

New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus

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Members of the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus & Advocates from the Disability Community Discuss Access to Safe and Inclusive Education at Quarterly Meeting

Trenton, NJ – On April 23, the bipartisan New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus met virtually to discuss the critical need to ensure students with disabilities receive safe and inclusive education from the moment they board the school bus in the morning, throughout their school day and on their return trip home. Specifically, the discussion focused on how the shortage of special education teachers is impacting classroom inclusion and recommendations on how to bolster recruitment and retention, as well as policy changes needed to safeguard the health and wellness of every child on their way to and from school. Caucus Co-Chair, Assemblywoman Aura Dunn, led the important and informative conversation.

Education leaders, [Dr. Michelle CarneyRay-Yoder](#), Superintendent of Central Regional School District, and [Dr. Regina Peter](#), Founder and Co-Executive Director of the Newmark Schools shared the unique challenges they face in hiring and retaining qualified special education teachers to meet the needs of their students. Both discussed the need for the state to reexamine the certification process, as special education teacher candidates face additional requirements that often serve as an unnecessary barrier for entry into the field. More flexibility in hiring would provide schools with a greater applicant pool without compromising teacher quality.

“The shortage of special education teachers is not a secret but hearing from those charged with doing the hiring was eye-opening,” said Mercedes Witowsky, Executive Director of New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities. “There are several bills pending in Trenton being championed by our Caucus members that would certainly help by expanding eligibility for teacher loan redemption and scholarship programs, permitting the State Board of Education to issue new teacher certification endorsements, and streamline the certification process. We all look forward to continued progress on this front,” she concluded.

[Paul Aronsohn](#), Ombudsman, Office of the Ombudsman for Individuals with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and Their Families, started the latter half of the meeting focused on school transportation safety. He commended the Caucus for including the topic as part of a greater conversation on special education as transportation is an integral part of the overall learning experience for students. It’s an issue that has become an urgent priority for his office after the tragic loss of 3 students in the past year in school bus incidents. His office is expected to release its latest annual report in the coming weeks

detailing several recommendations to enhance school transportation safety, including at minimum, increased communication, cameras on buses, and greater accountability at the local level.

Much of policy-change is being led by Anabela Rossi who courageously spoke about the gaps and weaknesses in the system and how specific changes can improve student safety. Anabela Rossi lost her 19-year-old son on the way home from school last year. Ms. Rossi is working closely with Paul Aronsohn and other advocates pushing for new safety regulations and oversight on school transportation vehicles. Both have already met with the newly established [Office of School Bus Safety](#) at the NJ Department of Education and several legislators on the matter, including Caucus Co-Chair Senator Bucco who along with other Caucus members are working on a bill to establish new safety features, establish a School Transportation Commission within the NJ Department of Education, to name just a few.

“No parent should have to endure an unspeakable loss of their child like Ms. Rossi,” said Caucus Co-Chair Assemblywoman Aura Dunn. “I am grateful to her for sharing her recommendations and for her selfless advocacy to protect the lives of other children. This Caucus is about turning information into action. I am confident we can continue to move New Jersey closer to safe and inclusive education for all learners by all working together. I thank my dedicated Co-Chairs for their leadership and all the members of the Caucus for their commitment to this important work. We are indeed, better together.”

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***About the New Jersey Legislative Disability Caucus:** The Caucus was formed December 1, 2020, and serves as a bipartisan forum within the New Jersey Legislature for lawmakers and their staff to consider the impact on the disability community when shaping ALL public policies in the Garden State. The Caucus is co-chaired by Senate Majority Leader Teresa Ruiz (D-29), Assembly Majority Leader Lou Greenwald (D-6), Senator Anthony Bucco (R-25) and Assemblywoman Aura Dunn (R-25). Participation in the Caucus is open to all legislators who agree to be champions for individuals with disabilities in New Jersey by meeting with them in their district offices; participate in the quarterly education forums; and promote policies to improve the lives of people with disabilities and their families. People with disabilities, their families and organizations that serve, support and advocate for people with disabilities in the Garden State serve as a resource for the NJ Legislative Disability Caucus. For more information about the Caucus and to get involved, visit <https://njcdd.org/legislative-disability-caucus/>.*

Addressing Safe and Inclusive Education Roundtable Recording, April 23, 2024:
<https://youtu.be/jZifJcV485k>