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NEW JERSEY INSTITUTE FOR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS
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A New Era for New Jersey Schools: State Leadership Aligns on the Community School Model

The start of 2026 has brought a wave of historic momentum for the community school movement in New Jersey. From the Governor's office to the legislative floors in Trenton, there is a clear, unified signal:

the community school model is no longer just a promising alternative—it is a cornerstone of the state's strategy for the future.

The Blueprint: Governor Sherrill's Transition Report

The recently released report from the **Transition Action Team on Youth Mental Health and Online Safety** places community schools at the heart of the new administration's agenda. By recommending the model as a primary vehicle for delivering integrated student supports and mental health services, the report recognizes schools as the essential hubs of our neighborhoods.

With NJICS representation on the subcommittee, the focus remained on ensuring this blueprint is rooted in evidence-based practice and a commitment to sustainable, statewide infrastructure.

The Action: Re-introduction of the Pilot Bill

This executive vision is being met with immediate legislative action. The **Community School Pilot Bill (A4760/S3804)** has been officially re-introduced, proposing a five-year program to establish 21 community schools—ensuring every county in the state has a dedicated site for this transformative work.

The Path Forward

As these high-level policy shifts move toward implementation, the priority must remain on quality and consistency. NJICS is committed to ensuring that as the model scales, the focus stays squarely on the best practices and optimized outcomes that make community schools effective. By maintaining this standard, we can ensure that every new school established under this legislation becomes a true center of opportunity for its students and families.

In This Issue

NJ Prioritizes Community Schools
A landmark state report names community schools a primary recommendation for youth mental health, while the re-introduction of the Pilot Bill (A4760/S3804) moves this vision into immediate legislative action.

Common Ground Gains
Stories of progress and partnership from across the state.

Institute Insights
Updates, new initiatives, internal milestones, and upcoming events from NJICS.

NJ Happenings
Updates on policy, funding, legislation, and budgets that impact NJ education.

Common Ground Gains

Leadership in the Field: Trenton School Visits

On February 13, 2026 B.C. Gregory Elementary School in Trenton—a Mercer Street Friends Community School—welcomed state and local leaders for an inside look at how the community school model is transforming student outcomes. Among those in attendance were **New Jersey Commissioner of Education Lily Laux, New Jersey State Senator Shirley K. Turner, Assemblywoman Verlina Reynolds-Jackson, and Mayor Reed Gusciora**—leaders committed to advancing educational equity and student well-being.

State and local education leaders tour B.C. Gregory Elementary to observe how integrated student supports are transforming outcomes in Trenton.

Under the leadership of Principal Jeanette Harris, B.C. Gregory has become far more than a traditional school building; it is a welcoming, student-centered hub where educators, families, and community partners work collaboratively to support the whole child. During the visit, Principal Harris and Community School Site Coordinator Larissa Boughton provided insight into how this integrated approach directly addresses the complex challenges students face—particularly those related to trauma, mental health, and access to resources.

To highlight the specific programs observed during the visit, leadership toured several key initiatives that illustrate the community school model in action:

- **Evidence-Based Literacy:** A look at the Mercer Street Friends Reading Intervention program, which provides students with the targeted academic support necessary to build foundational literacy skills.
- **Food Security Resources:** A tour of the MSF/Gregory School Choice Food Pantry, a vital resource that addresses food insecurity—a significant external barrier to a child's ability to focus and learn.
- **Holistic Student & Family Support:** A briefing on the robust social-emotional learning (SEL) supports embedded throughout the school, alongside comprehensive family engagement services that strengthen the connection between home and school.

This holistic approach reflects what research and local data continue to show:

students cannot succeed academically unless their basic needs are met and their mental health is supported.

In communities like Trenton—where exposure to trauma and barriers to care are prevalent—Community Schools serve as a vital infrastructure for delivering coordinated, accessible supports directly where children are every day.

B.C. Gregory stands as a powerful example of what is possible when schools are intentionally designed to meet the full spectrum of student and family needs. Together with dedicated partners and leadership, Principal Harris continues to build a true "schoolhouse" where children and families are not only educated, but welcomed, valued, and supported to thrive. Mercer Street Friends is honored to serve side by side with Principal Harris and her staff.

Institute Insights

A Collective "Why": Strengthening New Jersey's Educational Future at the Winter '25 Convening

Robert Kim, Esq., Executive Director of the Education Law Center, delivers the opening keynote at the Winter 2025 Convening.

On December 5, 2025, the New Jersey Institute for Community Schools (NJICS) gathered a powerhouse of district leaders, practitioners, and partners for a day of purpose at Saint Elizabeth University. The **Why Community Schools and Why Now? Winter 2025 Convening** wasn't just a meeting; it was a powerful affirmation of our collective commitment to every student in New Jersey.

The day's energy was set by **Robert Kim, Esq., Executive Director of the Education Law Center**. In a stirring keynote, Kim challenged the room to view community schools not as a luxury, but as a necessary, equity-driven response to the systemic hurdles facing our public education system today. Following his lead, the NJICS leadership team—**Dr. Patricia Heindel, Elizabeth Hansen Warner, Julie Larrea Borst, Dr. Gregory Stankiewicz, and Dr. Ross Whiting**—laid out the history and impact of our work as a proven roadmap for success.

The conversation deepened with a panel of "policy entrepreneurs" from organizations serving as lead agencies: **Nkese Rankine-Mercaldo** (Center for Supportive Schools), **Rosie Grant** (Paterson Education Fund), and **Carolyn McCombs** (New Destiny Family Services). They shared their expertise on the transformative power of lead partner organizations in coordinating academic, health, and social supports within neighborhood hubs.

We closed the day where the real change happens: with our **Community of Practice**. In an insight-packed strategy session, site and lead coordinators from across New Jersey shared the frontline observations that drive this movement forward. The message was clear: the time for community schools is now and together we are building the infrastructure of opportunity NJ's children deserve.

Site & Family Engagement Coordinators Community of Practice Meeting

We encourage all coordinators to take part in this collaborative space.

May 20th, 11:00 AM

Join the Community of Practice and be part of the conversation.

SIGN UP HERE

NJ Happenings

Navigating Challenges: An Update from Paterson

Paterson Public Schools has been **implementing the Full Service Community Schools (FSCS) model since 2010**, growing to **thirteen sites** across the district. Through strong partnerships and the support of federal FSCS grants, the district has built a comprehensive system of wraparound services designed to support students academically, socially, and physically. These services have included **in-school health centers** offering medical, dental, vision, and mental health care; after-school programs and enrichment activities; tutoring and academic support; family and community engagement initiatives; and access to **basic needs** such as food and clothing.

The impact of this work has been significant. By addressing barriers to learning such as unmet health needs, food insecurity, and limited access to enrichment opportunities, community schools have helped **improve student attendance, engagement, and overall well-being**. Families have become more connected to schools, and partnerships with community organizations have strengthened the support system surrounding each student. The FSCS model has allowed schools to serve as **community hubs**, places where students and families can access the resources they need to thrive both academically and personally.

However, the **recent non-continuation of the Full Service Community Schools grants** has immediate and serious consequences for Paterson's students and families. Without this funding, students may experience **reduced access to basic needs** such as food and clothing, fewer opportunities for preventive health care and mental health support, and **decreased availability of after-school programs**, tutoring, and enrichment. Combined with broader district budget constraints, Paterson is now facing difficult decisions about how to maintain the level of services that students and families have come to rely on. Some programs and supports may be reduced or restructured as the district works to navigate these financial realities.

Despite these challenges, Paterson Public Schools remains deeply **committed to the community schools model** and its proven impact. The district is **actively exploring alternative funding sources and partnerships** to preserve as many services as possible and ensure continuity of care for students and families. While the loss of federal funding disrupts a strong and effective system, our focus remains on ensuring that students and families continue to have access to the opportunities and services necessary to thrive.

Join the Community Schools Movement!

Whether you're an educator, policymaker, community partner, or advocate, there's a role for you in strengthening New Jersey's community schools.

To learn more, join our mailing list, or reach out at info@njinstituteforcommunityschools.com.

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