

Are We Planning for Achievement?

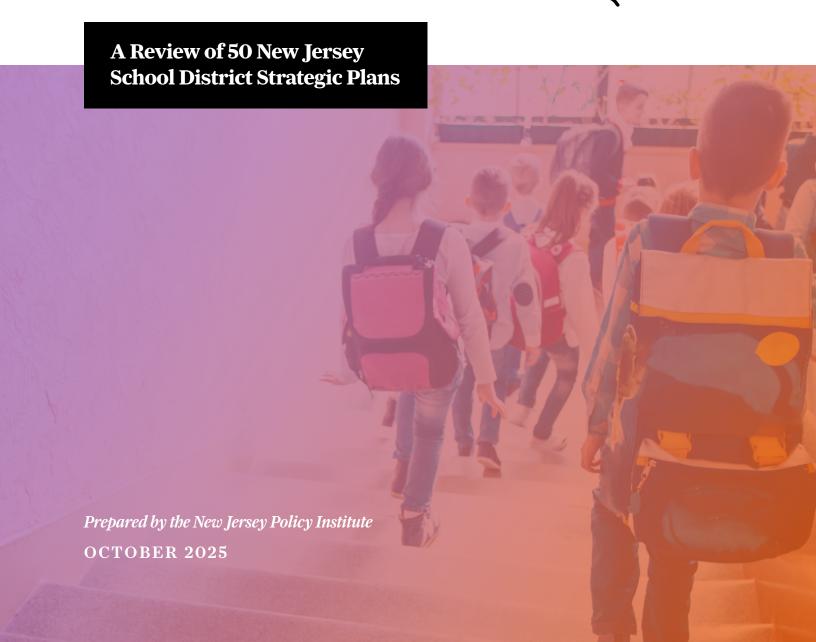




Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
Background	5
Methodology	6
Findings	7
Conclusion	12

Foreword BY AJ CRABILL



Student outcomes don't change until adult behaviors change. But changes in adult behavior are not easily won. They require the hardened focus of leadership that causes iterative realignment of the many adults in a school system. Unfortunately, many school system leaders don't know what they are aligning to. And they have no system in place for evaluating whether or not the latest iteration of changes are moving the school system toward improving student outcomes — what students actually know or are able to do, not just the strategies to accomplish them — or away.

There are simple tools available that help leaders turn that question into action. One of those tools is the strategic plan. When done well, strategic plans clarify three things:

- What are the student outcomes the big picture SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) indicators of what children know or are able to do that the school system is trying to achieve over the next 3-5 years (we call these, "Goals")
- What are the student outputs the ongoing SMART performance metrics that let leaders track and monitor progress in real time (we call these, "Interim Goals"), and
- What are the student and/or adult inputs the day-to-day SMART strategies that the staff and students are implementing with the intention of accomplishing the Goals (we call these, "Aligned Initiatives").

Dwight D. Eisenhower is credited with saying that, "Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable" which could be a meditation on the lack of quality of school system strategic plans across the nation. This study from the New Jersey Policy Institute (NJPI) investigates this very question: in a state that invests more per student than nearly any other, is New Jersey truly planning for improvements in student outcomes? To answer it, NJPI reviewed 50 district strategic plans across the Garden State—urban, suburban, and rural—to see whether they prioritize student outcomes, set measurable targets, disaggregate results, and describe how implementation and monitoring will occur.

These distinctions match the governance/management logic that effective systems use: boards adopt SMART Goals, superintendents define interim metrics that are predictive and influenceable, and school leaders implement initiatives, educate children, and reports on progress.

Having all three elements in place allows leaders and staff to constantly evaluate the extent to which their choices are helping or hindering the organization's march toward the Goals. The plan becomes a public blueprint for improvement and internal accountability, aligning time, talent, and treasure around clearly defined student outcomes.

Sadly, many school systems have no strategic plan at all, and among those that do, too many plans are thin on SMART clarity and completion. In NJPI's review, most plans provided only limited evidence that districts were prioritizing student outcomes; the majority scored between 5 and 10 out of a possible 20 on the rubric, and some districts had no public plan available. That's a missed opportunity to use planning as a lever for improving student outcomes.

Crucially, this report also shows what good looks like in New Jersey. Ramsey declares that improving student outcomes is the number-one priority, sets explicit NJSLA-aligned proficiency targets, and maintains a public

dashboard so families can monitor progress without the jargon and edu-speak. Brick Township outlines a three-year objective to measurably increase NJSLA proficiency across multiple grade spans and backs it with timelines and embedded monitoring. These school systems clarify their priorities, have systems for monitoring progress, and are able to leverage their strategic plan to align the school system's resources. They are proof that focus and transparency are possible within the same policy and resource environment.

If your school system's strategic plan already reflects this level of clarity, thank you! Keep going, keep learning, keep improving, and share about what you're doing with neighboring school systems. If it doesn't, let this whitepaper be your nudge to refocus. Gather your community, adopt a small set of SMART Goals about student outcomes, monitor progress, align resources accordingly, and communicate your results back to the public. When boards and superintendents do this work effectively, student outcomes change -- because adult behaviors do.



ABOUT AJ

AJ Crabill serves as Senior Coach at Effective School Boards and as National Director of Governance at the Council of the Great City Schools. He has dedicated his career to improving student outcomes through effective school board governance and leadership coaching. AJ is also an author, including *Great on Their Behalf: Why School Boards Fail, How Yours Can Become Effective*, and his latest book *Our Tools They Deserve*, which explores how schools can better position students to experience and achieve their full potential. He has served as Board Chair of the Kansas City (MO) Public Schools, as Conservator at DeSoto (TX) Independent School District, as Deputy Commissioner at the Texas Education Agency, has helped raise seven children, and has mentored dozens more. His work focuses on supporting education leaders to stay relentlessly focused on what matters most: improving student outcomes.



*MM*Introduction



New Jersey is often recognized as a national leader in public education, consistently ranking among the top states for both system quality and per-pupil spending. In 2023, the state spent approximately \$26,280 per student, more than \$10,000 above the national average and surpassed only by New York, Washington, D.C., and Vermont (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025). This substantial investment signals a strong public commitment to education. Yet, despite this advantage, student achievement in foundational areas like literacy and math remains deeply concerning.

According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 44 percent of New Jersey fourth graders and 37 percent of eighth graders scored at or above proficiency in math. In reading, just 38 percent of fourth graders and 35 percent of eighth graders met or exceeded proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Results from the state's own New Jersey Student Learning Assessments (NJSLA) show a similar pattern. In 2024, only 39.6 percent of students met grade-level expectations in mathematics, and just 52.2 percent did so in English Language Arts. These figures represent a decline from 2019, where proficiency rates were 5% higher for both Math and ELA (NJDOE, 2024).

These challenges are not new, nor are they isolated to certain communities. While the COVID-19 pandemic worsened learning loss, long-standing achievement gaps remain—particularly across racial and socioeconomic lines. For example, while 45 percent of all fourth graders met or exceeded math expectations in 2024, only 24 percent of Black students did, compared to 77 percent of Asian students (NJDOE Report Card, 2024). Moreover, 91 percent of students attend schools where 2024 math performance is still below 2019 levels, and 81 percent attend schools still behind in reading (Education Recovery Scorecard, 2024).

College readiness indicators confirm the trend. Less than 56 percent of 11th-grade students demonstrated proficiency on the math section of the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment (NJGPA, 2024), yet more than 90 percent still graduate with a high school diploma. Each year, over 20,000 students are placed in remedial education at two-and four-year colleges, and nearly half of full-time college students in New Jersey require at least one remedial course. Of those who enroll in remediation, 57 percent do not complete their program of study (Bacani & Zafar, 2023). These outcomes highlight the disconnect between high school completion and true readiness for postsecondary success.

Addressing these challenges demands strong curricula and well-prepared teaching staff. Yet above all, it requires strategic clarity and focus—and that focus should begin with a district's strategic plan.

Background



While New Jersey does not mandate strategic plans for all districts, they are widely adopted and often required under specific regulations, such as for districts identified as needing improvement (N.J.A.C. §6A:13A-3.1). The New Jersey Department of Education strongly encourages strategic planning as a best practice, and many districts engage in the process every three to five years with input from board members, school leaders, and the broader community. The New Jersey School Boards Association also assists many districts in developing these plans, reinforcing the value of the process as a best practice for setting priorities, aligning resources, and engaging stakeholders.

A well-crafted strategic plan serves as a district's public blueprint for improvement. It provides direction by aligning efforts and resources around clearly defined academic, and measurable goals, ensuring that decisions are grounded in purpose rather than driven by urgency or habit. These goals help focus attention on the outcomes that matter most, student achievement in math and literacy, preventing efforts from being scattered across disconnected initiatives. Strategic plans also establish benchmarks for measuring progress and create accountability for results, allowing districts to track performance over time, identify gaps, and make course corrections as needed.

In a resource-constrained environment, strategic planning plays a critical role in prioritizing where to invest time, funding, and staffing. When challenges arise or new opportunities emerge, a clear plan enables leaders to weigh options against long-term objectives. It also creates alignment across departments, schools, and teams by ensuring that everyone is working toward shared priorities rather than competing ones. Importantly, clear and achievable goals give teachers, administrators, and support staff a sense of purpose and connection to broader district success. And by anchoring plans in timelines and progress milestones, districts can maintain momentum and avoid stagnation.

In short, strategic plans are not just bureaucratic exercises—they are essential tools for managing complexity, driving improvement, and delivering better outcomes for students. To be effective, especially in the face of New Jersey's

academic challenges, these plans must place student achievement in literacy and math at their core.

This does not mean that other priorities should be set aside. But reading and math proficiency are foundational. Without these skills, every other objective, from civic engagement to college and career readiness, becomes significantly harder to achieve.

This report by the New Jersey Policy Institute (NJPI) reviews the strategic plans of 50 districts across the state—urban, suburban, and rural; large and small; demographically diverse—to assess whether school systems are truly planning for achievement. Do these plans prioritize academic outcomes? Are the goals measurable and disaggregated? Do they include actionable implementation strategies?

In a state that invests more per student than nearly any other, this report asks a simple but urgent question:

Are we planning for achievement?



Methodology



To assess how well districts are prioritizing academic achievement—particularly in literacy and math—NJPI reviewed the strategic plans of 50 school districts across New Jersey. These plans, typically developed every three to five years, guide priorities, budget decisions, and programming. As public-facing documents, they signal what a district values and how it defines success.

Each plan was evaluated using a five-point rubric that examined whether districts:

- 1 Explicitly name literacy and math as strategic goals;
- Include SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) tied to academic performance;
- Go beyond basic proficiency metrics to include growth or improvement targets;
- Disaggregate goals by school, grade level, or student subgroup (such as students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, or English learners);
- Include a concrete strategy for implementation, such as programming, resource allocation, or interim progress monitoring.

Each plan was reviewed independently by at least two NJPI researchers. Scoring was done on a scale of 1 to 4 for each criterion, giving a minimum possible score of 5 and a maximum possible score of 20:

1 = No Evidence

2 = Some Evidence

3 = Significant Evidence

4 = Exemplar

Discrepancies between reviewers were discussed and resolved on a case-by-case basis to ensure consistency. This method allowed for both quantitative scoring and qualitative analysis, measuring not just whether academic language was included, but whether it was backed by strong, specific, and actionable goals.

The following sections present our findings, highlight exemplary practices, and offer recommendations to help districts align their strategic planning with the academic needs of New Jersey's students.





1. A Missed Opportunity: The State of Strategic Planning

Strategic plans serve as one of the most visible and consequential expressions of a school district's priorities. When well-designed, these plans guide decision-making, budgeting, and instructional focus over multiple years. Yet among the 50 strategic plans reviewed by NJPI, the vast majority fell short in setting clear academic goals or articulating how they would improve outcomes in math and literacy.

The overall distribution of rubric scores reinforces the central finding of this review: most strategic plans provide only limited evidence that districts are prioritizing student achievement in math and literacy. The scatterplot below illustrates total rubric scores for each plan, with a maximum possible score of 20. The majority of districts fall between 5 and 10 points—indicating minimal alignment with the five criteria used to assess academic goal-setting and implementation. While many districts broadly named "academics" as a priority, very few specifically identified

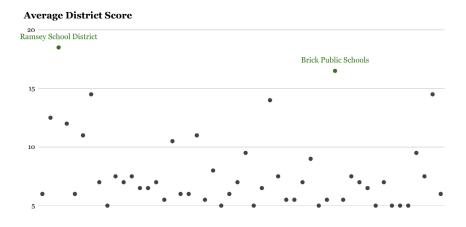


Figure 1. Distribution of rubric scores across 50 New Jersey district strategic plans.

math and literacy as core goals, and even fewer set measurable targets in these areas over time. Only a small number of districts scored above 15, demonstrating comprehensive, actionable plans. This trend highlights a missed opportunity across much of the state to use strategic planning as a tool for improving core academic outcomes.

Despite these results, it is noteworthy that even making a strategic plan publicly available represents progress. Many districts NJPI sought to review did not have plans accessible online or through other reasonable public channels. The 50 districts included in this analysis deserve credit for their transparency and willingness to articulate a vision. Still, the findings show that in most cases, these plans are not yet being used to their full potential as tools for driving measurable academic achievement.

2. Plans with Promise: Strong Models from the Field

Amid a landscape where many district strategic plans lacked clear academic priorities, a few districts stood out for their thoughtful, measurable, and student-centered approaches. Ramsey and Brick Township in particular emerged as leading examples of how strategic planning can be used to advance academic achievement in meaningful, transparent ways.

Ramsey School District: Clear Priorities, Transparent Tracking

Ramsey's strategic plan is a model of clarity and intentionality. From the outset, it declares **academic achievement** as **the district's number one priority**—a declaration that is substantiated through specific goals and publicly available data. The plan includes SMART goals aimed at increasing proficiency on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment (NJSLA):

- Mathematics: Increase student proficiency from 65% to 67%.
- English Language Arts (ELA): Increase student proficiency from 72% to 74%.

What sets Ramsey apart is not just the goals themselves but the infrastructure the district has built to monitor them. Ramsey maintains a public-facing dashboard that tracks key academic indicators, allowing stakeholders to view progress over time. This commitment to transparency reinforces the district's accountability and allows parents, staff, and community members to stay informed and engaged.

Ramsey's strategic plan includes detailed implementation strategies that make its goals actionable and achievable. For example, the district is revising unit assessments based on student outcomes—such as using on-demand assessments to strengthen grade 3 writing, piloting a numeracy screener at the elementary level, and implementing collaborative partnerships at both the district and school levels to impact teaching and learning. These features demonstrate that the plan is not just a static document it's a living tool used to guide decisions and drive improvement.

Strategy •	Objective	% Complete
Revise unit assessments based on student outcomes - specifically in grade 3 writing based on on-demand assessments.	Curriculum	100.00%
Promote student participation in the New Jersey Seal of Biliteracy	Innovative Programs	100.00%
Promote Complex and High-Level Thinking through Mathematics	Instructional Practices	100.00%
Promote Complex and High-Level Thinking through Literacy	Instructional Practices	100.00%
Investigate a portfolio system for student reflection in connection with Profile Projects and the Profile of a Ramsey Graduate.	Profile of a Ramsey Graduate	75.00%
Initiate a 5-year curriculum/program review cycle	Curriculum	100.00%
Implement Foundational Literacy Units	Curriculum	100.00%
Implement Collaborative Partnerships at the District and School Levels to impact Teaching and Learning.	Instructional Practices	100.00%
Implement Multi-Tiered System of Supports Program	Instructional Practices	100.00%
Expand the Summer Academic Options available to high school students	Innovative Programs	50.00%
Expand professional learning on Profile Projects and the Profile of a Ramsey Graduate.	Profile of a Ramsey Graduate	100.00%
Expand Dual Enrollment Offerings available to high school students	Innovative Programs	100.00%
Establish a Process for Data Analysis at the Teacher Level	Analytics	50.00%

Figure 2. Sample of Ramsey's academic strategies from its strategic plan, showing real-time completion toward Strategic Goal 1.

Brick Township Public Schools: Ambitious Measurable Progress Over Time

Brick Township distinguishes itself through its use of clear, ambitious academic goals. The district's plan sets a three-year objective to **increase NJSLA proficiency by 5% across multiple grade levels:**

- Mathematics: Grades 3-8
- Reading: Grades 3-9

These goals are supported by timelines and embedded within a broader vision of instructional improvement, reflecting a clear understanding that academic gains require both time and intentional planning.

To strengthen its foundation in literacy, the district is also adopting a new ELA curriculum in its elementary schools. By aligning this curriculum work with outcome targets, Brick demonstrates a commitment to coupling instructional change with measurable academic progress. The plan's goals are grounded in the state's own assessment system, ensuring consistency in how progress is measured and communicated to the public.

What further sets Brick apart is the way its strategic plan delineates goals across three dimensions—student-centered, teacher-centered, and community-connected. This holistic structure recognizes that academic progress depends on more than student effort alone; it also requires supporting teachers with the tools they need and actively engaging families and the wider community.

The district's mission statement makes this emphasis explicit: student-centered academic and personal goals are at the heart of the plan. This alignment between vision, strategy, and practice demonstrates that Brick is not only setting targets, but embedding them within a comprehensive framework designed to sustain real, measurable progress over time.



Why These Plans Matter

What makes Ramsey and Brick standout is not just that they set goals—but that they:

- Name student achievement as a top priority, rather than one among many.
- Use state-aligned assessments as their primary measure of progress.
- Specify concrete targets, rather than vague aspirations.
- Establish timelines and monitoring tools to track progress and adjust course.
- Promote transparency, making their progress visible to the public.

These plans serve as proof that even within the same policy environment and resource constraints, some districts are leveraging strategic planning to make a real impact. Their models can serve as valuable blueprints for other districts seeking to use their strategic plans to drive student success. While Ramsey and Brick stand out for the overall strength of their plans, Camden and Belvidere are highlighted here for certain elements—Camden for the specificity of its SMART goals, and Belvidere for the clarity of its performance scorecard.

Camden City School District: Explicit SMART Goals

Camden's strategic plan is a strong example of how districts can craft precise, measurable objectives. From the outset, it identifies specific academic priorities and sets SMART goals that go beyond aspirations. The plan includes targets designed to track annual improvement in student outcomes:

- Mathematics & Literacy: Ensure that two-thirds of Pre-K through grade 3 students meet reading and math annual benchmarks by 2022.
- **Subgroups:** A 5% increase in inclusion for students with disabilities and a 10% annual reduction in chronic absenteeism.

We will measure progress by:

- > Annual rise in graduate rates
- Each year student growth and proficiency will outpace the year before
- At least two-thirds of schools will improve their annual reading and math performance
- Two-thirds of all preK-3rd graders will reach annual benchmarks in reading and math by 2022
- > 5% more students in self contained classrooms will join their peers general education for at least part of the school day
- A 10% annual reduction in chronic absenteeism
- > 90% of graduates have completed SAT, FAFSA, and secured at least two post-graduation pathways (college or career)
- By June 2019, half of our Career and Technical Education programs will include partnerships with local employers or institutions

Figure 3. Examples from Camden's strategic plan illustrating the specificity of its SMART goals.

The plan's goals are written with specificity, identifying precisely what the district expects students to achieve and by when. This level of detail ensures progress can be measured, tracked, and adjusted as needed. Camden provides a clear model for how districts can utilize SMART goals to transform general priorities into actionable commitments.

Belvidere School District: A Comprehensive Scorecard

Belvidere's strategic plan is distinguished by its public-facing district scorecard, which makes progress in math and literacy transparent and easy to track. This level of detail enables stakeholders to see not only overall progress but also how specific student subgroups are performing:

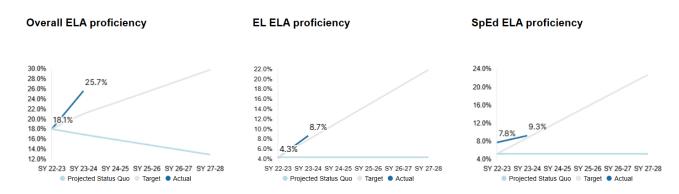


Figure 4. Example of Belvidere scorecard tracking of ELA proficiency, including subgroup performance for English learners and special education.

The performance dashboard complements these graphs by showing exactly what share of goals are on track. Progress is broken out by both **goal area** (for example, 67% of academic key performance indicators (KPIs) are on or above trajectory) and by **strategy within the goal** (such as 43% of math and 43% of ELA indicators meeting benchmarks). This design makes it immediately clear where the district is making headway and where more focus is needed. By quantifying and visualizing performance at multiple levels, Belvidere turns its strategic plan into an accountability tool.

3. District in Action: Cherry Hill's Commitment to Progress

While many current plans lacked academic specificity, some districts are taking action to do better. Cherry Hill Public Schools is a compelling example of a district actively working to align its planning process with measurable academic goals. The district was in the final stages of adopting the new strategic plan when this study commenced, thus they were not formally included in the study.

GOALS



By 2030, the district will achieve a 10% increase in math proficiency across Grades 3 through 11 on state math assessments while ensuring measurable annual growth for all students.



By 2030, the district will ensure that all students meet or exceed the Annual Targets outlined in School Performance Reports, achieving measurable progress in math skills.

KPIs

- KPI 1: Achieve a 5% annual increase in math proficiency among grade level cohorts as measured by district benchmark assessments.
- KPI 2: At least 80% of students will demonstrate a minimum of 5% growth on each district benchmark assessment (administered three times per year) with a cumulative 15% annual growth goal for all students.
- KPI 3: 90% of all students will participate in district benchmark assessments during each testing window.
- KPI 4: Ensure an annual increase in the percentage of students successfully completing Algebra 1 by the end of Grade 8.

ACTION STEPS

- Utilize data analysis of student performance to provide tailored academic support.
- Deliver research-based instructional strategies, grounded in a comprehensive curriculum and supported by high-quality professional development
- o Ensure 90% student participation on benchmark assessments.
- o Ensure each student's growth on benchmark assessments.

Figure 5. Example from Cherry Hill's strategic plan (AIM 1A) showing bow the district links math proficiency goals to key performance indicators and action steps.

The district's recently adopted plan includes goals tied to student performance in math and literacy, and commits to tracking achievement against state standards over time through annual key performance indicators. The plan also outlines steps to build internal capacity for data use and ensure that strategic planning translates into classroom impact. Cherry Hill recognizes the value of strategic planning as a tool for continuous academic improvement in its schools and, along with the strong models outlined above, should be looked at by other districts as they revisit their own plans.



Conclusion

This research provides an important starting point, but it should not be the end. The review of 50 New Jersey district strategic plans highlights a consistent pattern: while many districts embrace the idea of planning, too few are using their plans to drive measurable academic improvement in math and literacy.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that strategic plans are only one step in a much broader effort to improve student achievement. Progress in literacy and numeracy will require high-quality curricula, strong teaching, community engagement, and equitable resources. Yet without strategic plans that set clear, measurable academic goals, districts risk scattering their efforts and missing the opportunity to bring coherence and accountability to their work. The strategic planning process also helps channel the voices and elevate ideas of those closest to our students—our schools' hard-working and dedicated teachers.

The good news is that this is something districts fully control. School boards, in particular, have both the authority and the obligation to set specific academic goals that guide the work of their superintendents and staff. Boards, together with superintendents and community members, can use strategic plans as tools to align vision, set priorities, and track progress over time. Where strong plans already exist, they demonstrate what is possible: clarity of focus, measurable benchmarks, and transparency in reporting.

For districts that already set academic goals, the challenge now is to ensure those goals translate into action. Community members and parents can play a vital role by partnering with boards and district leadership to make sure that progress toward those goals is reported publicly throughout the year and that district budgets and resources are aligned with the plan's priorities—especially the improvement of math and reading outcomes.

With hundreds of thousands of New Jersey students unable to read or do math at grade level, improving literacy and numeracy across our schools needs to be a top priority for our state. Education serves as the foundation for the economic, cultural and democratic prosperity of New Jersey and as the ladder of opportunity for every young student.

To produce significant and sustainable academic improvement, New Jersey will certainly need a coordinated effort, but ensuring that every district has a strong, academically focused, public-facing strategic plan is a critical, and very achievable, first step. By beginning here, districts can take control of what is within their reach and create the conditions for real, lasting progress. After all, you can't solve a problem if you don't name it.







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Index

A-N

A

Asbury Park Public Schools

В

Belvidere School District
Bloomfield Public Schools
Bloomingdale Public School District
Bordentown Regional School District
Brick Public Schools
Burlington Township School District

\mathbf{C}

Camden City School District Clinton Township School District Cumberland Regional High School District

\mathbf{D}

Delaware Township School District Denville Township School District

\mathbf{E}

Edison Township Public Schools Ewing Public Schools

F

Fairfield Township School District Franklin Township Public Schools Freehold Township Schools

\mathbf{G}

Gloucester Township Public Schools

Н

Hackettstown Public Schools
Haddonfield Public Schools
Hawthorne School District
Hillsborough Township Public Schools
Hoboken Public Schools

K

Kingsway Regional School District Kittatinny Regional School District

\mathbf{L}

Lenape Valley Regional High School District Linden Public Schools Long Branch Public Schools

M

Middle Township Public Schools Monroe Township Public Schools Montclair Public Schools Morris School District

N

Neptune Township Schools New Brunswick Public Schools North Brunswick Township Public Schools Northfield Community School

Index

P-Z

P

Plainfield Public Schools
Point Pleasant School District

R

Ramsey School District Readington Township Public Schools

S

Salem City School District Somers Point School District

T

Township of Ocean School District Trenton Public Schools

U

Union City School District
Upper Township School District

W

Wall Township Public Schools
West Essex Regional School District
Westfield Public Schools
Wyckoff School District



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