged her brother aside, and explained to him what she had found inside the drawer and why it was such an important discovery. I have no idea whether her explanation was accurate, but the curiosity that drove her to explore, and the confidence

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***Curiosity leads to confidence,
confidence reveals value, and with
care, that value can endure – just
like fossils.***

that followed, revealed something far more important: curiosity leads to confidence, confidence reveals value, and with care, that value can endure just as fossils do. This value allows important stories to continue being told long after they were first uncovered.

From fossils to futures

The Edelman Fossil Park & Museum also offers a variety of additional opportunities for visitors to explore, including a fossil dig and a gift shop sure to delight everyone from the youngest scientist to the most seasoned explorer. Our night at the museum was a family-friendly event that sparked curiosity in learners of all ages. While the museum



The Jean & Ric Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University opened in March 2025.

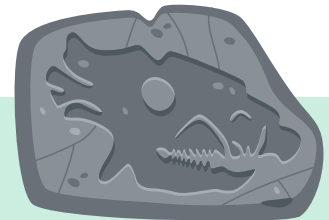
offers plenty of reading opportunities, it also features many hands-on activities, from interactive games and scavenger hunts to petting horseshoe crabs (which was definitely not my thing, though I admired everyone else's enthusiasm).

Yet amid the fun and exploration, there is also a sense of wonder that finds its way into the hearts of every wandering traveler. One of the final rooms I explored in the museum was the "Hall of Extinction and Hope." Here, visitors learn about the timeline of events that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. You can view meteorites and witness the looming effects of climate change on the past, present and future. I don't believe it is any accident that this room is labeled extinction and hope. It is a solemn reminder that unless we begin to change how we treat our planet, humanity could follow the dinosaurs' same path to extinction. But can we take this idea even further? Are we on the brink of the extinction of kindness? Hope? Our very humanity? Some would argue we are. Yet, when I look at my students, I see a generation actively trying to swing the pendulum back toward acceptance, empathy and positive change.

Though the world seems to be living in a state of constant chaos, the Edelman Fossil Park & Museum offers a brief pause and a space for quiet discovery. It allows you the freedom to ask questions about the unknown and to

use those questions to fuel change. As educators, we are privileged to create this same space in our classrooms every day, allowing students to ask questions, explore and take meaningful action. I, for one, am profoundly hopeful for what this next generation will unearth.

A huge thank you goes to EGEA for hosting such a meaningful event for our school community. Union events like these are the glue that holds New Jersey public schools together. In a society always questioning what truly matters, I am grateful to belong to an organization that supports educators and empowers them to help students see their own value. This cyclical relationship helps our school communities create stories that endure. Just as fossils preserve the past, every student carries a story worth telling, and if the future is in their hands, I have no doubt it will be extraordinary. 🌱



New Jersey's prehistoric history

New Jersey leads the nation in many positive ways. Our public schools are the best in the nation. We are national leaders in technology, pharmaceutical and biotech innovation. And we are also the state with the longest geological history in the nation. Beginning in the 1780s, dinosaur and fossil remains in New Jersey were reported to the American Philosophical Society. In 1838, the first relatively complete set of dinosaur bones were discovered in Haddonfield. Mastodon and mammoth skeletons have been found in Sussex County. Some of the world's most ancient life records have been found in the Highlands. From fossils to innovation, New Jersey's deep prehistoric roots remind us that our state's story stretches back millions of years and continues to shape the future.

Learn more

The Jean and Ric Edelman Fossil Park & Museum of Rowan University in Mantua is a unique paleontological site and museum built around a rich Cretaceous-era fossil bed in a former marl quarry, offering hands-on experiences like real fossil digs, dinosaur exhibits, trails and educational programs focused on paleontology, biodiversity and sustainability, aiming to connect people with Earth's history and climate challenges. It features New Jersey's largest carbon net-zero building, promoting environmental responsibility alongside scientific discovery. To learn more, visit efm.org.

Maximizing the co-teaching experience

By Rodney Lane

As I enter year 32 in education, it is important to me not only to survive but to thrive. Co-teaching can be a challenging task due to numerous variables. With the many different types of noises impacting the public education experience, we must remember that the students must come first, and we must maximize our time with them. Rachel Healy is my classroom partner in our U.S. history classes at Hackensack High School. She has been teaching for nine years, and we have been working together for four years. We feel our collaboration has been very successful and can be used as a model for others interested in co-teaching.

While there is no perfect way to do anything in the field of education, we have put together five essential principles that work for us in our classroom. These principles are communication, professional respect, procedures and consistency, community building and academic strategies. Over the past three school years, we have applied these principles and have seen strong academic, social and behavioral success.

Communication

One of the most important factors in our success has been solid and frequent communication. We have found that it turns a classroom into one unified learning community.

Rachel and I meet every morning prior to the first bell to recap what went on previously and to anticipate what we may expect for the coming days. These brief meetings help us set the stage for things that cannot be foreseen in our lesson plan. We make this time available for peace of mind and to execute the daily lessons to the best of our abilities. The time that we spend meeting makes our classroom experience much easier and more rewarding for us and the students.

It is not uncommon for Rachel and me to text or call each other multiple times a day. These mini-communications keep us up to date in real time. Sometimes unexpected things happen between classes or even during classes that must be discussed.

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Rodney Lane and Rachel Healy have been co-teaching together for four years. They have developed a set of principles that help them succeed together.

In addition, we have a co-teacher-only Google Classroom page where we can take notes, send messages and collect resources.

One of the most important things that we do to encourage communication is that we welcome open and honest feedback from each other. That includes the good, the bad and the ugly. But that is only possible when it is closely tied with professional respect.

Professional respect

Rachel and I have found that when both educators value each other's strengths, students gain twice the support. We value each other's expertise, and we lean on those abilities when appropriate. We understand that our roles and responsibilities can change depending on the lesson and the level of expertise each one of us has on a given subject.

We always attempt to include each other's skillsets in everything we do. There may be different levels depending on the subject, but there is always input.

Procedures and consistency

In our experience, clear procedures and consistent routines create the structure that helps every student feel secure and ready to learn.

The procedures that are unique to our classroom are posted on the walls around the room. We send the procedures to each student, parent and guardian electronically, as needed. As co-teachers, we monitor these procedures together and we are in mutual agreement on how they will be enforced and who, if either of us, will play the lead role for each procedure.

Consistency helps keep our classes well-organized and sets realistic expectations for our students and the teachers. The establishment of a flow helps keep our students on task and limits behavioral issues.

Community building

A strong classroom community isn't built in a day. It's built every day, through trust, respect and shared learning.

Each first day of a new school week, generally a Monday, we take about seven minutes to recap the prior week. We discuss the class goals we achieved the previous week and we honor a single student with a student of the week, award based on a criteria shared with the students. There is a small ceremony, and we honor the champion of the week with a certificate and a championship belt that the student can display in class until the next champion is crowned. A picture of each champion is placed on the wall of champions for the entire year. Most of our students want this award, but some of our students need this award.

We know that one way to build community inside the classroom is to involve the parents in positive ways. What we have named a "call of goodwill" is a phone call to the parent or guardian of a student that expresses our goodwill towards them and their student. We talk about how great the student is doing and how much we appreciate the parental involvement in the learning process.

We make it a habit to applaud and cheer for each other. We do this to acknowledge the good things and the effort that teachers and students put into the day. This small gesture is a great asset to our community and has helped us build the culture we want in our classroom.

Finally, we bring an element of joy to our classroom every day. The students can feel our energy, and that energy is often contagious.

Academic strategies

In our classrooms, we embrace the philosophy of two teachers, one team to ensure that the needs of both general education and special education students are met. This approach is grounded in the six core models of co-teaching, which allow us to adapt instruction to different contexts and student needs. At times, one teacher may lead instruction while the other observes, gathering valuable insights into student progress and classroom dynamics. In other situations, one teacher takes the lead while the other assists, providing targeted support



Lane and Healy try to bring an element of joy into their classroom every day.

to individuals or small groups. We also employ station teaching, where students rotate through different learning activities led by each teacher, and parallel teaching, which allows us to divide the class into smaller groups for more personalized instruction. Alternative teaching provides opportunities for one teacher to work intensively with a small group while the other continues with the larger class, and team teaching enables both educators to share responsibility for delivering lessons together in a seamless, collaborative manner.

Beyond co-teaching models, we integrate the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure that every student has multiple ways to engage with material and demonstrate understanding. Lessons are designed to incorporate text, visuals, video, oral discussion, written work and digital tools, maximizing accessibility and expression for all learners.

We emphasize modeling and provide clear, step-by-step instructions so that expectations are transparent and achievable. Consistent routines and classroom norms further support student success by creating a stable and predictable learning environment.

Finally, we make thoughtful use of technology, leveraging digital platforms and tools to enhance instruction, foster engagement and prepare students with the skills they need to thrive in a modern, connected world.

There are no right or wrong answers to co-teaching, but after years of collaboration, this is what works for us. While some things are out of our hands, like scheduling, common planning time and room selection, we try our best to work with the situation at hand. Ultimately, the dynamic between co-teachers is what will make or break the team's ability to maximize the classroom experience. I am very fortunate to have been teamed up with such an amazing partner in Rachel. 🙌

NJEA offers professional development in co-teaching. If you'd like to learn more, contact Dawn Howlen, associate director for Professional Development and Instructional Issues, at dhowlen@njea.org.



Ocean County Vocational Tech's culinary program serves up skills and hope

By Kathryn Coulibaly

The Ocean County Vocational Technical School (OCVTS) Culinary Arts shared time Career and Technical Education (CTE) program has built a reputation as one of the most immersive and career-ready programs in the state. With its unique blend of classroom instruction, hands-on training and community service, the program not only prepares students for careers in the food industry but also instills in them a sense of responsibility and pride. At the heart of this mission is the annual Feed the Need campaign, a tradition that brings together students, staff and community partners to provide thousands of Thanksgiving meals to families across Ocean County.

A shared academy experience

The culinary program at OCVTS is structured as a shared academy, meaning students split their time between their home high schools and the vocational campus. Juniors and seniors from across Ocean County attend either morning or afternoon sessions, spending half their day immersed

in culinary education. Sophomores are given a preview of the program, and if accepted, they begin their two-year journey in their junior year.

This design allows students to experience the best of both worlds: the academic and extracurricular opportunities of their home schools, and the specialized, career-focused training of the vocational program. It also fosters a diverse community of learners, as students from different towns and backgrounds come together around a shared passion for food.

Steven Glassoff, a culinary arts instructor at OCVTS and an alumnus of the program, is proud of the education students receive.

"What makes our program unique is that it's real," Glassoff says. "We're like a culinary college in the experiences we're able to provide students."

A rotational curriculum

The program's curriculum is carefully structured to give students a comprehensive foundation in the culinary arts. Juniors rotate through three distinct areas:

- Dining room service: One marking period is spent learning the art of hospitality, from setting tables to serving guests.

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We're like a culinary college in the experiences we're able to provide students.

- Bake shop: Another marking period is dedicated to baking, where students master breads, pastries and desserts.
- Hot foods/kitchen: Two marking periods focus on cooking techniques, knife skills and food preparation.

By senior year, students spend most of their time in the hot foods kitchen, with additional exposure to baking. This rotation ensures that every student graduates with a well-rounded skill set, capable of handling multiple roles in a professional kitchen.

Real-world experience: bakery and restaurant

What sets OCVTS apart is its commitment to replicating the real-world culinary industry. The school operates both a bakery and a restaurant, Touch of Class, which are open to the public three days a week. Products made in class are sold in the bakery, giving students direct experience in production, sales and customer service. The restaurant rotates its menu weekly based on what students are learning—whether it's meat butchery, fish filleting, or plated desserts.

Students quickly learn the importance of consistency and quality. For example, bakery students tasked with producing plated desserts for the restaurant must ensure that all 50 plates look identical, just as they would in a professional setting. This emphasis on precision builds confidence and instills a sense of ownership in their work.

Industry-ready training

The program's instructors are seasoned professionals, many of whom are graduates of OCVTS themselves. With backgrounds ranging from the Culinary Institute of America to Atlantic Cape Community College, they bring industry expertise directly into the classroom. Their goal is to prepare students not only for college but also for immediate employment. Graduates often start as line cooks and quickly advance to sous chef positions thanks to the rigorous training they receive.

"We're preparing the students to be able to walk into a restaurant kitchen or a bakery and know what they need to do," Glassoff says.



Students display some of the apple pies they are preparing for the school's Feed the Need initiative, which partners the school with local organizations to provide Thanksgiving meals for Ocean County residents.



Students receive a comprehensive foundation in the culinary arts, including dining room service, baking, cooking techniques, knife skills and more.



Chef Steven Glassoff, an alumnus of the program, instructs students as they prepare pie crusts.



Students and faculty are justifiably proud of the OCVTS culinary arts program and its reputation as one of the most immersive and career-ready programs in the state.

Students are also required to earn ServSafe certifications. Juniors complete the food handler certification, while seniors tackle the more advanced food manager certification. These credentials, valid for five years, are highly valued by employers and health departments alike, giving students a competitive edge in the job market.

Tradition and innovation

The program balances tradition with innovation. Baking fundamentals—such as ingredient identification, creaming methods and lamination for croissant—are taught alongside modern techniques like using programmable Unox ovens, edible printers and combi ovens that can steam, bake and air fry. Students also explore gluten-free and vegan baking, learning how to adapt recipes for dietary restrictions.

Technology plays a growing role in the classroom. Students create instructional videos, practice demonstrations on camera and engage with platforms like TikTok and Instagram, reflecting the way modern chefs build their reputations. By blending timeless skills with contemporary trends, OCVTS ensures its graduates are prepared for the evolving culinary landscape.

A culture of professionalism

From day one, students are expected to act like professionals. They wear full chef uniforms—checked pants, non-slip shoes, jackets and chef toques—and are held to high standards of sanitation and presentation.

Instructors emphasize that showing up in a dirty uniform would be unacceptable in the industry, and the same applies in class. This culture of professionalism teaches students accountability and prepares them for the expectations of employers.

“We’re not just teaching students recipes,” Glasoff says. “We’re teaching them to be problem-solvers.”

Competitions and achievements

OCVTS students regularly participate in SkillsUSA competitions, where they showcase their talents at regional, state and national levels. Events range from baking and culinary challenges to demonstrations of trade skills. These competitions not only test technical ability but also build confidence and camaraderie. Over the years, OCVTS students have earned top placements, continuing a tradition of excellence established by instructors like Chef Dennis Melia, a beloved figure who helped shape the program and whose legacy continues to inspire.

Feed the Need: serving the community

Perhaps the most impactful aspect of the program is its annual Feed the Need campaign. Each year, the culinary program prepares approximately 4,000 complete turkey dinners for families in Ocean County. The effort is a massive undertaking, with each class responsible for a different dish—sweet potatoes, stuffing, green bean casserole, or roasting turkeys. The meals are then boxed and distributed through local agencies in partnership with Fulfill, the local

food bank; Seeds of Service; the Community Medical Center and the OCVTS Foundation.

Feed the Need is more than just a service project; it is a lesson in empathy and community engagement. Many students have never volunteered before, and the experience of cooking for thousands of people instills a deep sense of pride. Knowing that their work directly supports families in need makes the long hours worthwhile. Importantly, all meals stay within Ocean County, reinforcing the program's commitment to serving its local community.

Thanksgiving traditions

In addition to Feed the Need, the bakery runs a popular Thanksgiving pie sale. Students develop a menu of five to seven pies, take orders for two weeks and fulfill them just before the holiday. This event not only raises funds but also gives students practical experience in production planning, customer service and time management.

Full-circle journeys

For many instructors, teaching at OCVTS is a full-circle experience. Several were once students in the program themselves, and now they have returned to guide the next generation. Chef Kevin Musto is considered the godfather of the program. He has encouraged several graduates to come back and work at OCVTS, including Glassoff and Chef Taylor Baluski. Their stories illustrate the transformative power of vocational education. Glassoff recalls growing up in Toms River, struggling in traditional classrooms, ultimately finding his passion through cooking. After working in restaurants and advancing to sous chef, he returned to OCVTS as a teacher, eager to give students the same opportunities he once received.

This cycle of mentorship and growth is central to the program's identity. Teachers model lifelong learning, reminding students that even seasoned professionals must continue to grow and adapt. As Glassoff puts it, "If I stop learning, I'll stop being an effective teacher."

Preparing for the future

Graduates of OCVTS pursue diverse paths. Some continue their education, earning bachelor's degrees in food science or applied science. Others enter the workforce directly, finding jobs in restaurants, hotels, cruise ships and catering companies. The program's emphasis on real-world skills ensures that students are ready for both college and career, equipped with the confidence and professionalism to succeed.

The OCVTS Culinary Arts Academy is more than a training ground—it is a community hub where students learn, grow and give back. Through its bakery, restaurant, competitions and Feed the Need campaign, the program

offers a holistic education that blends skill development with social responsibility. Students graduate not only as capable cooks and bakers but also as compassionate individuals ready to make a difference.

"We are incredibly proud of the Culinary Arts Program at OCVTS," says Lynn Sauer, principal of the Brick campus. "With unparalleled instruction, remarkable creativity and an impressive level of production, this program stands out as truly exceptional. For students passionate about the culinary field, OCVTS is the place to be."

In Brick, the ovens at OCVTS are always warm, the classrooms are always buzzing and the lessons extend far beyond recipes. Here, culinary education is about preparing meals, preparing futures and preparing students to serve both their industry and their community. 🍽️



The impact of Feed the Need

From preparing ingredients to packing up meals, OCVTS undertook an ambitious goal: to provide Ocean County residents in need with a delicious Thanksgiving dinner. Students and instructors scaled up Thanksgiving to prepare:

- More than 8,000 pounds of turkey
- 1,500 pounds of potatoes
- 1,200 pounds of sweet potatoes
- 1,200 pounds of stuffing
- 450 pounds of green beans
- 90 gallons of gravy.

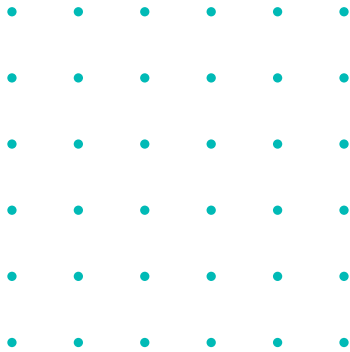


Watch the Ocean County Vocational Technical School's culinary arts team in action, helping to Feed the Need in their community.

Visit njea.org/FeedtheNeed

Video by Chris Curto,
NJEA Communications.

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New Jersey Film Academy: Reclaiming the state's cinematic heritage

By Diane Raver

Long before Hollywood became synonymous with American cinema, New Jersey was the epicenter of the film industry. Thomas Edison pioneered motion pictures in Menlo Park, and Fort Lee boasted 49 film studios where groundbreaking director Alice Guy-Blaché, first woman director and studio owner, invented the narrative film format.

Now, through the New Jersey Pathways to Career Opportunities Initiative, the Garden State is reclaiming its cinematic legacy by building a robust pipeline of skilled film and television workers through its community college system.

A statewide training network

The New Jersey Film Academy has established an impressive network of 13 community colleges, with Brookdale Community College serving as the lead institution. This partnership model includes Atlantic Cape, Bergen County Community College, Camden County College, Essex County College, Hudson County Community College, Mercer County Community College, Middlesex Community College, County College of Morris, Raritan Valley Community College, Rowan College of South Jersey, Sussex County Community College and Union College of Union County.

The academy has also forged partnerships with four-year institutions including Rutgers and Fairleigh Dickinson University, plus Red Bank Regional High School.

Joan Scocco, dean of the School of Business, Humanities and Social Sciences at Brookdale Community College, has been an excellent partner working to create workforce development opportunities across diverse regions of the state.

Real results, real careers

The numbers tell a compelling story. Since January 2025, the academy has served 216 students across multiple institutions, with Brookdale awarding 67 certificates in specialized areas including Production Office Coordination & Management, Production Accounting, Location Management, and Hair & Makeup. Hudson County Community College has successfully launched three

cohorts of the prerequisite "Script to Screen" course, establishing a proven model for other partner colleges to follow.

Perhaps most impressive is the academy's work-based learning program, which has placed students in real-world production environments on active film and television sets throughout New Jersey. These placements provide invaluable hands-on experience in roles ranging from production assistants to accounting department support, location management and hair and makeup departments. Several students have already secured paid positions on subsequent productions after completing their placements—a direct pathway from classroom to career.

Industry-standard training

The academy leverages curriculum developed by the same team behind the highly successful Georgia Film Academy, ensuring students receive training that meets industry standards. Emmy Award-winning line producer Joe Colicelli serves as program manager, bringing over 15 years of experience from major productions including "The Talk," "American Idol," and Dave Chappelle's stand-up specials.

All instructors undergo thorough vetting to ensure they possess both relevant industry experience and demonstrated teaching ability. The Academy also offers a "Breaking In" lecture series featuring industry professionals like producer Michael Uslan, Cheryl Quareentello Schnitzler and Armand Assante, providing students with networking opportunities and insider perspectives.

Building for the future

Thanks to a generous grant from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) and ongoing support from the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges, we are able to provide scholarship programs. The academy is removing barriers to entry for aspiring film professionals. The initiative's sustainable revenue model aims to reduce reliance on external funding over time while continuing to expand course offerings, including upcoming programs in Costuming for Film & Television and Editing.

As New Jersey's film industry experiences rapid growth, the film academy isn't just training workers, it's reclaiming the state's rightful place in cinema history, one graduate at a time.

Diane Raver is director of the New Jersey Film Academy at Brookdale Community College. She can be reached at draver@brookdalecc.edu.



NJ PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ASBESTOS

By Dorothy Wigmore

New Jersey has many old school buildings. When districts decide to renovate or upgrade them, it's time for NJEA members to ask about asbestos hazards.

That's a lesson the Wayne Education Association (WEA) learned once renovations started on the oldest of 15 buildings in the district, the Preakness Early Childhood Center.

"They started on the windows, doing things with the exterior that involved grinding a lot of old materials, including grout," Heather Potts-Jacobs, the new WEA president and former health and safety committee chair, explained.

Despite assurances there was no hazard, staff found visible dust on classroom supplies. Members started asking questions about it.

In response, WEA met the district, consulted the New Jersey Work Environment Council (NJWEC), and made Open Public Records Act (OPRA) information requests. When independent testing was positive for asbestos, the district closed the building wing in April and moved classrooms until work ended in the summer.

"Now they're updating the building interior, dealing with the 'glue dots' on the walls," Potts-Jacob said. The contractors also are working through layers to get to the original asbestos-containing floor tiles.

Given the earlier experience, the district had a community presentation about their plans, including precautions, training and daily testing, for the next stages.

"The health and safety chair and I specifically asked

questions, like 'Are we going to see any dust again?' They assured us the answer is no," she said. "They have to send these [daily test results] to the state, so if anything comes back abnormal, it just gets shut down immediately."

What's the hazard?

Asbestos is a group of minerals used for fire resistance and insulation properties in building materials, brakes, theater curtains, drug and wine filters, and more. Unlike many other countries, the U.S. has not fully banned its use and importation. Legacy materials are a hazard in older buildings, especially in renovations.

People are exposed to asbestos when it becomes "friable," which means it is disturbed and its invisible fibers pass in the air and onto surfaces. There's no safe level for any type of asbestos. Effects include lung and other cancers, as well as life-shortening asbestosis.

The school law isn't working all that well in New Jersey

The WEA wanted the district to obey the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act (AHERA), passed in 1986 to ensure school districts identify asbestos containing materials (ACM) sites in their buildings and remove or manage it properly. New Jersey's Department of Health's Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health program (PEOSH) enforces the law.

It requires districts to have a trained designated person dealing with ACM and a management plan based on inspections every three years and checks made every six months. The plan must be updated based on activities and available to anyone who requests it. Other provisions include labelling ACM areas.

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.

Early in 2025, the state Department of Health's Environmental and Occupational Health Surveillance Program (EOHSP) published two AHERA fact sheets.

Difficult to find on the website (they are under Reducing Exposures to Hazardous Substances, not the school asbestos pages), one analyzed 456 PEOSH asbestos inspections between 2008 and 2017. The results are scary, especially since the law is almost 40 years old:

- 48% (218 schools) had unidentified asbestos.
- 20% didn't do the required six-month checks ("surveillance").
- When friable ACM was present, half had no operations and maintenance plan.
- 57% (259 schools) failed to put warning labels near asbestos-containing building materials (ACBM) in routine maintenance areas.
- Short-term workers in 254 schools weren't told about ACBM locations.
- Workers in more than half the schools inspected (254) were not told about required actions.
- Most districts had a designated person (all but 77 schools) but many are not properly trained (41% / 185 schools).

Lessons for health and safety committees

Local associations and their health and safety committees need to find out what their district is doing about AHERA, like the WEA did.

Committees can:

- Learn about the law.
- Have membership conversations using workplace maps to discuss where ACM is located and how it's managed.
- Keep tabs on district management plans and activities, updating members about what they learn.
- Advocate for stringent protections.

WEC works with NJEA members who go through their UniServ rep for health and safety help.

"We get these reports and things from the district, but we don't necessarily know exactly what we're looking at. We need somebody who knows to tell us what to do," Potts-Jacobs said. "Having someone from WEC who can talk about those things is really important when working with the district, because you start saying, 'Well, we were told ...' and they go 'OK, I'll get back to you'. And suddenly it gets done."

That's also a lesson for the district, she added. It can be a partnership, not a "gotcha."

"We are going to exercise our rights to follow up on these things and ask these questions, and we're going to rely on WEC and NJEA and those connections to ensure things are safe."

Connections to the membership are key. Potts-Jacobs got involved with her committee in 2019.

"Members and leaders need to know that health and safety committees aren't just there for these unique situations," Potts-Jacobs explained. "They're there to help with things that maybe you've just been dealing with as a person in the classroom, because you thought that's what it's going to be like day in and day out. Members should know they can say something so that the committee can act on it to make things better."

"After all, our working conditions are our students' learning conditions."



Resources



NJEA

Asbestos killer dust in your school?



Environmental Protection Agency

The Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act (AHERA) (Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) Title II): in your school?

New Jersey Department of Health



10-Year Study on AHERA Compliance in Schools



AHERA Quick Guide for Schools



School asbestos management plans



PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

NJREA's county associations

As future retirees plan to leave their public school positions, it's an excellent time to join NJREA and one of NJREA's county retired education associations (CREA). Retirees find that it's a great way to keep informed and to maintain and develop friendships with people who once worked in public education.

A closer look at the 21 county REA's activities

Annual meetings: Most of the counties hold between two and four business meetings and luncheons each year. These may be held in restaurants, hotels, or country club facilities. Very often, staff from NJEA give updates on pensions, health benefits, government relations and member benefits. Representatives from Aetna and Horizon may attend and are available to answer retirees' questions. NJEA endorsed candidates are invited if an election is imminent. And of course, NJREA and NJEA officers come to discuss important education or legislative issues. Choirs and instrumentalists from junior high and high schools frequently entertain around the holidays or as the school year ends.

Workshops: Many CREAs hold workshops on topics such as "Preparing Wills and Probate," "Nutrition," "Email Scams," and "Physical Therapy." Currently, setting up and navigating "Your MBOS Account" is the most popular workshop. MBOS is the New Jersey Division of Pensions and Benefits' secure online portal for state and local employees and retirees to manage their pension, health and life insurance accounts.

Philanthropic activities: CREAs generously support food banks, veteran homes, family shelters, the Ronald McDonald House, young children in schools and the elderly in homes. Sweatshirts, coats, gloves, hats, toys, books and more are collected and distributed. Funds raised from chances on gift baskets or monetary donations go to county organizations as well as retirees or families with special needs.

Trips: Bus travel to Longwood Gardens, the Paper Mill Playhouse, Sight & Sound Theatres, New York City and Cape May are popular destinations and may include family members and friends.

Scholarships: In addition to the four NJREA scholarships awarded annually, the CREAs give scholarships ranging from \$500-\$1,500 to graduating high school students planning to attend four-year or two-year colleges or

a technical school. Some of the counties give a \$500 scholarship to each high school in the county. A CREA officer presents the scholarship at the high school awards ceremony. The recipients and their parents are invited to attend a spring CREA luncheon. Often the recipients return a year later to share their post-high school experiences.

Joining is easy

Ready or almost ready to join NJREA? Talk to your local association president or contact your NJEA regional office. Or call NJEA at 609-310-4546, option 9.

The following CREAs contributed to this article:

Atlantic, Burlington, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Hudson, Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Ocean, Sussex and Warren.

Coming up in March: Atlantic County gives each new retiree a one-year membership to NJREA.

Around the counties February 2026

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.

Cumberland County REA

March 4: Winter luncheon meeting at The Millville Motorsports Park in Millville. To attend, contact Pam Garwood at 856-392-6909.

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.

Gloucester County REA

March 23: MBOS orientation Zoom presentation. The presenters will be Mike Salerno and Sarah Favinger. Reservation deadline is TBA, and there is no cost. To attend, contact Margery Walsh at 856-381-1123.

Middlesex County REA

March 12: Spring luncheon meeting at The Grand Marquis in Old Bridge. There will be a NJREA Member Benefits Fair with Aetna and Horizon Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Reservation deadline is March 2, and the cost is \$46. To attend, contact Susan Jaysnovitch at 732-925-1606.

Monmouth County REA

April 14: Spring luncheon meeting at Falcone’s at Renaissance in Ocean. Voting for new officers. Reservation deadline is March 31, and the cost is \$45. To attend, contact Debbie Adamchak at 848-459-2672.

Morris County REA

March 11: General luncheon meeting at the Birchwood Manor in Whippany. There will be a Member Benefit Fair. Reservation deadline is March 1, and the cost is \$35 for members and \$55 for guests. To attend, contact John Williams at 609-504-9681.

Ocean County REA

March 12: Spring luncheon meeting at the Clarion Hotel in Toms River. Speaker to be announced. Reservation deadline is March 1, and the cost is \$32. To attend, contact Pam Raynor at 862-268-5210.

Passaic County REA

March 25: Luncheon meeting at the Brownstone in Paterson. Reservation deadline is March 20, and the cost is \$35. To attend, contact Kitty Sausa at 201-410-1325.

Sussex County REA

April 13: Spring luncheon meeting at Farmstead Golf and Country Club in Lafayette. Reservation deadline is March 30, and the cost is \$35. To attend, contact Betty Monaghan at 908-303-6436.

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 NJEA Member Benefits. Reservation deadline is Feb. 15, and the cost is \$40. To attend, contact Luanne Lohman-DiCicco at 732-882-1688.

Warren County REA

April 1: Luncheon meeting at Hawk Pointe Golf Club in Washington. Reservation deadline is March 25, and the cost is \$33. To attend, register at warrencountyrea.org/meetings or contact Deb Polhemus at 908-328-8817.



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A call for inclusive curricula: The erasure of Black and Muslim students in American education

By Linda Miller and Thuraya Zeidan

The erasure of Black history—which is American history—has a profound and damaging impact on our students, families, and educators. When schools limit the books that are allowed, dismiss comprehensive curricula and neglect resources that highlight Black contributions, they send a message that Black voices, experiences and achievements are not valued. This systemic omission distorts historical truth and deprives all students of a complete understanding of our nation's past.

For Black students, it leads to a loss of identity, pride and self-worth as they struggle to see themselves reflected in their education. For educators and staff, especially those from marginalized communities, it creates a hostile environment where their knowledge and experiences are sidelined.

Adding to this harm, daily microaggressions, such as comments about Black students' natural hair being "unprofessional" or "distracting," the mispronunciation or dismissal of their names and assumptions about their intelligence or behavior, further alienate and devalue them. Black educators also endure these microaggressions, from being questioned about their qualifications to being expected to handle all "diversity" issues in the workplace. These constant slights compound the negative effects of historical erasure, damaging self-esteem, reinforcing systemic inequities and hindering the development of a truly inclusive and affirming educational environment. A failure to acknowledge Black history and experiences is a failure to prepare students for a just and equitable society.

New Jersey, along with many other states including New York, Illinois and California, has one of the highest Muslim student populations in its public schools. In the

U.S., Muslims are the country's most ethnically diverse faith community, with the vast majority being Black, South Asian and Arab. Since nearly all Muslim students are also people of color, they are erased from their learning process in schools, similarly to students from all communities forced into marginalization.

Curricula in schools across the U.S. is heavily influenced by a Eurocentric lens that shapes historical perspectives, cultural perspectives and literary selections—despite at least 50% of students in public schools being people of color. This means students of color can complete their entire K-12 education while being excluded from their truth.

The students most negatively impacted by the narrative taught to them are our students of color, who are either erased from their school curricula or taught a watered-down version of who they are. As educators committed to our kids beyond fulfilling our contracts, we must shift the mainstream teachings in our classrooms.

Students who see themselves reflected through an authentic lens are far more likely to feel valued and seen in the classroom. We want to collectively improve our students' academic, social and emotional progress—and this will happen when we normalize teaching from a global lens. When our Muslim students are taught about the great contributions of Muslim scholars in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and medicine, all students would benefit from a global lens while deconstructing the stereotypes and prejudice internalized through the absence of teaching about marginalized communities.

The need for inclusive curricula that reflect the diverse histories and contributions of all communities is more urgent than ever. By embracing a global perspective and acknowledging the rich tapestry of cultures and histories that make up our nation, we can foster an educational environment where every student feels valued and empowered. This shift not only benefits students of color but enriches the educational experience for all, paving the way for a more just and equitable society.

Linda Miller is a speech-language specialist in Jersey City Public Schools and advocate for Deaf and hard of hearing persons.

Thuraya Zeidan is an educator in northern New Jersey, teaching at the high school and college levels. She gives workshops on various educational topics, including multiculturalism and anti-racist teaching.



“TO BE OR NOT TO BE” A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER

By Dr. Tiffanie ThrBak

“To be, or not to be: That is the question.” For those who choose the calling of special education, the answer is not found in words, but in the heart.

The art and heart of special education

Teaching students with exceptionalities is both an art and a science. It requires creativity, adaptability and boundless empathy. Special education teachers are masters of modification and scaffolding. We design lessons that meet students where they are academically, socially and emotionally.

On any given day, we assess student needs, develop individualized education programs (IEPs), collaborate with parents and general education teachers and create instruction tailored to each learner’s abilities. We teach not just content, but confidence.

To be a special educator is to see potential and possibility where others see deficits and limits.

The challenges we face

To be a special educator is also to navigate unique challenges. Collaboration is essential, but not always easy. Some general education teachers and students can be impatient or indifferent when the special education teacher and their students join mainstream classrooms.

These moments test our resilience. Yet patience is our greatest gift.

We manage behaviors, teach life skills and advocate fiercely for equity in classrooms that sometimes misunderstand our mission. But even through the frustration, we persist because our students deserve champions.

The rewards of the calling

Despite the obstacles, the rewards of being a special education teacher are unmatched. We witness transformation when students learn to speak up, read fluently or express joy through newfound skills. Each milestone is monumental.

Dr. Tiffanie ThrBak, the 2025-26 Cumberland County Teacher of the Year, is a special education teacher with more than three decades of experience serving students who have experienced trauma and those with exceptionalities. She can be reached at tthrbak@njea.org.

Our role extends far beyond academics. We nurture social and emotional growth, teach self-regulation and prepare students for transitions after school—whether to continued education, employment, or independent living.

Every breakthrough, no matter how small, is a victory worth celebrating.

The need for more special educators

Fewer aspiring educators are choosing this rewarding path. Increasing certification requirements and challenging coursework are discouraging many from pursuing special education degrees.

This shortage is deeply concerning. The world needs more patient, skilled and compassionate teachers who see ability, not disability. To be a special educator is to accept one of the most demanding yet profoundly fulfilling careers in education.

My journey: from determination to dedication

Growing up in Cumberland County—New Jersey’s poorest county, with one of the highest teen pregnancy rates—I faced statistics that could have defined my destiny. Instead, I let them fuel my determination. As a teenage mother, I learned that success is not determined by circumstance, but by perseverance and support.

I tell my students: don’t dare fit into a mold that someone puts you in. If you can conceive it, believe it, then do your darndest to achieve it. My “why” is to make every student feel seen, supported and celebrated.

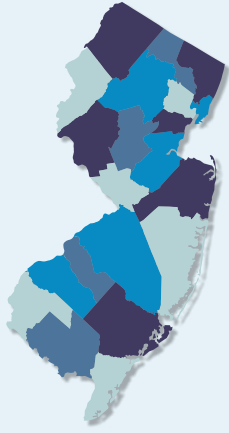
The ripple effect of purpose

Teaching students with exceptionalities means teaching the world about empathy. My classroom is more than a learning space, it’s a safe haven where growth and acceptance flourish.

Each child I teach becomes a seed of change, carrying forward lessons of compassion into their homes, schools and communities.

“To be or not to be” a special education teacher is not just a question— it’s a choice to change lives.

And that, truly, is the art of being.



SUSSEX TO CAPE MAY

Workshops and conferences

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 and Instructional Issues Division.

NJ ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED CHILDREN ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The NJAGC will hold its 2026 annual conference on April 17 at the Palace at Somerset Park. The theme of the conference is Pursuing Excellence: The Art & Science of Gifted Teaching.

The purpose of the NJAGC 2026 conference is to celebrate the balance between creativity and evidence-based practice that defines our gifted education community.

Participants will attend a keynote session and one breakout session in the morning, lunch (compliments of NJAGC) and three breakout sessions in the afternoon. Each participant will receive six professional development hours, if applicable.

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The Palace at Somerset Park
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Learn more and register at njagc.org.

NJ HALL OF FAME, MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY AND TEACHROCK

The New Jersey Hall of Fame, Montclair State University's College for Education and Engaged Learning and TeachRock are presenting free professional development workshops. The workshops are held at the New Jersey Hall of Fame, located at 1 American Dream Way in East Rutherford.



Civic Leadership and SEL: Lessons from NJ Changemakers
Feb. 4 from 4:30-6 p.m.



Media, Identity, and Voice: From Radio Waves to Reels
Feb. 18 from 4:30-6 p.m.



Teach Rock: Teaching History Through NJ Music Legends
Feb. 27 from 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

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MENTORSHIP MATTERS

By Amy Moran, Ph.D.

I'll never forget the day, some 10 years ago, when a Muslim sophomore and her girlfriend came to an after-school GSA meeting where I was the adviser. She attested that she had no identifiable support as a queer Muslim teen. The GSA, she said, was the only place where her intersecting identities were acknowledged and celebrated. The next day, I approached a Muslim colleague and asked her if she knew of area support resources for queer Muslims. She replied that there were no queer Muslims.

January 2024 was the first time New Jersey formally recognized Muslim Heritage Month. January was also National Mentoring Month, and it's great to report that queer youth of all religions have more models of support than ever before—support in schools through GSAs and affirming classrooms as well as support we see from public figures.

Our governor and queer ally, Mikie Sherrill, has a strong track record as one of New Jersey's congressional representatives of supporting LGBTQIA+ issues. She voted no on legislation that would restrict trans girls and women from participating on sports teams that align with their gender identity. She voted no on federal legislation that mandates parental consent and notification for LGBTQIA+ students' gender identity-related identities at school—school is sometimes the only safe space a young person has. And she voted yes on the Respect for Marriage Act, which sought to protect against legal challenges to interracial and same-sex marriages. As a congressperson, Sherrill also sponsored a number of queer-affirming initiatives, including

- The LGBT Data Inclusion Act, which requires federal surveys to collect voluntary demographic data about queer people to support social programs.
- The PrEP Assistance Program Act, which works to expand HIV prevention assistance (despite the federal government suddenly no longer commemorating World AIDS Day on Dec. 1, 2025, which had been previously acknowledged since 1988)
- The Therapeutic Fraud Prevention Act, a ban on dangerous so-called "conversion therapy."

Amy Moran, Ph.D. (she/her) is an out queer educator, advocate and activist working to make education inclusive and affirming for all students and colleagues. She is a 31-year middle school teacher, was a high school GSA advisor for 16 years, served on NJEA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Committee and received NJEA's Equality Champion Award.



Resources

With 300,000 American Muslims living in New Jersey, one of the largest populations in the U.S., there will always be opportunities for elected leaders to help ensure access to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all of our neighbors. And there will always be opportunities for educators to provide mentorship to LGBTQIA+ Muslim students who may be exploring their queer identities.



PFLAG's "I'm Muslim and I Might Not Be Straight: A Resource for LGBTQ+ Muslim Youth"

Mentorship matters. Share ways you've mentored LGBTQIA+ students (of any or no religion) at RainbowConnectionNJEA@gmail.com.



Transforming curricula

NJEA Design Team Ambassadors bring lessons back to classrooms

By Dr. Kim Pinckney

The affirming curriculum for New Jersey students is more than a task; it is a deeply felt commitment. At the heart of this work is the NJEA Consortium, an initiative born from a three-year NEA Great Public Schools (GPS) grant titled “Cultivating Community, Action, Justice, and Understanding” and based on the vision of Dr. Chrissi Miles. The Consortium aims to move beyond tokenistic inclusion (the “heroes and holidays” approach) to authentically embed the state’s rich diversity and historically marginalized identities into K-12 teaching and learning.

A critical part of the consortium’s vision are the Design Team Ambassadors (DTAs), a dynamic group of passionate NJEA member educators who work collaboratively to curate impactful and intersectional curriculum resources.

The NYC field trip: an immersive capstone

To conclude the initial GPS grant work, the ambassadors embarked on a final field trip to New York City Dec. 5-7. The purpose of this experience was to engage in authentic learning that would immediately inform the final stages of curriculum design, ensuring the resulting resources are grounded in real-world context and cultural relevance. This trip was structured to provide rich, experiential content across a variety of disciplines.

Historic and artistic exploration

Ambassadors chose between a historical visit to the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum or an exploration of art at the Museum of Modern Art.

Social and environmental context

Ambassadors could go on an “iconic views” tour with the Central Park Conservancy. The tour offered a focus on community, environment and history.



Ambassadors toured Central Park with a focus on community, environment and history. In back are Jane Camizzi and Dr. Kim Pinckney. Front, from left: Erin Putman, Central Park Conservancy tour guide Juan and Tamar LaSure-Owens.

Dr. Kim Pinckney, Ph.D. is an associate director in the NJEA Professional Development and Instructional Issues (PDII) Division and the consortium coordinator. She can be reached at kpinkney@njea.org.

The power of narrative

The entire group attended a performance of the musical “The Outsiders” at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre. This experience served as a powerful shared text for collective reflection and design work.

Community building

The ambassadors shared a meal and fellowship at Utsav, an Indian restaurant.

From experience to educational design

The final day of the trip began with reflection, critical reviews of the site visits and sharing observations and analyses. The ambassadors conducted a silent gallery walk focusing on joy and the four macro-curriculum themes which are the core framework of the consortium’s work:

- Self and identity
- Institutions and structures
- Equity and equality
- Activism and advocacy

At each poster, ambassadors identified specific moments from the previous day’s experiences that resonated with one of the themes, how it impacted them as individuals and what could spawn design work. This exercise was a powerful example of how educators can use contemporary arts and immersive experiences to foster meaningful conversations and connect core social justice concepts to narrative.

Due to the constraints of the day, the ambassadors embarked on rapid design brainstorming with the goal of drafting initial field trip itineraries unique to their student populations and disciplines, they developed initial bare bones of a performance task, leveraging the GRASPS framework. GRASPS stands for goal, role, audience, situation, product and standards. This performance-based assessment model is a hallmark of quality curriculum design, ensuring that learning culminates in an authentic demonstration of skill.

I reminded the ambassadors to flesh out Universal Design for Learning (UDL) considerations upon finalizing their designs. UDL is the cornerstone of the consortium’s approach, ensuring that instructional materials and activities are proactively designed to be accessible and engaging for all students from the start, regardless of their learning profile.

Resources for all NJEA members

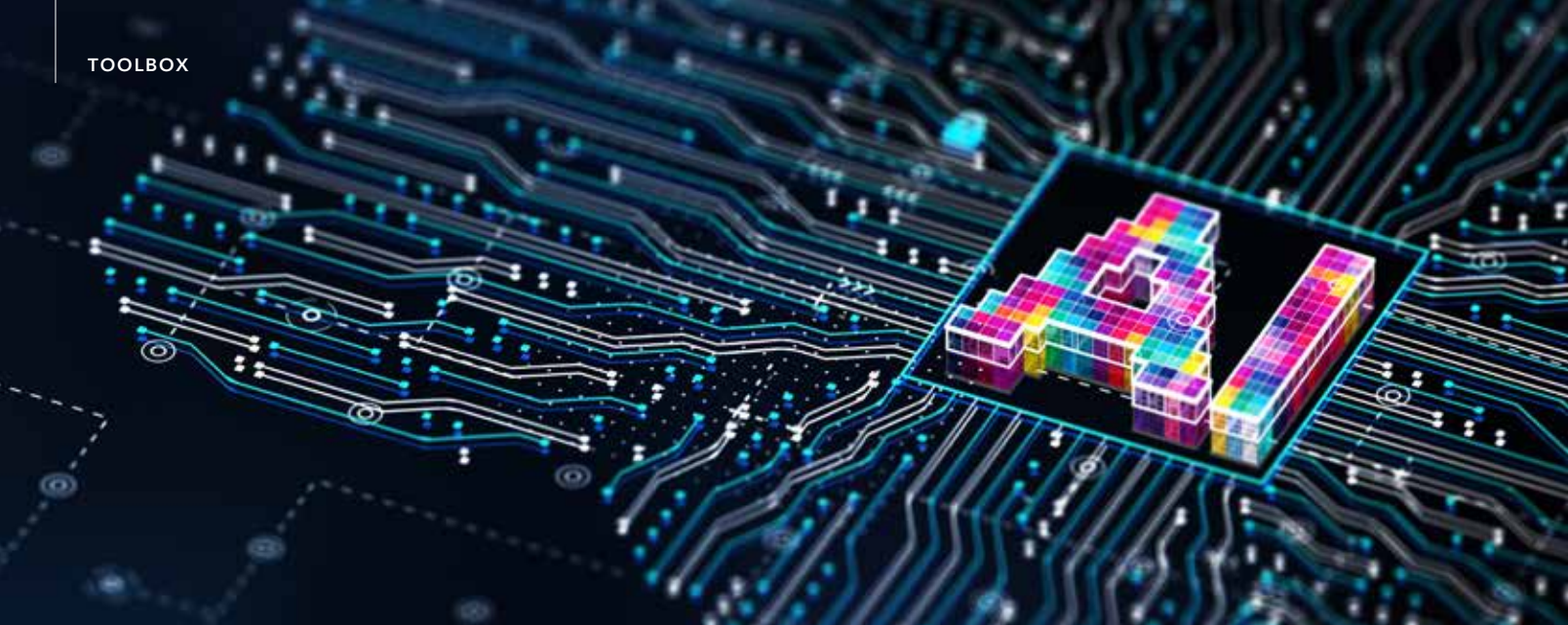
The resource curation and instructional materials as well as the collaborative designs, field trip itineraries, detailed performance tasks and all resulting curricular resources are available to every NJEA member.

To explore the innovative curriculum designs, instructional materials and field trip resources that resulted from this and prior work, members are encouraged to visit the consortium’s learning portal at njeaportal.learnupon.com.



Top: Ambassadors Alamelu Sundaram-Walters, June Camizzi, Gabriela Guzman, Tariq Raheem, Shihong Zhang, Erin Putman, Tamar LaSure-Owens and Steve Komoulis enjoyed the Broadway show, “The Outsiders,” and used it as a shared text for collective reflection and design work.

Ambassadors also were able to visit the Museum of Modern Art. From left: Alamelu Sundaram-Walters, Shihong Zhang, Steve Koumoulis and Tariq Raheem.



Navigating the AI landscape

Helping students and educators recognize AI-generated content

By the NJEA Technology Committee

As generative AI quickly evolves, distinguishing between authentic human work and increasingly sophisticated AI-generated content, including writing, images and video, is now a core educational challenge. Since current AI-detection software is unreliable and often produces false positives, both students and educators must develop strong critical media literacy skills. Research shows that AI-detection software is often unreliable and prone to false positives, making a human-centered approach—one that is focused on evaluating style, accuracy and authenticity—the most effective strategy.

Recognizing AI-generated text

AI writing often appears polished but lacks the individuality of human work. It typically includes repetitive or formulaic phrases and misses personal voice or class-specific insight. AI hallucination is the term used to describe AI-generated content that seems real but is false, misleading or made up. When writing feels generic or avoids referencing discussions, lessons or personal experiences, it may indicate the use of AI.

Recognizing AI images and deepfakes

AI-generated images frequently include distorted details such as extra fingers, inconsistent shadows, warped backgrounds or misshapen text. Deepfake videos

may show unnatural movements, poor lip-syncing, or mismatched audio and lighting. Teaching students to use reverse image search and metadata tools strengthens their ability to verify authenticity. Educators can use sites such as detectfakes.kellogg.northwestern.edu from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management to have students review AI-generated images and foster discussion about their ethical use and potential misuse.

Instructional approaches for educators

Instead of focusing on policing AI usage, experts advise redesigning learning experiences. Assignments that involve analysis, personal reflection, interviews, or referencing specific class content are harder for AI to mimic. Process-based assessments such as drafts, AI-use statements and class discussions encourage transparency and accountability.

These principles apply to teaching students and educators of all ages about artificial intelligence and critical content recognition.

- Start young: Introduce foundational AI ideas beginning in the early years.
- Teach the mechanics: Focus instruction on how AI works, not just on operational use.
- Foster skepticism: Cultivate critical thinking by encouraging students to question, verify and be skeptical of all AI outputs.

- Address ethics: Cover essential topics such as data privacy, deepfakes and the responsible use of AI tools.
- Support educators: Provide teacher training to ensure educators have the skills to integrate AI effectively and knowledgeably into their lessons.
- Be contextual: Tailor the use and discussion of AI to the specific subject or context.

To prepare students for a world where digital manipulation is standard, schools must shift from relying on detection tools to teaching verification, critical thinking and digital provenance skills. This is done by tracing the origin, authenticity and creation process of online content to determine whether it is real or manipulated. By teaching students to verify sources, check metadata and confirm the origins of digital media, educators help them navigate an online world where misinformation and AI-generated content are increasingly common. The new normal is to treat all online content as potentially altered until proven otherwise.

The NJEA Technology Committee

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Resources



Britannica Education: Spotting AI



MIT Sloan: AI detectors don't work. Here's what to do instead.



TurnitinGuides: AI writing detection

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Trenton Public Schools build wellness initiatives through LMC practices

By Kimberly Crane

Trenton Public Schools has entered a new era of collaboration and trust-building as administrators and the Trenton Education Association (TEA) begin Labor Management Collaborative (LMC) work. TEA President Talithea Duncan and Superintendent James Earle both view this as a turning point built on transparency, shared goals and a renewed commitment to educator well-being.

Duncan shared that Trenton's LMC work began with identifying a joint area of concern. "We chose the shared goal of increasing staff attendance," she said. Duncan emphasized that the root of the problem goes deeper than sick days. "First, we needed to talk about the well-being of our members." Duncan feels that district administration is committed to creating a healthy work environment where people feel like they and their work are valued.

The creation of Wellness Wednesdays has already made a difference. "We turned our summer professional development days into wellness days," Duncan explained. "It sent a message that our well-being matters."

Trenton operates with several independent unions, making systemwide collaboration more complex. Duncan is proud that TEA initiated inviting leaders from business, tech, secretarial and para-educator unions to the work. "We're excited to bring in our partners," she said. "Hopefully, we can quickly get to a point where the data shows improvement in staff well-being and student outcomes."

Superintendent Earle has worked to strengthen structures and expectations on the district side. "Respecting each other and showing up with purpose are some of the broad expectations that ground our work."

Earle stressed that norms must be functional, not decorative. "When we bring team members in, they understand how we do business," he explained. "We've learned how to collaborate, even on topics that may have some level of conflict. We may push each other, but we make sure to always stay in the conversation."

Much of this trust has been built through direct and consistent communication. Earle holds monthly meetings

“

"It sent a message that our well-being matters."

with every association leadership team and reviews agenda items, concerns and shared priorities. He takes every issue back to district-level administrators and wants to know: Is it fact? Can we fix it? What more information do we need? Then groups are assigned to bring back resolutions.

The intentional work of Trenton's fledgling LMC has minimized conflict and accelerated progress. "We see each other often, formally and informally," says Earle. "We celebrate each other's families and successes. Everyone has direct access to me, and I don't miss a callback."

Earle acknowledges that this collaborative culture wasn't always the norm in Trenton. "The mere mention that we were going to collaborate in this way was foreign to some people," he said. "Trust had to be built."

When asked for his advice to other districts beginning LMC work, Earle says, "Don't be afraid to enter this work. When you have more people working with you instead of for you, it's hugely beneficial."

Both Duncan and Earle believe the work has only just begun, but they already feel the cultural shift. Earle summarized: "We're making leaps now, not slow steps. We're changing our district culture and showing up together. We're proving that collaboration is the path forward."

Kimberly Crane is an NJEA Communications Consultant and former president of the Highland Park Education Association. She can be reached at kcrane@njea.org.

For more information on the New Jersey Labor Management Collaborative email Mike Ritzius, NJEA liaison to the New Jersey LMC at Mike@lmcpartnerships.org.

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NJEA Delegate Assembly

A note about the minutes

On pages 56-59, you will find the minutes for two meetings of the NJEA Delegate Assembly (D.A.): Nov. 9, 2024 and Jan. 11, 2025. 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.

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

Nov. 9, 2024

The NJEA Delegate Assembly met at the Atlantic City Convention Center, Atlantic City, N.J. on Nov. 9, 2024 at 9 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 117 members present and a quorum was met. Alternates were seated as follows: Williams for Foremny, (Burlington); Stinson for Mungro (Camden); Susinski for Siegel (Mercer); Barilka for Marino (Monmouth); and Palladino for Greadington (NJREA).

Absent without alternates were the following: Yaple (Mercer); Muglia (Middlesex); Paprota (Middlesex); Montanti (Monmouth); Vistein (Monmouth); Reilly (Monmouth); Coniglio (Morris); Cordova (Morris); Durkin (Warren); and Shibli (Non-Classroom Tchr.).

Daniel Fields, Middlesex County, gave the Inspirational Message and along with President Spiller, led the delegation in the Flag Salute.

President's report

Spiller celebrated the success of the NJEA Convention and acknowledged the hard work of organizers.

President Spiller stated that the day after Election Day was a time of emotional processing for many, marked by frustration and uncertainty, but also an opportunity for NJEA members to come together, regroup and recommit to advocating for students, colleagues and public education.

Spiller highlighted the following:

- GR Election Update
- Election Results
- NJEA Members on the Ballot
- Local Endorsed Candidates
- Federal Races
- Post Election Political and Policy Strategy

Vice president's report

Vice President Steve Beatty was unable to attend the meeting as he had to leave for the National Council of the State Education Association (NCSEA) Conference that was being held out of state. His report was presented as written.

Secretary-treasurer's report

Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson delivered the NJEA fiscal report.

Executive Director's report

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher highlighted the following:

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher was unable to attend the meeting as he had to leave for the NCSEA Conference that was being held out of state. His report was shared via email prior to the meeting.

Deputy Executive Director Denise Policastro shared highlights from his report and included:

- PAC contributions are showing steady growth
- Membership is showing continued growth
- Welcomed Dr. DaQuan Bashir to lead human and civil rights and equity initiatives
- The Professional Development and Instructional Issues Division had nearly 100 educators attend the ACCESS fall conference

Deputy Executive Director Policastro gave a heartfelt tribute to Martha DeBlieu, who was retiring after nearly five decades of service to NJEA. Denise praised Martha's unwavering commitment, kindness, and deep institutional knowledge, calling her a guiding light and "queen for life." Attendees honored Martha by wearing tiaras distributed in envelopes, symbolizing her legacy and leadership.

Nondelegate speakers

Marcella Simadiris (Passaic County) asked NJEA to improve its engagement with state education policy and testimony processes. She highlighted flaws in recent amendments and called for better member involvement and testimony coordination, especially around equity-related issues.

Election of Members to Hearing Committee on Censure, Suspension, Expulsion and Reinstatement of Members

Four members were elected to the Hearing Committee on Censure, Suspension, Expulsion, and Reinstatement of Members. One seat was designated for an active support member as constitutionally provided and was filled by Lakhia Blocker (Union County). Three seats for classroom teachers were filled by Twanda Taylor (Mercer County), Peter Helff (Higher Ed), and Tomika Lamb (Burlington County). The election followed NJEA constitutional guidelines, which included nominations from the floor. No balloting was required as the number of nominees matched the number of open seats. The nominees were deemed elected.

Reports of committees without recommendations**Elections Committee**

The Elections Committee report without recommendations was presented by Toni Guerra, speaking on behalf of the NJEA Elections Committee, which presented the 2025 elections calendar, noting that balloting would begin in April and that the schedule follows previous years with updates for 2025.

Membership Committee

Kevin Bloom (Middlesex County), Chair of the Membership Committee, reported that the committee reviewed a previous New Business Item (NBI) proposal to raise the low-dues earner threshold from \$22,500 to \$27,500. After analyzing financial and membership data, the committee found that the change would result in a significant loss of revenue while attracting relatively few new members. As a result, the committee did not recommend adjusting the formula at this time.

Reports of committees with recommendations

None

New Business**New Business Item #1**

Sarah Reichenbecher, Monmouth County, moved that NJEA allocated significant funding toward a statewide advertising campaign to educate the public to mitigate the misinformation about immigrants and inform our neighbors and communities of the positive impact and crucial role immigrants, students and their families play in the economic and social success of our great state.

The motion was seconded by Stacey Williams, Burlington County. The motion was adopted.

For the Good of the Order

Sarah Reichenbecher, Monmouth County, thanked everyone who supported the NBI.

Gene Woods, Hudson County, thanked Martha for her support during a challenging time early in his leadership, recognizing her dedication and thorough assistance. In addition, he shared a troubling incident involving student harassment witnessed by his wife, emphasizing the need for educators to be prepared to advocate for and protect vulnerable students in the current climate.

Patty Kebrdle, Passaic County, thanked the NJEA Government Relations staff for their dedication and hard work canvassing every weekend during election season.

Jon Coniglio, Morris County, suggested exploring lower dues thresholds, such as \$25,500, and requested future breakdowns to help assess more feasible options.

Tarsha Lawson, Essex County, urged educators to talk with students to prevent rising violence and fear fueled by post-election rhetoric.

An ESP behaviorist whose name was not captured, shared that Tier 4 and 5 pension members lose disability coverage and must buy costly long-term insurance, despite facing frequent injuries like bites and dislocated fingers while supporting students.

Mark Richards, Essex County, urged support for the pension bill benefiting TPAF members, expressing confidence that they would stand in solidarity with ESPs as one united union.

James Frazier, Union County, criticized the \$625 fee charged to ESPs for campaign booths, calling it a barrier to equity in NJEA elections.

Adjournment

Peter Helff, Higher Education, moved to adjourn. The motion was duly seconded, and the meeting was adjourned at 12:11 p.m.

Jan. 11, 2025

The NJEA Delegate Assembly met at the Hyatt Regency, Princeton, 102 Carnegie Center, Princeton, N.J. on Jan. 11, 2025, 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 Vice President Steve Beatty on behalf of Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson who was ill and unable to attend the meeting. There were 118 members present and a quorum was met. Alternates were seated as follows: A. Policastro for Mendelson (Bergen); Fuller for Newman (Burlington); Conahey for ThrBak (Cumberland); White for Earle (Essex); Byock for Hinton (Essex); Barilka for Marino (Monmouth); Alston for Coston (Union); and Valiante for Klikus (Union).

Absent without alternates were the following: Duncan (Mercer); Paprota (Middlesex); and Nicolescu (NJAEA).

Susan Waldron, Middlesex County, gave the Inspirational Message and along with President Spiller, led the delegation in the Flag Salute.

President's report

NJEA President Sean Spiller opened the meeting by acknowledging the "overwhelming and terribly sad loss" of Rich Driscoll, describing his passing as sudden and unexpected. He emphasized Rich's kindness, helpfulness, and genuine care for others. A moment of silence was held in Rich's honor.

Spiller highlighted the following:

- State Board of Education
- GR Updates
- Spiller for Governor

Vice President's report

Vice President Steve Beatty highlighted the following:

- New Jersey Aspiring Educators Association (NJAEA) – educator identification, recruitment, mentorship and retention
- NJACTE
- O4Ed
- Spiller for Governor Member ID Calls
- Higher Education
- Educator Evaluation Task Force
- Department of Education and State Board of Education

Secretary-Treasurer's report

The NJEA fiscal report was given by Denise Policastro on behalf of Secretary-Treasurer Petal Robertson.

Policastro introduced Steve Mazur of Novak Francella, NJEA's external CPA firm, who presented the audit report.

Executive Director's report

Executive Director Kevin Kelleher shared his report as written.

Executive Director Kelleher asked Deborah Cornavaca, NJEA's Director Government Relations, Policy and Politics to share her campaign plan for Spiller for Governor and winning the Democratic Primary on June 10, 2025.

Nondelegate speakers

Rose Casey, president of Educational Assistants of Cherry Hill in Camden County, urged NJEA to revise its dues structure for ESPs, stating that current increases are driving low-income members out of the union.

Nicole Jackson, Passaic County, criticized the quality of legal representation provided to members, calling for better oversight and accountability.

Lori Lalama, Passaic County, discussed union values and praised NJEA's support in successful contract negotiations.

Veronica Bishop, Camden County, shared her experience of being nonrenewed while on workers' compensation and expressed feeling abandoned by both her employer and union.

Salma Rudi, Camden County, spoke about the financial hardship caused by a dues increases and called on NJEA to uphold its commitment to equity.

Krista Donah Dorah, Camden County, described how dues increases forced her to cut essential family expenses, urging NJEA to reconsider its approach for low-income members.

Cheryl Calabrese, Camden County, questioned NJEA leadership's lack of action on dues increases and called for immediate relief for struggling ESPs.

Shelly Hollingsworth, Camden County, expressed concern over the steep dues hike and its impact on ESPs already living paycheck to paycheck.

Melissa Rosen, Camden County, shared how her raise was offset by dues increases, forcing her to cancel therapy and extracurricular activities for her children.

Reports of committees without recommendations

PAC Operating Committee

Vice President Beatty presented the committee's report and reviewed the outcomes of the 2024 election cycle. There were no questions, and the report was accepted as presented.

UniServ Committee

The UniServ Committee report was presented by Deanna Nicosia-Jones, Cumberland County, on behalf of the NJEA UniServ Committee and its retired chair, Ellen Ogintz. There were no questions and the report was accepted as presented.

Reports of committees with recommendations

Affiliation Committee

Gerard Campione, Middlesex County, chair of the Affiliation Committee presented the committee's report recommending affiliation the local associations listed below.

Marquisha Reynolds, Hudson County, moved the recommendations. It was duly seconded.

RULE RECOMMENDATION: that the affiliation of the following associations be approved:

- East Hanover Paraprofessional Association (Morris County)
- Somerset County Educational Services Commission Security Guards Association (Somerset County)
- Lecturer Association of Ocean County College (Ocean County).

The recommendations were adopted.

Executive Committee

The recommendations from the Executive Committee regarding the NJEA Hardship Relief Program were presented by Steve Beatty, NJEA Vice President. The recommendations were:

RULE RECOMMENDATION 1: that NJEA amend the Hardship Relief Program's current qualifying definition of a disaster or unforeseen event for grants related to the loss of classroom supplies/materials be amended as follows:

“a natural disaster, such as a fire, flood, hurricane, or tornado; mold infestation in the classroom causing loss of classroom supplies/materials; an epidemic or pandemic; an emergency as declared by a local, state, or federal government authority; or any other large-scale unforeseen event as determined by the Plan Administrator in its sole discretion.”

RULE RECOMMENDATION 2: that NJEA Member Benefits develop application procedures to include the amendment to the current qualifying definitions of a disaster or unforeseen event grants related to the loss of classroom supplies/materials to include, mold infestation in the classroom causing loss of classroom supplies/materials.

Ann Margaret Shannon, Union County, moved Rule Recommendations #1 and #2 as a block. The motion carried.

Elections Committee

Joe Toma, Middlesex County, chair of the Elections Committee presented the committee’s report and recommendations.

Daniel Fields, Middlesex County, moved to accept all sixteen recommendations in block.

Howard Lipoff, Bergen County moved to make a friendly amendment to Recommendation #1 by adding “withdrawal” as another condition for no longer being a candidate, and Ann Marie Finnen, Morris County seconded the motion. The amendment was accepted.

The motion to move the 16 recommendations in block as amended was adopted.

See Appendix A at njea.org/da (Minutes of Jan. 11, 2025) for the amendments to the Election Rules as presented.

New Business

New Business Item #1

Barbara Rheault, Atlantic County, moved that the NJEA ESP Committee examine the impact of dues on ESP members transitioning from low wage earners to full time dues and recommend any changes to the current dues structure to combat the effects of ESP members experiencing negative net due to increases in dues. The ESP Committee should collaborate with other committees to include UniServ, Membership and Budget committees and present a report to the Delegate Assembly in March 2025 with its findings.

James Frazier, Union County seconded the motion.

Frazier subsequently moved to amend NBI 1 to include: A preliminary report should be given to the Budget Committee prior to the April Budget Retreat. The amendment was adopted.

NBI 1 was adopted as amended.

New Business Item #2

Sarah Reichenbecher, Monmouth County, moved that NJEA research, advocate and apply for a New Jersey “Pride in Public Education” specialty license plate to promote our excellent public schools in the same way that other organizations use plates to promote, advocate, and fundraise.

New Business Item #3

Peter Helff, Higher Ed moved that NJEA create a scholarship fund, voluntarily funded through member and staff contributions for the son of the late Rich Driscoll, Jack Driscoll who is two years old, to help provide support in the absence and in honor of his father who gave so much to so many here at NJEA.

Denise King, Monmouth County, seconded the motion. The motion carried.

New Business Item #3 was adopted unanimously.

New Business Item #4

Annic Benamy, Union County, moved that the NJEA will establish a cross sectional and representative task force consisting of leaders and rank and file members, which will research different groups of NJEA members such as NJEA Affiliated Groups, NJEA Affinity Groups, and NJEA Caucuses to define the framework of each of these groups, explain how each type currently operates and decide what parameters NJEA should establish to allow these groups to work in concert with NJEA’s committees and follow the committee’s mission.

Furthermore, it will specifically state what should be required of the groups, what services can, or should, they receive and provide to them, what support should they receive and what guardrails can be implemented to ensure NJEA’s mission, NJEA’s Policies and NJEA’s goals are upheld.

Said task force or committee will report back to the Delegate Assembly with its findings and with a recommendation by the March 2025 Delegate Assembly meeting.

Ann Margaret Shannon, Union County, seconded the motion. Barbara Rheault, Atlantic County made a motion to amend the original language to remove “NJEA caucuses” from the language. Tricia Houck, Atlantic County seconded the motion with the amendment to exclude “NJEA caucuses.” The amendment was adopted. NBI #4 was adopted as amended.

For the Good of the Order

Janelle Mungro, Camden County, urged NJEA to reconsider its policy requiring terminated members to pay dues to continue arbitration, citing the financial hardship it causes for ESPs.

John Coniglio, Morris County, highlighted the extremely low voter turnout in NJEA elections and advocated for reinstating online voting to improve member engagement.

Jacqui Greadington, NJREA, Essex County, asked NJEA to support educators in Los Angeles affected by recent disasters, emphasizing solidarity and outreach.

Peter Helff, Higher Education, moved to adjourn. The motion was duly seconded. The meeting was adjourned at 2:03 p.m.

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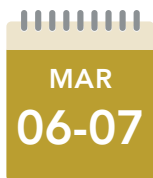
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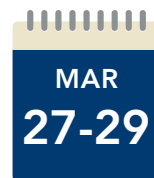
WEDNESDAY

Executive Committee meeting



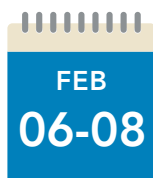
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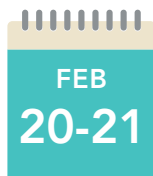
WEDNESDAY

Executive Committee meeting



SATURDAY

Celebration of Women



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SATURDAY

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A BUDGET FOR OUR STUDENTS AND OUR SCHOOLS

NJ elected Sherrill, now she will lead

This past November, Garden State voters made history. For the first time in more than 60 years, New Jersey elected a governor from the same party for a third consecutive term. With a record turnout of over 50% of registered voters, the message was unmistakable. Voters didn't just elect Gov. Mikie Sherrill; they gave her a decisive mandate to lead. After a hard-fought campaign that presented a clear contrast between two very different candidates, New Jersey chose affordability, accountability and inclusivity.

Voters did their part; now it's time for Gov. Sherrill to pursue those priorities as she leads. And the state's Fiscal Year 2027 budget is an early opportunity to do just that.

It's tempting to think about budgets like math problems and, to an extent, they are. Money comes in as tax revenue and goes out as services, programs, infrastructure and investment. But budgets are more than just math. New Jersey's budget is a moral document reflecting our collective values and shared priorities. As Gov. Sherrill constructs the state's FY27 budget, it's crucial for her to put forth a budget that honors and supports the working people of this state.

To begin with, the state's 800,000 public employees, including more than 200,000 who work in public schools, deserve the dignity and security offered by a fully funded pension system. There can be no greater signal of fiscal responsibility in this year's budget than to build on the success of the previous administration, which fully funded the pension for the first time in a generation to help begin repairing the decades of devastation it inherited. Fully funding pensions ensures essential services continue and honors the lifelong dedication of public servants.

Gov. Sherrill must support all students in the FY27 by ensuring that the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) is fully funded. Doing so helps guarantee schools can deliver the services and opportunities every student deserves. From textbooks to extracurricular activities to support for the arts, the school funding formula is designed to ensure that students have equitable resources, regardless of their ZIP code or their family's socioeconomic status.

A budget built for the working people of New Jersey will include the funds needed to address the long-ignored, decaying condition of many school buildings throughout the state. School districts need financial resources to implement essential infrastructure upgrades. Students deserve to learn in climate-controlled classrooms free of mold and grime. Every window in every classroom in the state should open and close without a phone call to a custodian or the use of old, battered textbooks (which should also be replaced).

Support for public education cannot stop with K-12 schools. New Jersey's community colleges, which play an increasingly crucial role in supporting working families and their pursuit of better education, must have the funding they need to help students thrive. In 2026, every student with the disposition and the drive to attend college should be able to do so. Gov. Sherrill can ensure college remains affordable by supporting these essential institutions.

The FY27 budget is Gov. Sherrill's opportunity to deliver for the voters who chose her. She can help make New Jersey affordable, reassure working families in a time of economic uncertainty stemming from federal chaos, and keep New Jersey's public schools the best in the nation. 🇺🇸

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