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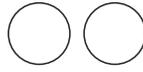
***Special Report***

# The long road back

Will N.J.'s struggling students recover from the pandemic? Here's how schools are scrambling to respond.

Updated on 11:27 AM; Today 6:45 AM

Luke Apergis, 13, James Apergis, 11, Nate Apergis, 9, and Owen Apergis, 7, during remote learning last school year at home in New Milford. "There is no way that they got everything they were supposed to get. I am really worried about what this is going to mean for next year," said Miriam Velasco, the mother of the boys.



#### EDITOR'S NOTE

This story has been corrected to reflect that the Highland Park school district eliminated letter grades below Cs. It converted Ds to "pass" and Fs to "incomplete."

Scott Taylor needed to do something.

A crisis was unfolding in the Highland Park schools, setting off alarms in the district office just 10 weeks into the new school year.

Three times as many students failed at least one class at Highland Park Middle School than during the 2019-20 first marking period. Failing grades more than doubled at the high school. Even many of the district's reliable students were struggling after an all-remote start in September, said Taylor, the Highland Park superintendent.

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Worried that the situation would only escalate as kids fell further behind, Taylor decided to throw a Hail Mary. The district abandoned letter grades below Cs, hoping to prevent students from giving up and completely disengaging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We performed triage," said Taylor, who converted Ds to "pass" and Fs to "incomplete." "It's not necessarily the kids' fault that they failed these classes. It's not the teachers' fault either. It's just the circumstances of being in all-remote learning all of the time and dealing with the mental health stresses that come with the pandemic."

One year after New Jersey ordered all schools to close, the state has yet to release comprehensive data revealing the depths of learning loss during the pandemic. But early returns from districts such as Highland Park — along with results from **an optional state exam** — show what almost everyone expected: More students are failing classes, falling behind academically or ghosting teachers altogether as the coronavirus disrupts a second school year.

Children are suffering both emotionally and academically, to the point that Gov. Phil Murphy recently **urged schools to open** as quickly as they can “before more students fall away.”

“It started off well, but slowly got worse and worse,” said Christopher DelVecchio, a New Milford sixth grader whose once sterling marks plunged to Cs, Ds and Fs under remote learning. “Most of the time I was thinking, ‘I don’t think I was as smart as I thought I was. Maybe I got dumber.’”

If the pandemic tested schools’ ability to teach under **the worst possible circumstances**, what comes next will be a colossal challenge when they are at their best. With the vaccination of teachers in full swing and Murphy’s expectation that all schools will reopen by the fall, local officials are already preparing for another unprecedented — and some might say impossible — task.

Can the school system Murphy touts as America’s finest — bolstered by \$2.8 billion in recent federal rescue aid — get all 1.35 million students caught up?

The education of a generation of New Jersey students is at stake.



Gov. Phil Murphy recently urged schools to open as quickly as they can “before more students fall away.” Michael Mancuso | NJ Advance Media

“We’ve had (learning loss) before, but never to this extent, and never in the way that we’re having to deal with it right now,” said Suzanne McCotter, dean of The College of New Jersey’s School of Education. “What they’ve lost is not only academic progress, but also social-emotional progress. And we’re not going to be able to increase that learning until we deal with where they are as human beings.”

Educators and state leaders are not entirely in lockstep regarding the best way to close the learning gap.

Some say students face a years-long climb that will produce results if districts revise curriculum and temporarily reconsider grade-level expectations. A combination of summer school, afterschool programs and targeted interventions will then help raise students back to pre-pandemic learning levels.

Others think plenty of students will eventually recover, but it’s unrealistic to expect the pandemic’s damage can be fully repaired.

If schools attempt to hold students to existing standards right away, it could be even more detrimental to their learning, said Tanya Maloney, a professor of teaching and learning at Montclair State University.

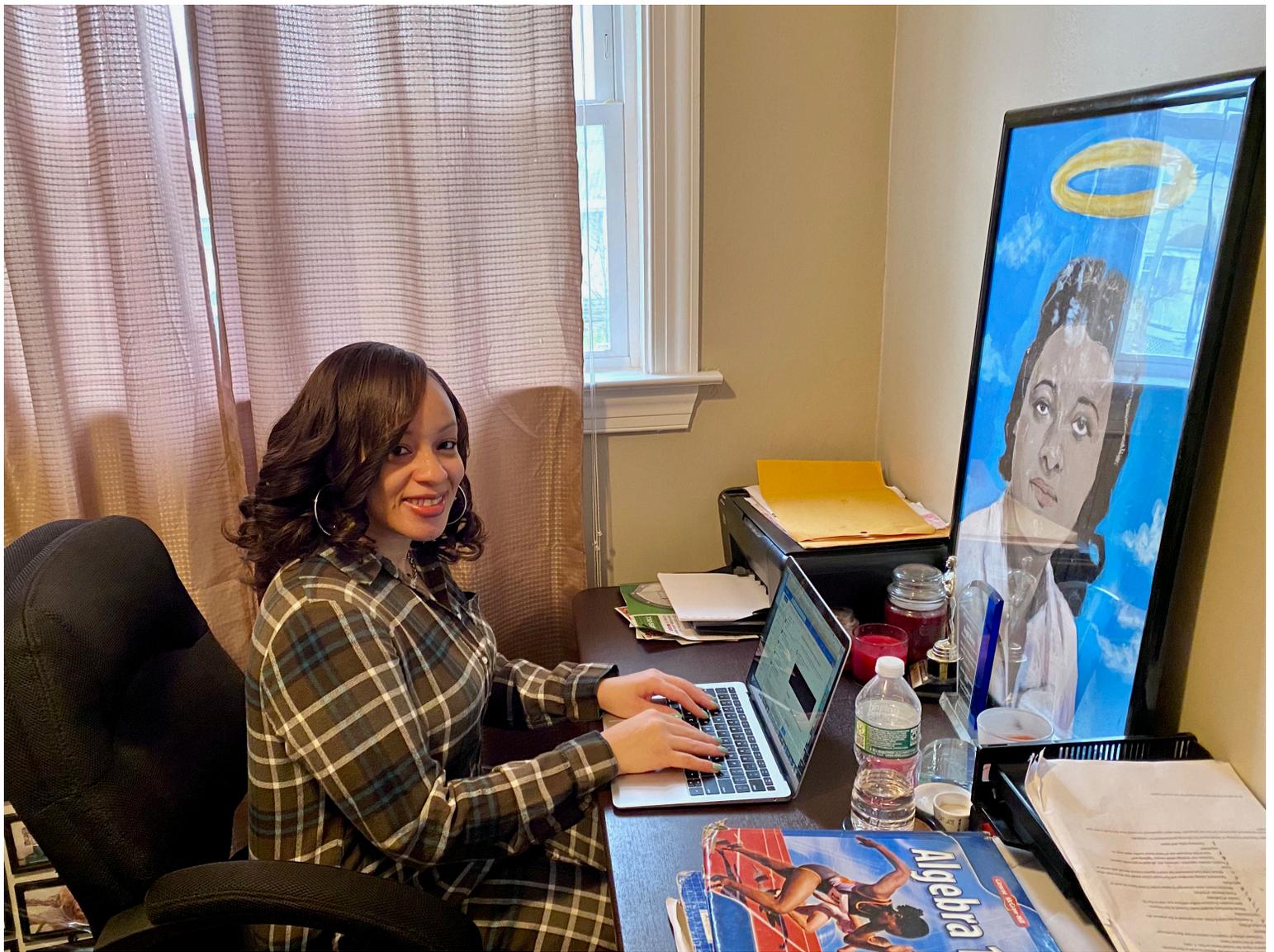
“I don’t think this is any small thing that we can say, ‘Oh, it will just take a couple of years, and we will all be back,’” Maloney said. “We are looking at a long period of time. I would say at least a generation. When we think about the children who are currently in elementary school, I would be very curious to see where they will be by the time they are in high school.”

However, learning loss should be a secondary concern at a time when families are struggling to keep kids emotionally intact, leaders in the state education community say. Schools are more than capable of re-teaching concepts students should have already mastered, while also forging ahead with the curriculum this fall, said Patricia Wright, executive director of the New Jersey Association of Principals and Supervisors.

But several state lawmakers worry that students will be left behind, especially kids in low-income communities where many children were struggling before the pandemic.

A proposed state law giving parents the right to hold their children back next school year — even over objections from administrators — has already won support from the Senate Education Committee. The New Jersey Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union, opposes the bill.

“We are burying our head in the sand by maintaining that everybody is receiving a thorough and efficient education,” said state Sen. Shirley Turner, D-Mercer, who sponsored the bill. “Because they are not.”



Angel Boose, a third grade teacher in East Orange, has yet to teach her students in-person this school year. Photo courtesy of Angel Boose

## Are students really learning?

Angel Boose sees the limitations of remote learning every weekday at 8 a.m.

Boose is supposed to teach a class of 19 third graders at East Orange's Benjamin Banneker Academy. Instead, she sees a Zoom screen, where 18 of the 19 students regularly log on. Only 13 of them typically stay engaged throughout the entire day, while the others get distracted by computer games or YouTube clips, she said.

Boose's students usually tell her they understand the math concepts she is teaching. But she can't walk the aisles to check their step-by-step progress like she would in the classroom. It's only after they submit their work that she finds out the truth.

"Then I realize, 'Wow, many of the kids didn't get this,'" said Boose, who has taught third grade for eighth years. "I thought I taught a great lesson."

The state's  **rushed foray** into remote instruction was never meant to last this long. Even after a summer dedicated to improving distance learning, it's still not effective for many children — which parents have screamed loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“It has been a nightmare because every kid has a different learning style and different needs,” said Miriam Velasco, a New Milford mother of four boys whose schools were closed for most of the winter because of COVID-19.

Luke Apergis, her eighth grader, and James Apergis, her sixth grader, saw their typical As and Bs turn to borderline failing grades. Her youngest son, Owen Apergis, needed her to sit with him and rewrite the words and numbers from his computer screen onto a white board just so he could follow along with his first grade lessons.

Velasco's third grader, Nate Apergis, repeatedly burst into tears and slammed his computer shut because he felt like he was falling behind his classmates.

“There is no way that they got everything they were supposed to get,” Velasco said. “I am really worried about what this is going to mean for next year.”

The New Jersey **“Start Strong” assessments**, an optional exam administered to about 90,000 students in the fall, found one-third of kids in grades 4-10 could need “strong support” in both English and math. In science, which typically involves more hands-on learning, 57% of students tested across grades 5, 8 and 11 could also need “strong support,” the state Department of Education found.

Officials cautioned against making any sweeping judgments from the small sample size, but some districts are already flagging concerning results from their own assessment data.



Miriam Velasco, of New Milford, worries her four sons are falling behind in school. She's pictured with her husband, Mark Apergis, and sons Luke Apergis, 13, James Apergis, 11, Nate Apergis, 9, and Owen Apergis, 7. Courtesy of Miriam Velasco

In Millville, a district where 70% of students are economically disadvantaged, about 45% of kindergarteners were reading on grade level in January 2020. When the same students returned for first grade in September, just 15% still met that benchmark.

The numbers improved by January 2021 — about 25% were reading on grade level — but still fell far short of the same point last school year.

What's even more concerning is the dramatic rise in Millville students who need intensive help in reading. That number ballooned from 28% last January when the students were in kindergarten to 72% in September when they started first grade. In January 2021, the district found 61% of them still needed intensive reading support.

In raw numbers, that means 90 additional Millville children in first grade alone will need significant help just to develop reading skills.

“The loss of learning, although it’s crucial at all levels, it is more profound at the younger grades,” Millville Superintendent Tony Trongone said.

But benchmark testing reveals only part of the story while children are still at home.

Some of Boose’s third graders don’t use punctuation or capitalize letters when they submit online writing assignments. Is that because they haven’t learned that they need to? Or is it because they don’t know how to do it on the keyboard?

“The truth of the matter is these kids are at home, and they could be looking up answers on the computer or have parents and siblings and aunts and uncles around who may be assisting them with their work,” Boose said. “There is really no way to know right now who really knows what and who is performing at what grade level.”

After the chaos of remote learning last spring — when an estimated 350,000 students **lacked computers, internet access or both** — schools promoted many children to the next grade, even if they had stopped completing assignments. The thinking was students shouldn’t be blamed for circumstances out of their control, especially when research suggests retaining them increases the odds they will drop out.

But some districts have reported major attendance problems even after closing their digital divides. A few saw students effectively disappear early in the school year. Camden Public Schools told the State Board of Education in December that roughly 25% of students **were failing to log on** to virtual classes each day.

Now that the pandemic has kept **more than 300,000 students** out of the classroom for at least a full calendar year in districts such as Newark, Paterson, Jersey City and beyond — lawmakers are beginning to question whether that approach should apply in 2021.

Turner has heard horror stories from parents who say their children haven’t learned anything since schools closed in March 2020. Parents have always been able to request that a student repeats a grade, but her proposal would take the final decision away from administrators and let families choose.

“These are students who are left hopelessly behind. Many of them were behind before the pandemic,” Turner said at a hearing earlier this month. “This is an opportunity for those children to catch up and have a do-over year.”

Education groups, including the NJEA and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association, said parents should trust that their schools can and will get students caught up.

“I think there may be gaps, but I do think we need to give students and educators enough credit to say that learning did go on this year,” Wright said.

The stigma associated with retention could weigh heavily on students who have already endured a traumatic year, according to McCotter.

“Every kid is going to be in the same boat,” she said. “Teachers in schools have a herculean task to figure out how to deal with this. But they’re going to figure out how to deal with this.”



Christopher DelVecchio, 11, of New Milford, struggled with the transition to middle school during remote learning. Photo courtesy of Brooke DelVecchio

## Now what?

Christopher DelVecchio couldn't focus — not with his parents away at work, social media one click away and the family's playful dogs yearning for his affection.

The 11-year-old middle school student tried to follow along on the computer, but staying engaged with his remote schoolwork became harder each day, he said. His two older brothers were both busy with their own assignments, so there was no one to force him to pay attention.

“I would get distracted the whole time during class, and I wouldn't be able to focus that much,” he said. “So I would be pacing around the room petting my dogs and stuff.”

Christopher had been a good student in elementary school, but suddenly was averaging Cs and Ds as uncompleted assignments mounted. He lost confidence and worried he was letting down his mom, he said.

He eventually pulled up most of his grades, especially once he returned to in-person learning in February. He still has a C+ in math, which was always his favorite subject. He's hopeful he can catch up, but his mother is concerned.

"I feel like maybe he is not going to be where he needs to be when he gets to seventh grade," Brooke DelVecchio said. "I don't think it's just Christopher. I think there are more kids than not who really are behind."

Indeed, schools will have thousands of Christophers.

The old rule of thumb is a student who has a poor teacher for one year will need two years to catch up, McCotter said. But no one really knows if that timeline applies after the unprecedented impact of the pandemic.

"One of the big challenges is that because every kid is going to be coming in at such a different place, teachers aren't going to be able to teach a class of second graders the way they usually would," McCotter said.

The state Department of Education declined to predict how long it will take students to catch up, saying acceleration is likely to look different for every student. But New Jersey districts are suddenly flush with federal money, which they plan to use to launch an aggressive response to offset the damage of the pandemic.

The state recently directed \$1.2 billion in federal aid to school districts for COVID-related needs. President Joe Biden's administration announced another \$2.8 billion for New Jersey schools in the American Rescue Plan, giving districts an opportunity to hire additional staff and increase instructional time.

Schools are talking about extensive one-on-one or small group tutoring, the possibility of Saturday academies and expanding before and after school programs. Yet it's fair to wonder if the path forward will be as contentious as **the road that led here.**

Almost every issue in education has spilled into a fight over the past 12 months, from closing schools, to the quality of remote learning, to bringing teachers back into classrooms. Parents have lost patience with school leaders. School boards and teacher unions have tangled in court. One recent study found 38% of teachers nationally said the stress of the pandemic has made them **consider changing jobs.**

State Sen. Teresa Ruiz, chair of the Senate Education Committee, questions whether the education establishment's approach lacks urgency.

New Jersey sometimes celebrates its school system's accolades — including a No. 1 ranking from U.S. News & World Report — to a fault, she said.

"That is not a truth for every single student in the state of New Jersey, and it almost becomes an egregious title that we hang onto," Ruiz said earlier this month. "It is disrespectful for communities who have been most vulnerable and impacted in this time frame."

Existing disparities in schools will likely widen as districts with more students who have fallen behind will struggle to catch up. Parents in affluent districts can pay for tutors and educational summer camps that other families cannot.

“Here is where the government has to come in and say, ‘We are not going to let this be a wider gap in our public school system,’” Ruiz said.

In Millville, the first safety net is summer school, Trongone said.

The district is preparing a program unlike anything it has offered before. Larger enrollment. A longer school day. Maybe even a focus on field trips — whatever it takes to make sure kids are also having fun.

“I think 50% of them need it,” Trongone said of his students in the early grades. “This could be a pretty large undertaking.”



Amanda Yonks teaches her third grade students remotely from the living room area of her home in East Brunswick. Yonks is a teacher at Bartle School in Highland Park. Patti Sapone | NJ Advance Media

Summer school has traditionally been a small operation for students in dire need or high school students who must

make up credits to graduate. But district leaders see this summer as a chance to re-teach foundational math and literacy skills and reacclimate younger students to the classroom.

In Highland Park, Taylor envisions doubling or even tripling summer school enrollment by blending academics with intramural sports, yoga and meditation.

But schools can't require students to attend, officials said, so how many students will participate remains an open question. Will parents be desperate to get their children back into the classroom? Or will they want to give them a "normal," stress-free summer after the pandemic threw their lives into disarray?

"We have to build it so they come," Trongone said. "That is why the federal government is giving us the support. To build it so they come."

Even so, he's not sure what to expect.

"We are really in uncharted territory as far as what parents are going to want to do with their kids," Trongone said.

Many students could benefit from summer school, but the biggest concern is taking care of their mental health needs, said Marie Blistan, the NJEA president. Schools need to invest in nurses and counselors to make sure children have the support they need, she said.

"I can tell you if a kid comes into my classroom upset about something, I don't care if I've got the best lesson in the world, the kid isn't tuning in," Blistan said.

In Highland Park, counselors found many students felt overwhelmed by schoolwork, the pandemic and their emotions after remote learning, Taylor said. Kids in pre-K through fifth grade now attend school five days a week for four hours a day, while middle and high school students attend two days a week.

In addition to counseling support, Taylor wants the district to rethink how it grades students. He wants teachers to stop grading compliance assignments — a nice way of saying they should no longer tie grades to what parents have long considered busy work.

Teachers can begin repairing academic loss once they have evaluated how much social and emotional work students need, he said.

"I am only going to know what the fallout is going to be once I get lots of kids together again in person," Taylor said, "so I can observe how they are relating to each other."

Boose, a veteran, has trimmed her virtual instruction lesson plans to the core materials and combines two days of lessons into one when possible. She's a bit behind where she should be in the curriculum, but not too far, she said.

“I have to get right into the nitty gritty of the lessons, because we don’t have a lot of time,” she said. “For newer teachers and teachers new to a certain grade level, I cannot imagine the challenge that would come with teaching in this virtual world.”

Experts agree that educators are going to need help. Rather than pulling individual students out for remedial work, schools should think about bringing as many specialists into the classroom as possible, said Leslie Sylvan, a certified speech-language pathologist and professor at Montclair State University, who researches support systems in schools.

“It is a really big task for a classroom teacher to think about all of this while also teaching the curriculum for the year,” she said.

The federal funding can be used over the next two school years, so Trongone’s goal is to get Millville’s students caught up within that time frame, he said. Teachers will have an opportunity to reteach basic skills to those who need it, while also building on them by the end of the school year.

“It is going to be a lot of work,” Trongone said. “It is not going to be easy, but we are going to do our best.”

Yet the what-ifs linger in the back of almost everyone’s mind. What if children are not vaccinated by the fall and come to school sick and cause an outbreak? What if vaccines are not effective against the highly contagious variants?

“I don’t think we can assume that just because we’re beyond this particular set of circumstances that the kids are all going back to school,” McCotter said. “I don’t think we’re done with the same kinds of needs that we’ve had this school year. I think we’d be foolish to think that.”

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