



New Jersey Policy Institute

New Report Finds Most New Jersey School Districts Lack Clear Academic Goals or Accountability in Strategic Plans

Study of 50 district plans shows widespread gaps in focus, measurement, and follow-through — but highlights examples of excellence in Ramsey and Brick Township

TRENTON -- A new report from the New Jersey Policy Institute (NJPI) reveals that while most school districts in New Jersey have adopted “strategic plans,” few are using them as true roadmaps to improve student achievement in literacy and math.

The report, titled “Are We Planning for Achievement?”, reviewed 50 strategic plans from school districts across the state—urban, suburban, and rural—to evaluate whether they include clear, measurable goals for student learning, systems for monitoring progress, and transparency in reporting results.

The findings were sobering: most districts scored between 5 and 10 out of 20 on NJPI’s rubric, with few demonstrating clear alignment between their plans and student outcomes. Some districts had no public strategic plan available at all.

“Student outcomes don’t change without strategic planning for the future, and that requires leadership, alignment, and clear goals,” said Wells Winegar, Executive Director of the New Jersey Policy Institute. “Too many districts are focusing on initiatives without defining what success actually looks like for their students.”

The study notes that effective school systems clearly distinguish between three key components:

Goals — specific, measurable indicators of what students should know or be able to do in 3–5 years.

Interim Goals — ongoing metrics that track progress in real time.

Aligned Initiatives — daily strategies and actions staff and students take to reach those goals.

When these elements are in place, districts can continually assess whether their decisions are moving them closer to — or further from — academic success.

Bright Spots in New Jersey

The report highlights several districts leading the way:

Ramsey Public Schools identified improving student outcomes as its top priority, set explicit proficiency targets aligned to state assessments, and maintains a public-facing dashboard for families to track progress.

Brick Township Public Schools established a three-year plan to measurably raise literacy and math proficiency across grade levels, complete with timelines and embedded progress monitoring.

“These districts prove that focus, transparency, and community accountability are possible within the same policy and funding environment,” said Andy Mulvihill, Chairman of the New Jersey Policy Institute. “They show that strategic planning, when done right, is a powerful lever for student success.”

A Call to Action

NJPI’s report urges school boards and superintendents to adopt SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) academic goals and to align district resources accordingly. The institute argues that strong strategic plans are not bureaucratic exercises but essential tools for coherence, accountability, and continuous improvement.

“With hundreds of thousands of New Jersey students performing below grade level in reading and math, we can’t afford vague aspirations,” said Mulvihill. “Strategic plans are one of the few things districts fully control. They should be the foundation for measurable progress.”

While strategic plans alone won’t solve challenges in education, NJPI emphasizes they are a critical first step toward ensuring that every district is working intentionally toward better literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Read the full report [here](#).

