

N.J. students head back to class. But will it be a 'normal' school year?

By [Tina Kelley | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)



Chris Infante, 4 years old, gets a kiss from his mom, Hilda Garcia, before the first day of school at KIPP SPARK Academy in Newark, August 17, 2022. Mary Iuvone | For NJ Advance Media

Will this school year be normal?

And what would a normal year even look like, 2 1/2 years after COVID-19 upended [the entire system](#), changing the school landscape in dramatic ways?

The early signs point to a more routine school year, school officials said. Almost all of New Jersey's nearly 600 school districts have dropped [masking requirements](#), students won't be struggling to stay three feet apart, and administrators are hoping to forgo contact tracing and sending notes home detailing the number of new COVID cases.

"It looks like it's going to be a normal year," said Union Township schools superintendent Scott Taylor. Then, he paused. "That may come back to haunt me in November when some other variant comes up," he added.

More than 1.3 million New Jersey public school students are returning to class for what educators are hoping will be their most "normal" school year

since 2019.

Still, schools are struggling to help students catch up after years of pandemic learning loss and face other issues — including ongoing teacher shortages, a lack of bus drivers and teacher aides, and concerns about students' mental health. There are also fears that new COVID variants will again cause outbreaks during the colder weather, sending schools back into crisis mode.

Here's a glance at some of the issues New Jersey schools are facing as the 2022-2023 school year gets underway:

Learning Loss

[Figures released](#) Thursday from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed the pandemic's dire effects on students, particularly lower performing students, students living in poverty and students of color.

Overall, the nationwide figures showed the largest drop in test scores in three decades. New Jersey scores were not immediately available, and it is too soon to measure the effects of the state's [many summer programs](#) to address learning loss, funded by federal COVID relief dollars.

[Last year's Start Strong assessments](#) showed that about half of the state's fourth through sixth graders needed "strong support" to bring up their math scores, more than 60% of Algebra 1 students had fallen behind, and a third of high school freshman English students needed substantial help.

Helping students catch up from lost months during the pandemic remains a top priority at the state level, state officials said. In his budget address in March, Gov. Murphy said the state's new school funding formula "is especially critical as we work to [undo the learning loss](#) and meet the mental health challenges posed by the past two years."

Teachers are working hard to measure what students know and what they

need to know to help them make up for lost time, said Karen Bingert, executive director of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

“It’s kind of like what teachers do all the time, but on steroids,” Bingert said. “They have just a really heightened sensitivity to making sure that if you see the potential that something is not understood, that you jump on it right away.”

Social and emotional learning

In December, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy [urged schools to support](#) students’ mental health, which suffered greatly during the forced isolation of the pandemic, reaching crisis levels.

Peg Kinsell, policy director at SPAN, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, said she has seen a serious increase in the number of students at severe risk. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, SPAN saw an almost 300% increase in calls from families with students who were removed from school for having psychiatric problems or posing a risk to themselves or others, she said.

These “informal removals” last until students can be assessed by an expert, who can be hard to find and expensive, she said. Some districts refuse to pay for these assessments. During such removals, students do not necessarily receive at-home instruction, as they would if they had been formally suspended, she noted.

Kinsell also expressed concern about vacancies at the state Department of Education. There were 145 open positions out of about 900 as of May, according to records obtained by NJ Advance Media.

“There’s a huge training and technical assistance piece that needs to happen, but with the Department of Education so significantly understaffed,” she said, many services don’t reach students.

Districts are addressing the issues in various ways.

New Brunswick public schools are adding 20 minutes to the school day starting this year under a new teacher contract. That time will be used as part of a [40-minute period](#) for social and emotional development after school officials said they saw many students lose family members, financial safety and their sense of security during the pandemic.

Student mental health is a priority in Union Township as well, said Taylor, the school superintendent.

"We are much better prepared to focus on and handle the pandemic fallout than we were going into the last school year," Taylor said. "Some of us may have underestimated just how difficult that was going to be."

Teachers will be focusing on measures to help build relationships, he said, and the district is concerned with their mental and emotional health as well.

"Morale was tanking last year," he said.

When Union Township teachers entered the building last Thursday, they were given prep time to set up their rooms, hear a motivational speaker, and attend workshops on self-care.

"Happy teachers, happy kids," Taylor said.

Paterson is also training staff in every school to help decrease the number of students suspended, according to district superintendent Eileen F. Shafer

Managing COVID

District leaders are hopeful that the worst of the pandemic is over, provided no virulent variants pop up as people head indoors for the colder weather.

Newark is one of the last remaining public school districts [requiring students](#)

[to wear masks](#). However, some districts said they would consider reinstating mandatory mask rules if COVID cases begin to spike again in their districts.

Last month, the state stopped requiring unvaccinated teachers to be [tested weekly for COVID](#).

Most schools have also dropped other COVID safety measures, including social distancing in classrooms, temperature checks, extra cleaning, and mandatory quarantine periods for students and teachers exposed to the virus.

Paterson schools no longer have partitions in classrooms but have kept air purifiers in every room, air blasters in windowless rooms, and air scrubbers in larger rooms, with hand sanitizers in all classrooms and hallways, Shafer said. Every building has scanners to take temperatures, and testing and contact tracers are available as needed.

Ramping up for early testing

This fall, districts are also preparing to give a second round of Start Strong standardized tests, the shorter version of the [New Jersey Student Learning Assessments](#) (NJSLA), the state's standardized math and English test, given in the spring.

The state is requiring districts to give the Start Strong test, a move the teachers union and various [advocacy organizations have protested](#), arguing the tests will be redundant, expensive, and stressful for returning teachers and students. Acting state education commissioner Angelica Allen-McMillan said the tests are one way to measure year-to-year progress from last fall.

[The tests](#), which take 45 minutes to an hour, measure what students learned the previous year. Fourth through tenth graders take the English exam, 4-8th graders take math, and students in grades 6, 9 and 12 also take science exams. [Barring mix-ups](#), students who took Algebra I, Geometry, or Algebra

ll last year are tested in those subjects.

On Wednesday, the state extended the time tests could be given, [through October 21](#). But, at least one advocacy group, Save Our Schools NJ, is urging families to opt their students out of the assessments.

“How do we talk about mental health for kids, and the first thing you do is put a standardized test in front of them?” said Julie Borst, the group’s executive director, who noted that the spring test scores have not been released yet.

At the state school board’s Aug. 3 meeting, where the Start Strong test was discussed, Allen-McMillan said the test it as “one of the sharpest tools we have” to help districts focus on students who need the most help.

“The reality for us is we have the responsibility to understand the landscape at all the schools throughout New Jersey,” she said. The test will help the state analyze data year-to-year, without having to wait for the spring tests, which weren’t given annually during the pandemic. Without testing in the fall, “we would lose another year of analysis that is so critical to our work,” she said.

Staffing shortages

Shafer, the Paterson superintendent, said Friday that her biggest concern is filling vacancies. The district had 240 in June, and 117 open positions remain, which will be filled by substitutes while the district will continue to hold job fairs every two weeks this fall.

For the state Principals and Supervisors Association, ensuring adequate staffing is the highest priority as school starts.

“If there’s not a teacher to teach a particular class, you can’t offer that class, and you need to start restructuring staffing decisions for meeting the broadest of needs,” said Bingert, the association’s head. Some classes may

be overcrowded, as well.

“This year, anecdotally, we’re hearing it is just exponentially worse,” she said. “The workforce has definitely shifted since COVID,” for bus drivers and teacher aides as well as for teachers, said Bingert.

Teacher shortages are hitting districts with fewer resources disproportionately, said Charity Comella, president of CJ PRIDE, a consortium of school districts working to attract and support teachers of color.

“Districts that have the most funding, the more generous contracts and perks, the teachers all go there, while the poorer districts are hurt,” she said. Among her group’s members, districts that are considered less desirable continue to have significantly more vacancies as the first day of school draws near. “It’s an equity issue,” she said.

Even though district wealth is supposed to be balanced out via the state school funding formula, and even though schools overall have received increased state funding, benefits like health care, tuition reimbursement, better professional development, and other factors can draw teacher candidates away from the districts with the greatest needs, she said.

Education officials could not provide the exact number of classrooms currently lacking a certified teacher. The state does, however, provide figures about teacher experience and licensing.

According to the state Department of Education’s [school performance reports](#), in 2021-22 76% of students were taught by one or more inexperienced teachers, and 13 percent had teachers who are teaching outside their certified field.

In future years, more exact figures should be available. Gov. Phil Murphy [signed a bill](#) in January that requires districts to report data on new, vacant,

and eliminated teaching positions, estimated retirements, as well as data on why teachers leave districts and on their demographics.

Free lunch

Schools will also be coping with the expiration of the federal funds that provided [free school lunches](#) during the pandemic. Districts that had opted into the National School Lunch Program were providing free lunches to all students, but the program expired in June.

“The loss of free lunch is a mistake,” Borst said. “Kids can’t learn if their tummies aren’t full.”

School districts will have to find help for families applying for subsidized lunches, which can be a cumbersome process; some districts may help families by connecting them with local food banks, she said.

School security

In the aftermath of recent school shootings, the state and districts are increasing school security.

Gov. Phil Murphy announced last week that the state will use \$6.5 million in federal funds to [provide digital maps](#) of all the state’s public and private schools to law enforcement officials in case of emergencies.

An important part of school safety is ensuring first responders have the tools they need to answer any emergency at any time,” Murphy said. “When every second matters, the most important tool is to know without delay not just where an emergency is in the building but the safest way to get there.”

The initiative also requires law enforcement to take an annual walkthrough of school buildings and grounds, Murphy said.

The state has also passed [legislation](#) requiring schools to form and train

[behavioral threat assessment teams](#) to help school administrators, social workers, and law enforcement specialists identify and support students at risk of becoming violent.

Readers, what are your main concerns about schools as the new year begins? We want to hear from parents, guardians, students, and staff via [this form](#) as you prepare to return to school this fall. What are you most concerned about? What kind of plans do you hope your school district will implement? If you are interested in being interviewed, please leave your contact information. Thank you!

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