



2024

ANNUAL REPORT



for **ADVOCATES**[®]
CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY

Giving Every Child A Chance[®]

Dear Friend:

This year has been one of remarkable growth for ACNJ. Under the leadership of Winifred Smith-Jenkins, our Early Learning Team, in partnership with communities and the state, has brought the vision of Unlocking Potential 2.0 to life by listening to parents and responding to their needs in maternal health, child care, family supports, and infant mental health. Together, we are working to dismantle systemic barriers, focusing on transportation and food insecurity and advocating for policies that strengthen our early care and education system. This includes attracting and retaining a skilled child care workforce, expanding access to affordable infant and toddler care, and creating a more equitable mixed-delivery preschool system. We are deeply grateful to our early learning funders for supporting our mission to ensure every child, from birth to age 5, thrives.

Isaiah Fudge, ACNJ's new Director of Positive Youth Development, is leading efforts to launch new initiatives aimed at improving youth mental health and to ensure wellness and appropriate interventions. He is also raising awareness about evidence-based programs, including community schools, community-led violence prevention efforts, and fatherhood cultivation programs, all of which positively impact youth aged 9-21.

We are working to bring data into the hands of a broader community, and for the first time, we translated our *Newark Kids Count 2024* into Spanish. Roughly 42% of the city's children identify as Hispanic or Latino, and

32% of Newark Public School students speak primarily Spanish at home. More than half of all births in the city were to foreign-born women; of those births, 64% were of Hispanic descent. We hope the translated Newark Kids Count will serve as a bridge, helping Spanish-speaking residents understand the data in their community and the resources available to them.

ACNJ welcomed new staff and new members to the ACNJ Board of Trustees, all committed to improving outcomes for children and ensuring that every child has the chance to grow up safe, healthy and educated. ACNJ continues to be an organization with one mission, many faces.

We want to thank our funders, donors, parent leadership council, and partners who work with ACNJ to achieve our accomplishments and improve outcomes for children and youth. Because of you, ACNJ remains a strong, independent, and effective voice for our youngest residents.



Mary Coogan, Esq.
President & CEO



Jennifer Robinson, Ed.D.
Chair, Board of Trustees

JANUARY

- Members of ACNJ staff and the parent leadership council visit New Jersey's congressional delegation bringing attention to the importance of home visiting and other maternal and child health services.



2024

FEBRUARY

- ACNJ launches its 2024 Lunch and Learn series. These virtual webinars are open to the public and focus on policy topics concerning children and families.

MARCH

- ACNJ senior legislative analyst Shadaya Bennett testifies before the NJ Senate Budget Committee, urging lawmakers to prioritize spending on programs and services for children and families.



- In partnership with the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), ACNJ hosts a webinar informing center-based child care providers how they can work with school district officials to provide state-funded, full-day preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.

APRIL

- ACNJ's #NJVotes4Kids Budget Campaign kicks off, culminating in thousands of postcards and emails delivered to legislators urging them to invest state funds in New Jersey's child care infrastructure – the workforce.



- ACNJ Data Analyst Alena Siddiqui presents the latest Kids Count data on child well-being at the Lead NJ Issues of Our Times panel on poverty.

- ACNJ participates in a series of site visits at child care centers with members of Congress including US Representatives Josh Gottheimer, Tom Kean, and Mikie Sherrill to highlight the critical need for significant child care federal funding.

Mobilizing Support for Child Care Infrastructure

To further amplify our advocacy, we launched a statewide postcard and sticker campaign focused on securing child care infrastructure funding in the FY 2025 State Budget. Nearly 17,000 parents, providers, and stakeholders participated, urging legislators to prioritize child care and support fair compensation for the workforce. This campaign emphasized the critical role child care plays in supporting New Jersey's parents, communities, businesses, and the broader economy.

Budget Wins

The Fiscal Year 2025 Budget includes substantial investments for New Jersey children, expanding preschool access, child care assistance, and family support. It focuses on early education, mental health, and food security while maintaining the Child Tax Credit and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit to offer ongoing support for families across the state.

Top Budget Wins:

- **Child Care and Preschool: \$482.5 million** for child care subsidies, **\$144 million** for public pre-K programs, and a focus on mixed-delivery preschool systems.
- **K-12 Education: \$908 million** in direct aid, **\$7.2 million** for literacy, and **\$5 million** for the Teacher Loan Redemption Program.
- **Child Tax Credit:** Expansion continues, providing up to **\$1,000 per child** for families.
- **Hunger and Food Insecurity: \$318 million** for WIC, **\$924.5 million** for school breakfast and lunch programs, and **\$7 million** for SNAP and school meals dual enrollment program.
- **Mental Health: \$30 million** to expand services for children and adolescents.

A Shift from Juvenile Justice to Positive Youth Development

Preventing youth from becoming involved with state systems yields far better results than incarcerating them. That is why ACNJ is focusing on the intersectionality of safety, wellness and education and advocating for policies and practices that ensure positive experiences, relationships and environments that help children thrive and become productive adults.

KidLaw: Continuing to Empower Parents

Staff attorney Nina Peckman currently assists over 350 parents each year, helping them to understand education related laws and to advocate effectively for their children facing challenges in school. **The Center has assisted over 10,000 parents on school matters since Kit Ellenbogen, Esq. began this program in 1996.** The KidLaw Center produces written materials and videos on different topics and provides training and resources to professionals working with children. These essential resources are accessible on ACNJ's website.

JULY

- ACNJ and The New Jersey Department of Children and Families convene a virtual forum to provide updates on state programming.



- Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer, M.S.W. and Rev. Dr. Willie Francois III join the

Unlocking Potential Coalition Leadership Team in a conversation about how storytelling can uplift parent voices to improve policies and programs to benefit young children and their families.

AUGUST

- *Newark Kids Count*, available for the first time in Spanish, can help Spanish-speaking residents understand the data in their community and advocate to improve outcomes for children.

SEPTEMBER

- ACNJ testifies in front of the Board of Education on NJ's preschool mixed-delivery system.

OCTOBER

- Mary Coogan, Co-Chair of the NJ Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect joins other Task Force members, educators, law enforcement, and health care professionals to discuss the overreporting of families of color for neglect when the real concern is poverty.



DECEMBER

Join Us!
ACNJ's 9th Annual
Breakfast
Celebration

Thursday,
Dec. 5 at 8 am

The Clubhouse at
Galloping Hill Golf Course
Kenilworth, NJ



KIDS COUNT: DATA DRIVING CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

Data is a powerful tool that measures progress, drives change, and empowers individuals. The ACNJ Kids Count project offers a comprehensive snapshot of child well-being to policymakers, advocates, grant-makers, and the public, informing critical decisions that affect children and families. Our *New Jersey Kids Count 2024* offers county-level insights, while the *Newark Kids Count 2024* focuses specifically on the Brick City. This year, ACNJ was thrilled to release the first-ever Spanish translation of the *Newark Kids Count 2024* report, expanding access to this essential information. To further share these insights, we are also engaging audiences in community conversations hosted in Spanish by ACNJ staff member Eloisa Hernandez-Ramos.

Highlights: COUNTY POCKET GUIDE

- **1,994,109** children (0-17 years) call New Jersey home and every 1 in 4 are under the age of 5.
- **58%** of children receiving free and reduced-price lunch are also receiving free and reduced-price breakfast.
- **58,387** children were enrolled in state-funded preschool in 2022-23, roughly **5,100 more** children from the previous year.
- **42%** of NJ's third graders met or exceeded expectations for English Language Arts on the NJ Student Learning Assessments in 2022-23.

Highlights: NEWARK KIDS COUNT

- In 2022, the median income of families with children living in Newark **rose to \$45,803**, an almost **14% increase** from 2021.
- The number of babies born with low birthweight in Newark **decreased by 18%** between 2018 and 2022.
- In 2022-23, **19%** of Newark Public School third graders met or exceeded expectations on the English Language Arts portion of the NJ Student Learning Assessments and **20%** met or exceeded expectations in the Math portion.
- Newark Public Schools had an **86%** high school graduation rate in 2022-23, an **increase from 76%** in 2018-19.



LUNCH & LEARN WITH ACNJ: ADVANCING ADVOCACY, ONE CONVERSATION AT A TIME

ACNJ coordinates monthly lunch and learn sessions, where we bring together passionate professionals for engaging discussions on the latest trends, strategies, and insights on child advocacy. These sessions are designed to provide a space to explore innovative approaches, share best practices, and build collaborative solutions that benefit New Jersey's children and families. Scan the QR code on the left to view past sessions and register for future ones!

Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) has been the trusted, independent voice that has prioritized children's needs for over 45 years. Our mission is to advance and strengthen policies and programs that promote equitable opportunities for all New Jersey children.

Our work results in:

- better laws and policies,
- more effective funding and
- stronger services for children and families.

*This means more children are given the chance to grow up **safe, healthy and educated.***

Want to
Connect
with ACNJ?



www.acnj.org



@ACNJForKids

A sincere thank you to all of our supporters for your steadfast dedication to New Jersey's children and for your generous donations to ACNJ in 2023. Our work would not be possible without you.

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35 Halsey Street
Newark, NJ 07102
(973) 643-3876
(973) 643-9153 (fax)

advocates@acnj.org

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♦ Donors who supported the celebration for Cecilia Zalkind.

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