

# ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW JERSEY 2024-2025 POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT LEGISLATIVE AGENDA



**Positive Youth Development (PYD)**, ACNJ's newest initiative, focuses on the intersection of safety, wellness, and education, elevating initiatives that positively impact youth to prevent youth detention. Our goal is to expand and promote initiatives that support youth, while eliminating barriers—policy, narrative, or procedural—that hinder their progress and that of their caregivers, empowering others to do the same.

## Improve Conditions and Systems that Affect Youth Cognitive Development

**Many youth face challenges that harm their cognitive development and overall functioning, such as adverse childhood experiences and inadequate caregiver support.** These factors impact mental health and psyche, affecting school and community engagement, leading to issues like absenteeism, over-discipline, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. To combat these outcomes, New Jersey must foster positive mental health associations and bolster support for the workers and resources that engage and empower youth and families.

### Recommended Policy Solutions:

- Increase awareness about the importance of the mental wellness for youth and their caregivers, highlighting the role everyday factors contribute to mental well-being.
- Increase awareness about the consequences of social media addiction and other harms associated with social media.
- Establish mechanisms to aid workers, communities, and families to robustly enhance positive youth development.

### Existing Proposed Legislation:

**S2945** Establishes task force to examine school discipline practices including racial disparities and effectiveness.



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*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.*

# Equip Schools with Resources to Foster Student, Teacher, and Community Growth and Well-being

## Youth face challenges that affect their academic performance, attendance, and school engagement.

Still, schools often lack the resources to address these issues, leading to poor outcomes like low math and literacy rates and chronic absenteeism. To improve student outcomes and support staff, we need provisions that enhance school climate, increase community support, and increase youth participation in their education.



## Recommended Policy Solutions:

- Fund and expand the full-service community school model statewide, and establish a centralized agency to provide technical assistance to schools executing the model.
- Establish methods for engaging local networks of safety and health professionals to support school safety practices.
- Establish measures (beyond financial) to increase interest in the teaching profession.
- Establish systems to increase support for the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of teachers and school support staff.
- Establish pathways to increase youth participation on school and other advisory councils

## Existing Proposed Legislation:

**S2243/A4107** Establishes five-year community schools pilot program.

**S2528/A3124** Establishes Office of Community Schools; appropriates \$10 million

**S2646/A4304** Requires school districts to provide training and coaching to certain teachers on student literacy and reading interventions; requires DOE to establish program for literacy coaches.

# Redefine Violence Intervention and Safety and Empower Communities to Lead Harm Reduction in Schools and Beyond

## Violence has become normalized for many youth in schools and communities.

Traditional responses from officials often worsen the issue, leading to school disengagement and desensitization. To address violence as it relates to youth and their response to its occurrence, New Jersey must shift the narrative around Community-Based Violence Intervention and Prevention (CBVIP), viewing it as a public health priority, not just a safety issue. The state must implement culturally responsive, health-focused safety programs led by community professionals and make intentional investments in CBVIP initiatives.

## Recommended Policy Solutions:

- Establish a health-based model for school safety, authorizing credible, community-based health professionals to support schools with discipline, violence prevention, and harm reduction.
- Enhance funding mechanisms to sustain CBVIP and harm reduction work.

## Existing Proposed Legislation:

**A5326** Establishes Community Crisis Response Advisory Council and community crisis response teams pilot program; designates "Seabrooks-Washington Community-Led Crisis Response Act;" appropriates \$12 million.

**A622** Establishes the "Safe Schools and Communities Violence Prevention and Response Plan Act of 2023"; appropriates \$10 million.

**A4021/S1407** Requires Medicaid coverage for community violence prevention services; Requires DOH to approve training and certification programs for violence prevention professionals.

## Recently Enacted Laws:

**P.L. 2024, c. 52** Requires DOE to establish working group on student literacy; mandates universal literacy screenings for kindergarten through grade three students; requires professional development for certain school district employees.

**P.L. 2024, c. 53** Establishes Office of Learning Equity and Academic Recovery in DOE.