

# THE REAL TEST:

ARE WE COMMITTED TO  
**EXCELLENCE** AND  
**EQUITY** IN  
NEW JERSEY

## Executive Summary

Following years of positive momentum in student achievement set on a foundation of rigorous expectations, some state leaders are seeking a new assessment system that would meet only the bare minimum required by law. The stakes for this decision are high. The future of our state competitiveness and the growth of an innovation economy hinge on having a ready, prepared, and agile workforce. Our students' futures will be influenced by whether we are willing to maintain high standards and capture an objective snapshot of student progression towards those standards.

Since the economic recession, over 95% of new jobs have gone to individuals with at least some education after high school,<sup>1</sup> and those with more education tend to earn more. Unfortunately, only about 45% of New Jersey's population over age 25 hold some form of degree,<sup>2</sup> and median yearly earnings for a high school graduate are significantly lower than for those with more education.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, 70% of students entering New Jersey two-year colleges and 30% entering our four-year colleges required remediation<sup>4</sup>.

A move away from high expectations puts New Jersey at risk of widening the disconnect between a high school graduate and a successful college-goer or employee. Assessments provide one important source of information about how our education system is working. Employers and higher education leaders need evidence that those entering their doors have met certain standards and are prepared for their next stage of life. Teachers and school leaders need data to understand where students are struggling and thriving to provide interventions. Parents need information to help them support their students at home.

Most importantly, equity for all students is at the center of why we test. When the state adopted a more rigorous assessment in 2014, we committed to transparent truth-telling around the academic outcomes of underserved communities to shine a light on the supports needed to make things better for the students and educators in those schools. And we have some inspiring truths to tell. Over the four years that the state has administered the more challenging exam<sup>5</sup>:

- **More students are proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) and math across the grade levels;** for example, over 110,000 more

students met or exceeded grade level expectations in ELA across the grades from 2015-2018 and over 85,000 more did so in math.

- **Performance trends are up across all student subgroups**, such as racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and special needs.
- **New Jersey has led the nation in closing achievement gaps** for African American and Hispanic students. In ELA, African American scores are up by an average 9.5 percentage points and Hispanic scores by 10.9 since 2015, outpacing the state average increase of 7.8.<sup>6</sup>

And yet, disparities within districts point out just how critical it is to have multiple forms of objective data. For example<sup>7</sup>:

- In Montclair, 77% of white students and 71% non-economically disadvantaged are proficient in ELA, compared to 56% of Hispanic, 42% of African American, and 31% of low-income students.
- In Paterson, the high school graduation rate of 85% stands in stark contrast to students' attainment in meeting or exceeding grade level proficiency on the state exam (18% for ELA 10 and 16% for Algebra I).

This report reminds us of the lessons of the past two decades of work in New Jersey to elevate our education system to one of the best in the nation, with equity as the central focus. To inform our state conversation about the next generation of assessments, we offer recommendations in the following categories:

- 1 **Commitment and Philosophy**
- 2 **Alignment with College and Careers**
- 3 **Technical Details and Costs**
- 4 **Implementation**

We believe New Jersey can, and must, pass the real test before us and reaffirm our commitment to equity and excellence for all students. Our future depends on it.

## Foreword

### New Jersey is at a crossroads.

For over a decade, state leaders have purposefully and systematically raised the bar for what New Jersey's 1.4 million public school students must know to prepare for a successful future, and students and educators have risen to the challenge. Since 2015, New Jersey has seen steady gains in student growth and achievement on rigorous, college- and career-aligned state assessments. And these assessments have provided parents and educators with more objective, granular data about student performance than ever before — data that is used to help inform instruction and interventions for the students who need it most.

Yet, in the face of evidence that New Jersey has been leading the nation with a commitment to equity and excellence, the pendulum is swinging in the direction of change. Some state leaders are seeking a new test and want to assess only the bare minimum required by law.

**The stakes for these decisions are high. The future of our state competitiveness and the growth of an innovation economy hinge on having a ready, prepared, and agile workforce. More importantly, our students' futures will be influenced by whether we are willing to maintain high standards and capture an objective snapshot of student progression towards those standards.**

The past several decades have seen many changes to our testing regime (see Appendix A for a brief history and timeline). Since 1983, state assessments have changed in whole or in part seven times.<sup>8</sup>

As we consider the possibility of another new assessment system, we have a fundamental question to answer: Will we maintain challenging standards and assessments that ensure a high school diploma means something for *all* students, and work together to provide additional support to those that need it most? Or, in this pivotal moment, will we reverse years of promising progress and be satisfied with an education system that allows social promotion, leaving a student's future destiny to be determined by ZIP code?

That is the *real* test.

## Students and Educators Are Clearing a Higher Bar

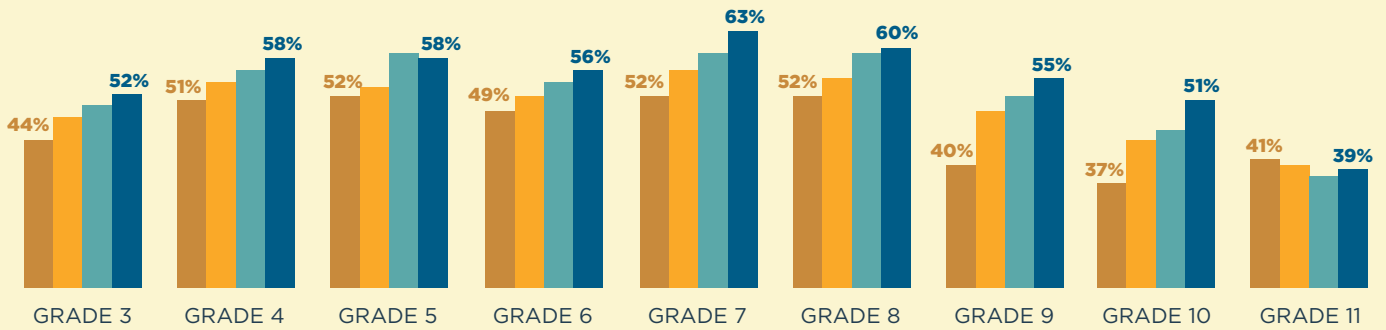
The most recent state assessment results show remarkable gains since 2015.

- On the state exam, where outcomes are aligned closely with the Nation's Report Card,<sup>9</sup> **more students are proficient in English Language Arts (ELA) and math across the grade levels.** From 2015-2018:
  - » Over 110,000 more students met or exceeded grade level expectations in ELA.
  - » Over 85,000 more students met or exceeded grade level expectations in math.<sup>10</sup>
- **New Jersey's 90.9% graduation rate<sup>11</sup> is becoming more meaningful**, as more students are moving toward proficiency in courses much more aligned with college expectations than the previous state testing regime.<sup>12</sup>

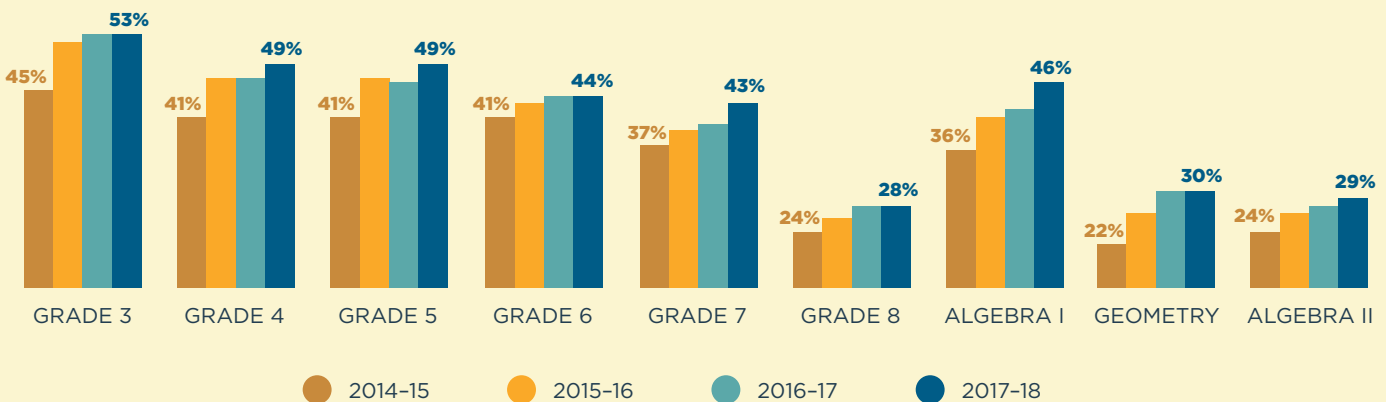
Evidence indeed shows that students and educators are steadily progressing over the higher bar. In fact, New Jersey has been a national leader in student achievement gains since 2015, including for racial and ethnic subgroups.<sup>13</sup>

New Jersey State Board of Education President Arcelio Aponte recently commented on these impressive gains in light of the concerns expressed several years ago when the state moved toward higher standards, including setting Algebra I as the minimum bar for math proficiency:

**FIGURE 1** ELA\* Performance Trends:  
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations<sup>i</sup>



**FIGURE 2** Math\*\* Performance Trends:  
Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Expectations<sup>i</sup>



\*Grade 11 students who took AP/IB English were exempt from taking the PARCC ELA exam.

\*\*Results for grades 6-8 do not include students who took the Algebra I, Geometry, or Algebra II end of course tests in those grades.

<sup>i</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. Statewide Assessment Reports, PARCC Results 2014-15; 2015-16; 2015-17; 2017-18. <https://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/>.

“The argument then ... was that if you increase the rigor, if you require higher standards, you’ll have more students failing and dropping out,” Aponte said. “I am so pleased that this is not the case and we are able to state that we made the right decision to better prepare our students for their future. To sit here and see this chart trending upwards over the years is just a tribute to the work of the Department and in particular to the school teachers who are out there every day in the classroom trying to prepare our students. It is a testament to all the hard work that’s going on across the state of New Jersey. We’ll continue to challenge and to better prepare our students, to set the bar high; no matter what their race, ethnicity, zip code, we want our students to be the very best, and to allow them to have options to choose college or enter the workforce.”<sup>14</sup>

## How Did We Get Here?

New Jersey has followed an intentional and bipartisan path to national leadership in academic achievement.

In 2014, things seemed to be going just fine for education in the Garden State. The graduation rate was 88.6%,<sup>15</sup> with 93.2% of eleventh graders performing at or above expectations in Language Arts Literacy and 78.9% in math on the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), our former statewide exam.<sup>16</sup> New Jersey students were outscoring most of their peers across the nation on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the national gold standard test.

But a closer look revealed troubling realities. The HSPA did not measure college or work readiness,<sup>17</sup> making it no surprise that 70% of students entering New Jersey two-year colleges and 30% entering our four-year colleges required remediation.<sup>18</sup> While outperforming peers in other states, only one-third of our students scored proficient in math and 41% in reading on the NAEP.<sup>19</sup> And the achievement gaps — the chasm between the academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students and racial and ethnic minorities and their more privileged counterparts — told the story of two New Jerseys: one for the haves, and one for the have-nots.

Following years of momentum that built upon former Gov. Jon Corzine’s High School Redesign Steering Committee report in 2008 and was spurred by President Obama’s Race to the Top and adoption of more rigorous academic standards in 2010, we committed as a state to the notion that every New Jersey student is capable of achieving at high levels:

- As recommended by Corzine’s High School Redesign Steering Committee, the state moved to require more advanced testing, including in Algebra II, a course proven to be a strong predictor of college-level success and a gateway to higher level academics.<sup>20</sup>
- In 2015, we began using a new exam designed to measure real-world skills aligned to the more challenging state learning standards.<sup>21</sup>

The name of the new exam, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, has become a political lightning rod that has co-opted the conversation around the need for an objective measure of what we expect from our public school graduates.

**This report is not about the politics of PARCC, but rather the objective evidence that our state commitment to high expectations is bearing fruit.** As we imagine the next generation of New Jersey’s assessment system, we must build on this momentum by focusing on improvements that will help all students and educators without jeopardizing the gains made across the state.

**“The committee represented educators, administrators, community leaders, and businesses. By keeping focused on the goal of public education — student success after high school — and by insisting on a deliberate, researched, and transparent process, we were able to set aside our differences and agree on an ambitious pathway for New Jersey students. Our work set the stage for significant improvements since then.”**

*—Mary O’Malley, High School Redesign Steering Committee Member*

## Why Education Matters to New Jersey and Our Citizens

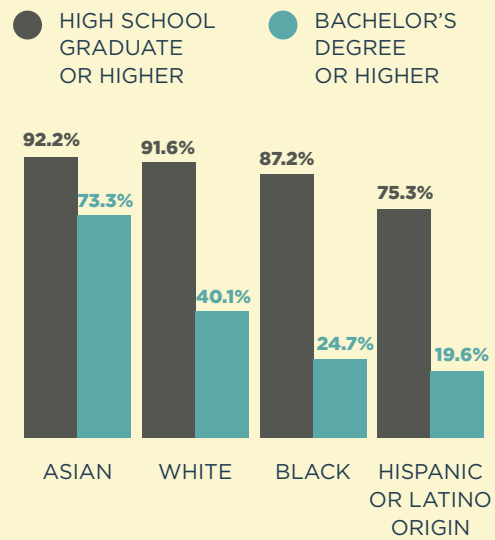
Postsecondary education has become critical for success in the workplace in the global economy. Since the economic recession, over 95% of new jobs have gone to individuals with at least some education after high school,<sup>22</sup> and those with more education tend to earn more.

**\$63,725: Difference in median yearly earnings between the highest and lowest levels of educational attainment in New Jersey<sup>23</sup>**

“Middle-skill jobs—those that require some training or education beyond high school—make up the largest share of New Jersey’s labor market, but only 37% of New Jersey’s workforce are prepared for these jobs. *US News, Forbes, and USA Today* all rank New Jersey as #2 in the nation for K-12 education, but our employers still struggle to find the talent they need to fill available positions. We need high standards and aligned assessments to ensure that **all** students, regardless of where they live, are prepared to work and enjoy the quality of life we have in the Garden State.”

—Donna Custard, President of the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce Foundation

**FIGURE 3** NJ Educational Attainment by Race<sup>ii</sup>



ii U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Unfortunately, the Garden State has far to go in providing the educated workforce employers need and the income New Jersey residents need. Only about 45% of our population over age 25 hold some form of degree,<sup>23</sup> and median yearly earnings for a high school graduate are significantly lower than for those with more education.<sup>24</sup>

Even more troubling, educational attainment achievement gaps show that Asian and white New Jerseyans are earning a bachelor’s degree or higher at significantly greater rates than their black and Hispanic or Latino counterparts. Quite simply, we must do better at providing effective pathways for all our citizens to a successful future.

## Promising Gains, Persistent Inequities

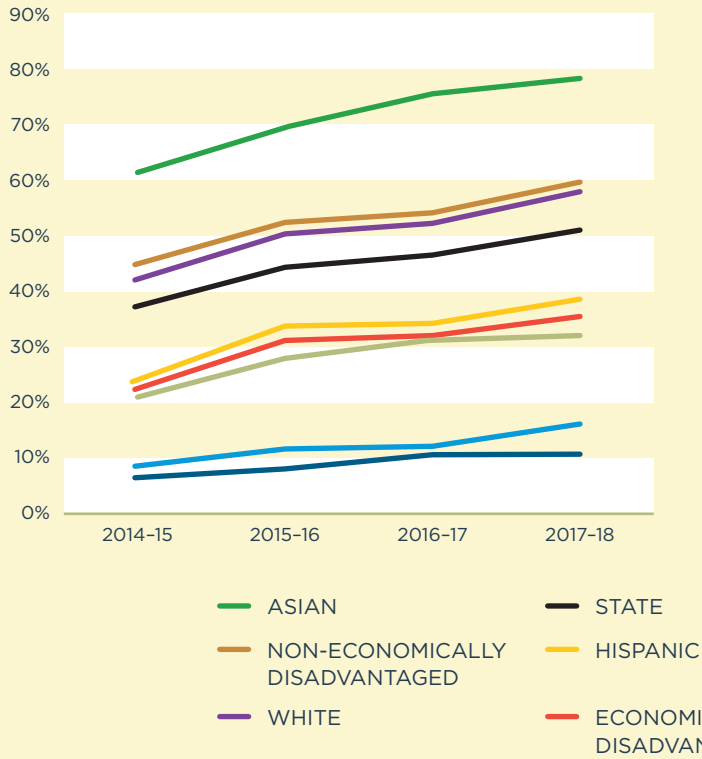
One benefit to the state assessment system over the past four years is the availability of much more robust and meaningful data than ever before. State and district leaders worked to expand school technology capabilities to allow for a computer test (while still providing accommodations for all student needs). The system also expanded data infrastructure, so that we now have detailed data to track and compare how students are doing year over year.

As described on pages 3-4, state achievement trends have risen significantly since 2015. Promisingly, some of the students who have been exposed to the more rigorous standards and assessments the longest have seen some of the greatest gains over time.

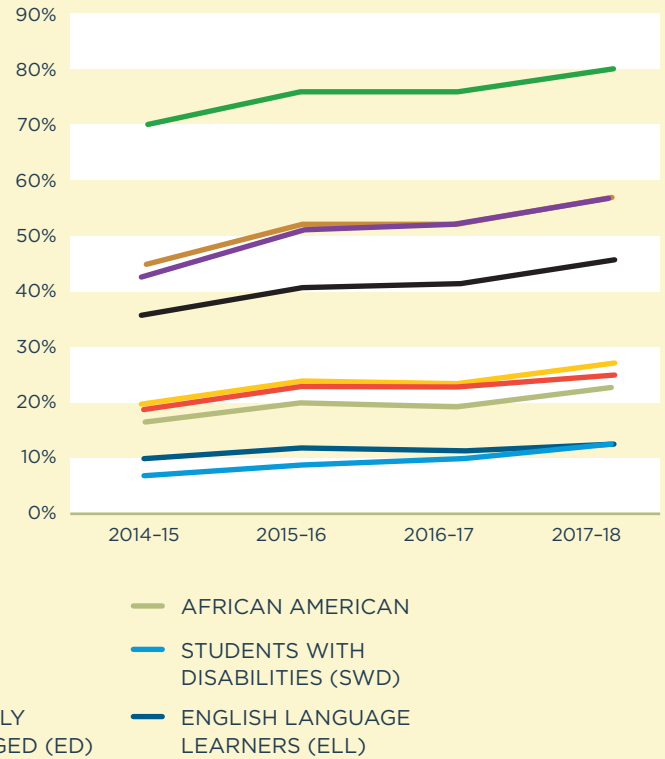
- A cohort of **250,000 of the same elementary school students who took the exam for three consecutive years posted extraordinary gains** from 2015 to 2017; **even the lowest-performing students in that cohort made dramatic improvements over that time**, with close to half moving up one or more levels in ELA and math.<sup>25</sup>
- **African American and Hispanic students have shown encouraging growth** since 2015 as well; in ELA, African American scores are up by an average 9.5 percentage points and Hispanic scores by 10.9,



**FIGURE 4** ELA 10 Achievement Gaps: Percent Met/Exceeded Expectations<sup>iii</sup>



**FIGURE 5** Algebra I Achievement Gaps: Percent Met/Exceeded Expectations<sup>iii</sup>



<sup>iii</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. Statewide Assessment Reports, PARCC Results 2014-15; 2015-16; 2015-17; 2017-18. <https://www.nj.gov/education/schools/achievement/>.

outpacing the state average increase of 7.8 and **placing New Jersey at the top among states for these kinds of gains.**<sup>26</sup>

And yet, we still have far to go in achieving a vision of an equitable education system for all students and achievement gaps persist. On ELA 10 and Algebra I, two critical high school academic benchmarks, Asian, white, and non-economically disadvantaged students are far outperforming their peers of other racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and special needs populations.<sup>27</sup> These gaps remind us why we need objective data that illuminates disparities in opportunities and outcomes for students in different areas of the state — and even within the same districts.

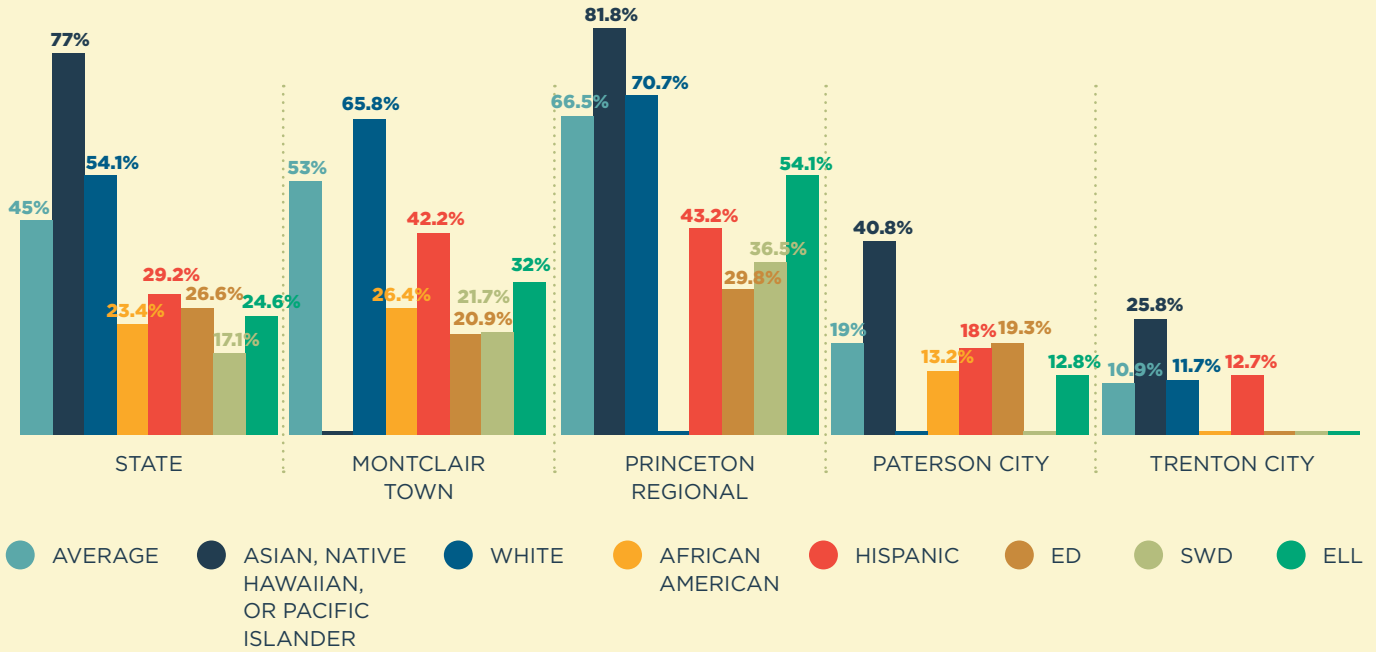
Despite recent gains:

- There are **50% more kids reading on grade level in Princeton than in Paterson.**
- In Trenton, **18% of high-schoolers are meeting college and career readiness benchmarks** in reading and writing, **compared to 72% statewide.**
- Within districts like Montclair, **76.7% of white students and 71.3% of non-economically disadvantaged students are proficient in ELA, compared to 56.2% of Hispanic, 41.9% of African American, and 31.2% of low-income students.**<sup>28</sup>

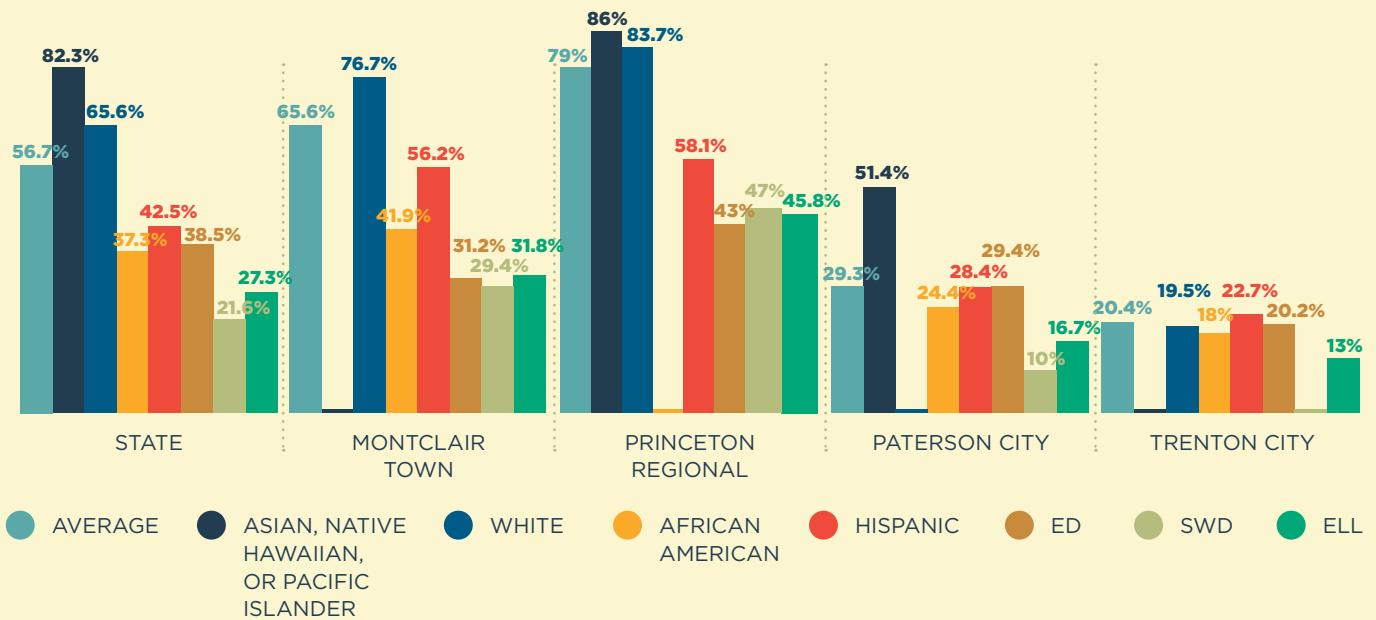
Without consistent, transparent information about these disparities, we won't be able to equitably serve our students — and our future.

**FIGURES 6 & 7** 2017-18 State & District Performance by Student Group\*:  
Percent Met/Exceeded Expectations<sup>iv</sup>

**MATH**



**ELA**

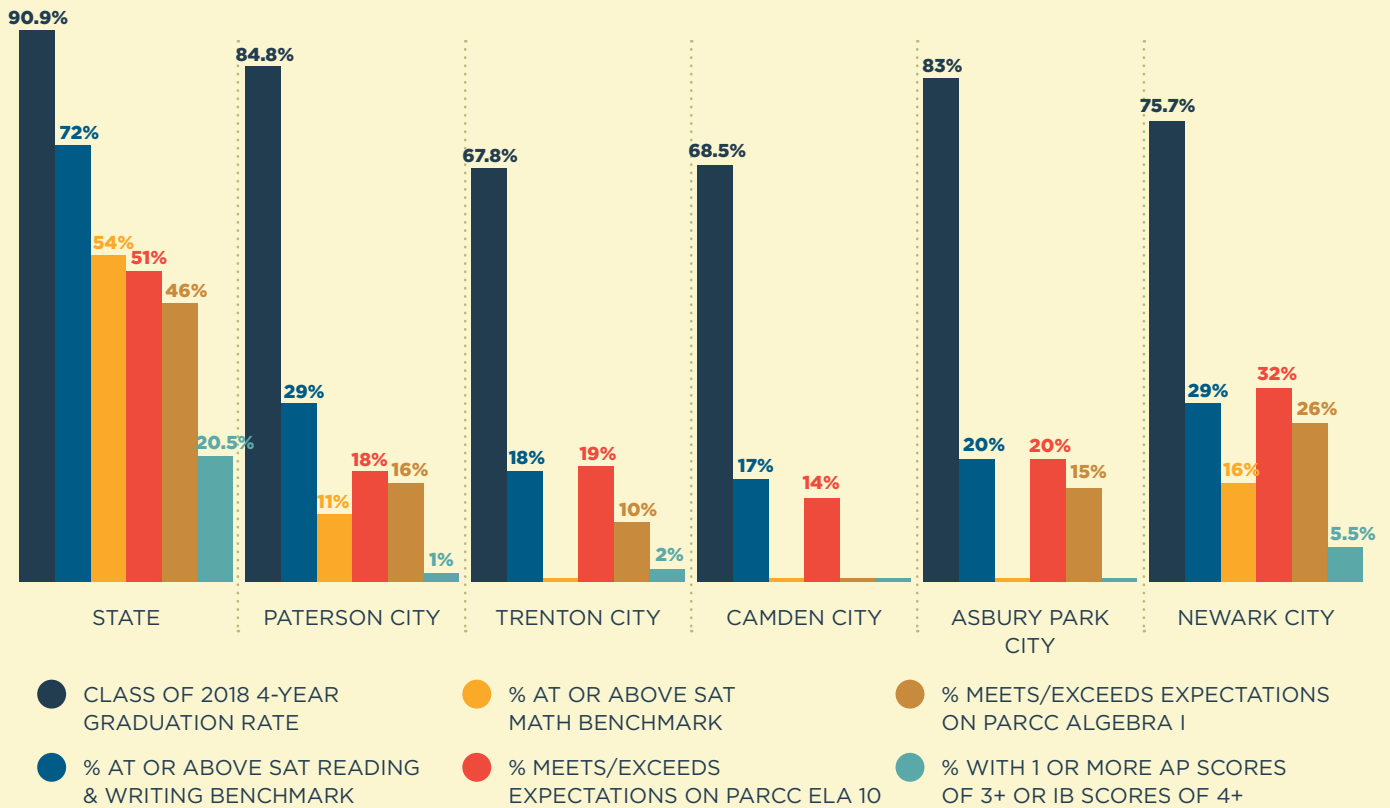


\*Missing information indicates data was only available for fewer than 10 or a small percentage of students.

<sup>iv</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. District Performance Reports, 2017-18. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/> (Montclair Town; Paterson City; Princeton Regional; Trenton City).



**FIGURE 8** State & City District Performance Across Metrics\* 2017-18<sup>v</sup>



\*Missing information indicates data was only available for fewer than 10 or a small percentage of students.

<sup>v</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. District Performance Reports, 2017-18. <https://rc.doe.state.nj.us/> (Asbury Park City; Camden City; Newark City; Paterson City; Trenton City).

## The Importance of Multiple Objective Measures

All agree that a school accountability system must include multiple measures, and that no one result alone should be used to judge performance. A look at outcomes across a few indicators in diverse districts emphasizes just how important it is to examine more than one factor.

- In Paterson, the **high-school graduation rate of 84.8 percent stands in stark contrast to students' attainment of college and career benchmarks** on the SAT (29% for reading and writing and 11% for math) **and in meeting or exceeding grade-level proficiency** on the state exam (18% for ELA 10 and 16% for Algebra I).
- In Trenton, Camden, and Asbury Park, **too few students have eligible data to even report on some PARCC, SAT, and/or AP and IB outcomes.**

When parents are presented with a visual like the one shown above, they can ask their school and district leaders why graduation rates are so high when academic achievement and college readiness levels are drastically lower, and they can advocate for and support the assistance their children and schools need to do better.

Educators and district and state leaders also need many forms of data to identify students who need additional support to achieve to their full potential, and to direct resources accordingly. New Jersey’s Lighthouse Districts offer one glimpse into the way educators have used assessment and other data to inform instruction and improve student outcomes. These seven diverse school districts were named by the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) in 2017 for their dramatic improvements in student math and ELA performance over time.<sup>29</sup>

The K-8 Beverly City district, for example, has used assessment data over the past several years as part of a comprehensive approach to improve student achievement. Since 2015, Beverly City has increased the students meeting or exceeding expectations by 20 percentage points in ELA and by 15 in math.<sup>30</sup>

These districts and schools have demonstrated how test results are not an endpoint, but rather a starting point for identifying areas of strength and opportunities for growth in individual

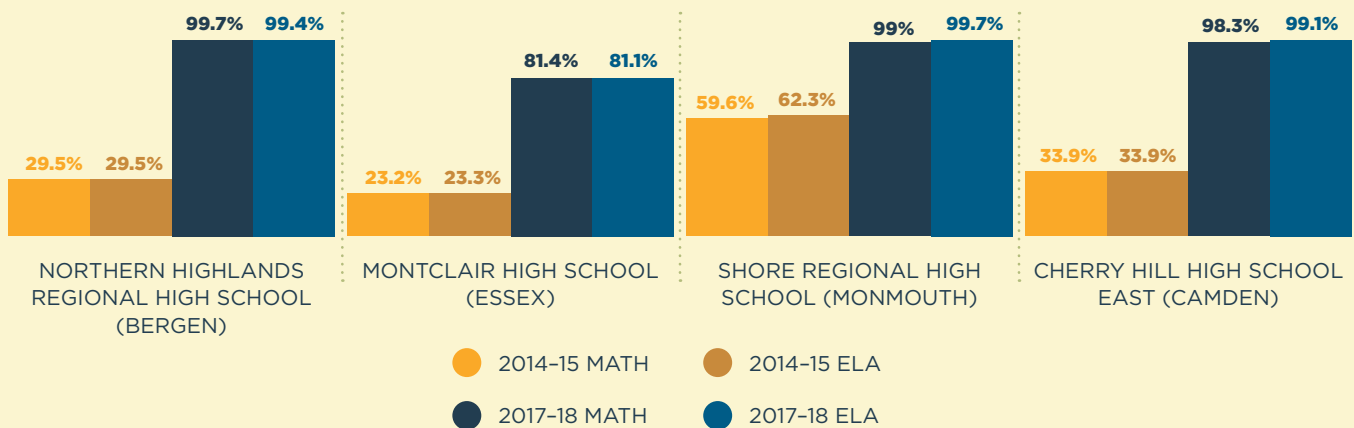
**“Beverly City School District was recognized not only as the flagship of the Lighthouse Districts, but also a National Title I Distinguished School due in part to the data we were able to glean from PARCC. The assessment data was the first step in creating a culture of accountability beginning with the teachers, but working its way all the way to the administration.”**

*— Liz Giacobbe, Beverly City Superintendent*

### Opt-out Declines

When the PARCC exam first rolled out in 2014-15, it was met with opposition from some groups of educators and parents. This led to an opt-out movement where parents refused to let their children sit for the test. Over the past four years, this trend has sharply declined. The chart below shows a dramatic increase in participation rates in a sample of secondary schools across four diverse counties. As schools, students, and families have become more comfortable with the assessment, participation has grown significantly.<sup>31</sup>

**FIGURE 9** High School Testing Participation Rate Trends<sup>vi</sup>



<sup>vi</sup> New Jersey Department of Education. School Performance Reports, 2014-15 and 2017-18. (Cherry Hill HS East 14-15 and 17-18; Montclair HS 14-15 and 17-18; Northern Highlands Regional HS 14-15 and 17-18; Shore Regional HS 14-15 and 17-18).

students as well as schools and districts. This emphasis on using data to improve instruction is being replicated in schools across the state — schools that have now invested five years in adjusting to higher expectations and working hard to prepare students to meet them.

## Recommendations for the Next Generation of State Assessments

Gov. Phil Murphy and the NJDOE have announced that the state will pursue a new assessment system for the future.

As a first step, the NJDOE renamed and shortened the test for the 2018-19 school year, and the State Board of Education proposed reducing required end of course exams for high school.<sup>32</sup> The July 2018 Summary of Findings, Recommendations for Next Steps from the NJDOE’s Statewide Assessment Outreach effort reveals top-line recommendations from a statewide listening tour, including “keeping our standards and assessment questions that require critical thinking; making sure any changes are communicated clearly and with time for smooth implementation and professional development; and keeping parents and teachers engaged in the process of the transition.”<sup>33</sup>

The recommendations identified below echo these themes as well as the context provided throughout this report; they represent a set of essential considerations for our state as we look toward the future and consider how to deliver the system our students need and deserve.

### 1 Commitment and Philosophy

**We must consider the lessons of the past two decades of work in New Jersey that have elevated our education system to one of the best in the nation, with equity as the central focus. To maintain our status as a leading state, we should:**

- Keep the end goal in mind: that all New Jersey students deserve to earn a diploma that signifies readiness for success.
- Ensure that a new state assessment system remains aligned to the New Jersey Student Learning Standards and can provide standards-level data that enables educators to improve curriculum and instruction.
- Allow the state assessment system to evolve in a systematic way that is informed by evidence of student progress and maintains longitudinal data.

## 2 Alignment with College and Careers

In recent years, the college-ready performance levels identified by PARCC, SAT, and ACT, and validated by higher education faculty, have allowed students to demonstrate aptitude.<sup>34</sup> The New Jersey Business and Industry Association (NJBIA)'s Postsecondary Task Force Report recommends expanded capacity for career and technical education (CTE) programs as well as internships and apprenticeships, and more employer-driven opportunities in K-12.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, we should:

- Pursue ways to align the state assessment system with New Jersey two- and four-year college entrance and placement requirements that could eliminate other assessments currently used for these purposes.
- Partner with the employer community to incorporate more career-readiness measures into the state assessment system.
- Pursue a test that challenges and teaches, asking students to demonstrate critical thinking and show their ability to draw inferences and extrapolate ideas.

**“Regardless of the pathway students take in their postsecondary education career, today’s employers consistently suggest that the incoming workforce lacks technical as well as employability skills; such as, problem solving, teamwork, and self-direction.”**

*— NJBIA Postsecondary Task Force*

## 3 Technical Details and Costs

New Jersey is not alone in making changes to the state testing regime. Since 2014, most states across the country have made a host of changes that range from tweaking names and length of content to adopting wholly new assessment systems.<sup>36</sup> Some of these changes have come at a cost. In Tennessee and New York, testing platform failures have led to significant disruptions and the inability to use resulting data.<sup>37</sup> In Ohio, the state has paid \$42.50 per pupil for the ACT and \$45 per pupil for the SAT<sup>38</sup> — nearly double the costs per pupil for PARCC in New Jersey.<sup>39</sup> To avoid these pitfalls, we should:

- Ensure the assessment system encourages the appropriate use of technology and leverages the significant upgrades already in place, while maintaining accommodations for diverse student needs.
- Be mindful of the technical details of test administration, ensuring compliance with federal and state laws and related funding streams, as well as maintenance of a testing platform that can operate effectively during the testing window.
- Have a clear understanding of the costs associated with a new test, both financial and human capital.

## 4 Implementation

Significant time and effort are required to develop, field test, and implement a new exam. The NJDOE trained thousands of educators on PARCC and over 42,000 students took the field test during the year before full implementation. Similar testing and training will be required for any brand-new assessment system. Further, the state has significantly expanded data capacity and structures, allowing for critical year-over-year trendlines and transparent public-facing reports. To build on these efforts, we should:

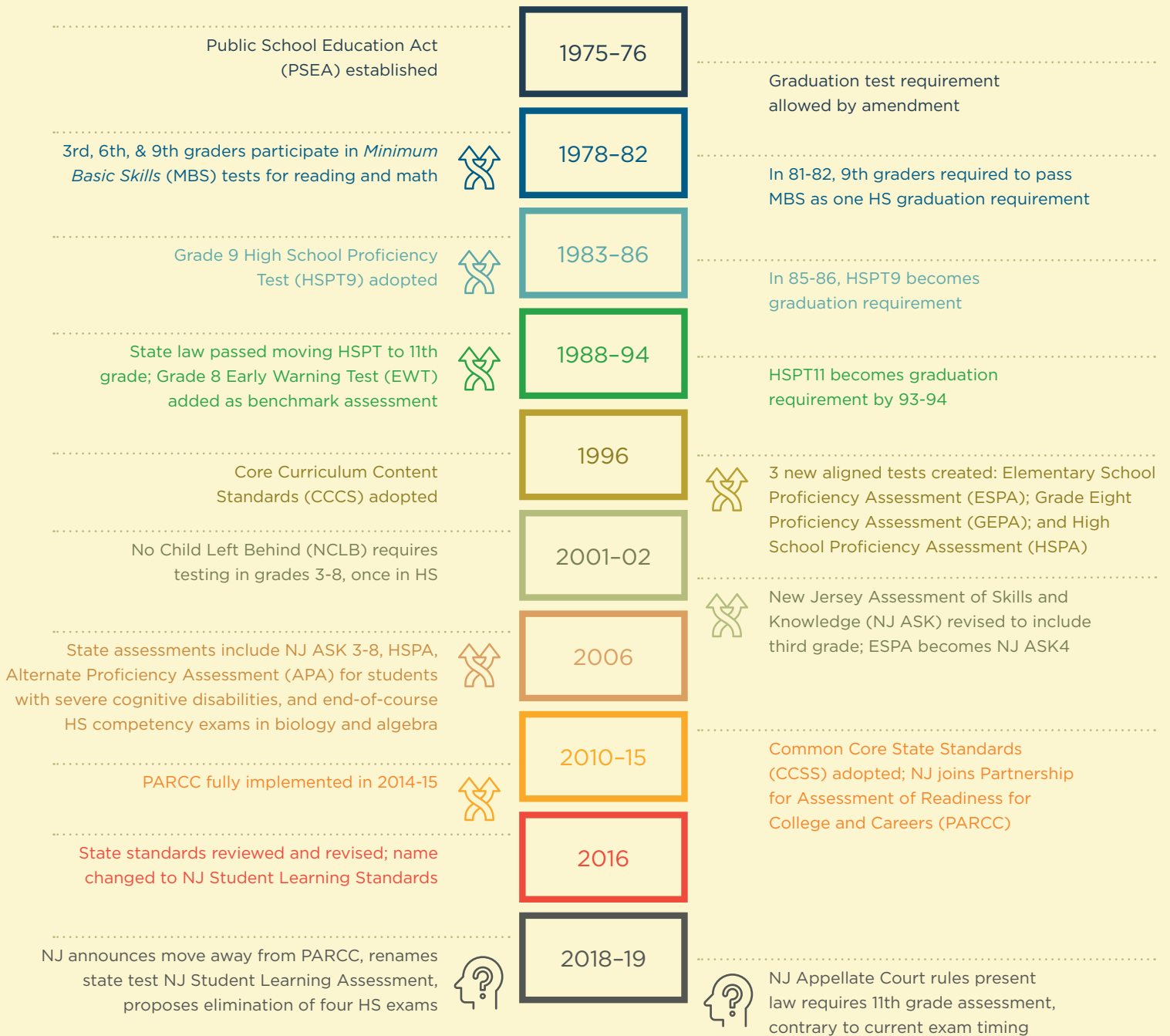
- Consider elements of the current assessment system that can be preserved to minimize time and cost disruptions.
- Take the proper time in transitioning to any new assessments. Gov. Corzine’s High School Redesign Steering Committee took two years to finalize and socialize recommendations; a deliberate, inclusive process is critical and was echoed by the Murphy administration’s recent report.
- Explore the formative assessments that districts can use to prepare students for the final summative tests. Are these of high quality, or will they add more testing time without adding value?
- Ensure testing data is:
  - » Transparent and accessible;
  - » Usable for comparisons within and across schools, districts, and the state by student characteristics and special needs; and
  - » Comparable with results from the past four years so we don’t lose awareness of critical trends that illuminate the students who need the most support.
- Incorporate timely, clear, and useful data reporting structures that allow maximum benefit to all audiences.

## The Future: Will New Jersey Pass the Test?

A late December 2018 decision by the State Appellate Court ruled that New Jersey’s current assessment regulations are in violation of the state law requiring an eleventh-grade test. The NJDOE struck an agreement to grandfather in current high school students to existing practice, but uncertainty remains as to high school exam and graduation requirements for future classes.<sup>40</sup> Consistent with state requirements, the NJDOE has indicated that it will release a request for proposal (RFP) for a new test vendor to develop a “next generation assessment.” The process to have that RFP approved and to then develop and implement a new system can take several years.

We must consider the context and use the recommendations provided in this report to inform the conversation around our next generation of assessments. We must not rush to a quick solution that short-changes our children’s future. Instead, state leaders, educators, parents, and advocates alike must pass the real test before us and reaffirm our commitment to equity and excellence for all students in New Jersey.

## APPENDIX A Evolution of New Jersey's State Assessment<sup>vii</sup>



ASSESSMENT CHANGES  
HAVE OCCURRED



WE DON'T KNOW WHAT THE  
NEXT CHANGE WILL BE

vii Historical Context: Overview of New Jersey's Statewide Testing Program," New Jersey Department of Education. Accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.nj.gov/education/assessment/history.shtml>.

## Endnotes

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- 9 Released in February 2016, AIR's National Benchmarks for State Achievement Standards Study (<http://www.air.org/resource/national-benchmarks-state-achievement-standards>) examines three multi-state tests (PARCC, Smarter Balanced, and ACT Aspire) and reports that PARCC is the only assessment to have college-ready achievement standards comparable in difficulty to the NAEP Proficient level.
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## About JerseyCAN

JerseyCAN: The New Jersey Campaign for Achievement Now advocates for all students across the state to have access to high-quality schools. We work to improve policies and programs to support equity and excellence in New Jersey education.

[www.JerseyCAN.org](http://www.JerseyCAN.org)

