New Jersey Policy Institute

Testimony Before the New Jersey Assembly Budget Committee Regarding the FY26 State Budget

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Chairperson Pintor Marin, Vice Chair Park, and Members of the Assembly Budget Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Wells Winegar, and I serve as the Executive Director of the New Jersey Policy Institute (NJPI), a research and policy organization committed to advancing practical solutions that improve educational opportunities and outcomes for students across the state.

Today, I urge the committee to prioritize the expansion of New Jersey's Interdistrict Public School Choice Program—a program that allows public school students to attend public schools in other districts that better meet their educational needs. This program provides students and parents with greater access to high-quality educational options, whether through stronger academic programs, specialized courses, or simply a better learning environment.

Why Expansion is Needed

Since its launch in 2001, the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program has grown to include 119 choice districts, serving approximately 5,000 students. However, nearly 2,000 students remain on waiting lists due to state-imposed caps, despite high demand. This unmet demand highlights both the program's success and the urgent need for expansion.

The impact of these limitations is felt across the state:

- Englewood Regional currently serves 265 choice students but has 96 students on the waitlist

- Rockaway serves 128 choice students and has 151 students on the waitlist. The district has expressed interest in expanding its program to 300 students, but without additional state funding, it cannot meet the demand.

- Haddon Heights accommodates 68 choice students but has 84 students waiting for an open spot.

- South Hunterdon Regional currently serves 97 choice students and has room to grow to 150 students, yet 25 students remain on the waitlist due to program caps.

These numbers reflect only a fraction of the unmet demand statewide. Many districts want to expand their programs to serve more students, but without state action, they are forced to turn away families who are actively seeking better educational options.

Unfortunately, this program has remained capped for over a decade, preventing more students from accessing the schools that best fit their needs. Every year, families are left waiting—not because schools lack space or willingness, but because the state has not provided the necessary resources to grow the program.

Importantly, this program does not financially harm local sending districts. Sending districts retain their local property tax levies, ensuring fiscal stability, while students gain access to better educational opportunities. At the same time, choice districts benefit from additional state funding, which allows them to expand programming and improve educational offerings for all students.

The Fiscal Case for Expansion

NJPI conducted a fiscal study to assess the cost implications of maintaining the current program versus expanding it to clear the waitlist. We will provide this study to all interested parties in the coming days for further evaluation.

- Keeping the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program at its current level costs about $63 million annually. However, after accounting for savings from state aid adjustments, the net cost is approximately $40 million.

- Expanding the program to accommodate all students on the waitlist would require a net cost of approximately $12 million using the same calculations.

These figures demonstrate that expanding the program is a financially responsible investment in our state's students and educational future. We will provide the committee with our detailed fiscal study in the coming days, ensuring members have full access to our methodology and findings. The cost of clearing the waitlist is far outweighed by the long-term economic and social benefits of ensuring more students have access to the education they deserve.

A Proactive Step for New Jersey's Education Future

Beyond the immediate benefits, expanding school choice is a proactive, common-sense step as New Jersey faces broader education challenges. The Latino Action Network v. New Jersey lawsuit underscores the growing concern over educational access and equity in our state. Rather than waiting for a court ruling to force changes, the Legislature has an opportunity to act

now—empowering families with more choices and ensuring a stronger public education system for all.

This is not just a policy issue—it's about real students and families who are seeking better educational opportunities. I urge this committee to make expanding the Interdistrict Public School Choice Program a priority in the FY26 budget. By providing additional funding and removing unnecessary caps, the Legislature can empower more families to choose the best educational environment for their children while maintaining fiscal stability for local districts.

Conclusion

New Jersey must act now to ensure that all students—regardless of race, income, or geography—have access to the quality education they deserve. Investing in the Interdistrict School Choice Program is an investment in student success, economic mobility, and a stronger future for our state.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss these ideas and to offer any additional insight during the on-going budget process.