



Capacity-Building: Supporting Black and Hispanic
Communities to Reduce Seclusion, Restraint, Suspension,
and Expulsion in Schools

Final Report

Submitted September 23, 2025



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Introduction

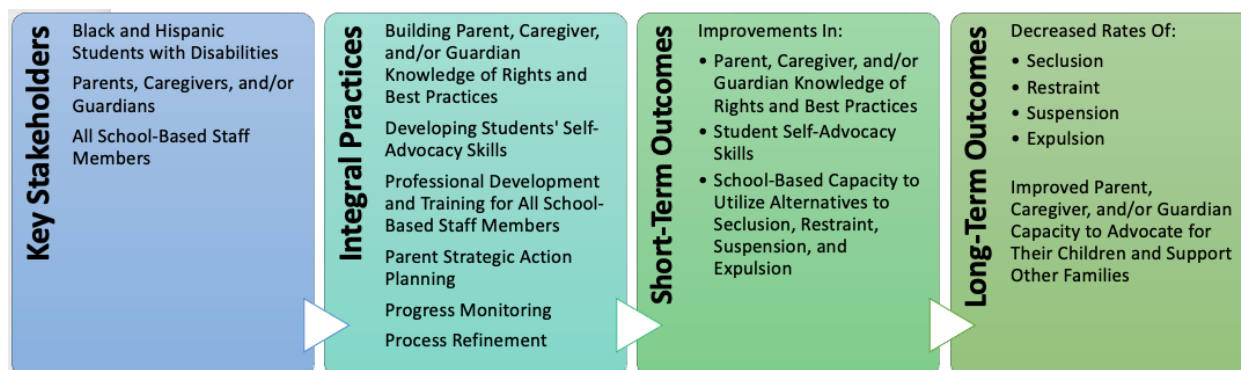
ALL IN for Inclusive Education (ALL IN), formerly the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education, in collaboration with INCLUDENJ and EPIC, is pleased to provide the final report for the *Capacity-Building: Supporting Black and Hispanic Communities to Reduce Seclusion, Restraint, Suspension, and Expulsion in Schools* project which the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities (NJCDD) generously funded.

With NJCDD's support, this project helped schools, families, and students address one of the most pressing equity challenges in education: the disproportionate use of seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion on Black and Hispanic students. Over the course of the project, our team worked collaboratively with educators, parents/caregivers, and students to build knowledge, skills, and efficacy in creating inclusive, culturally responsive school communities.

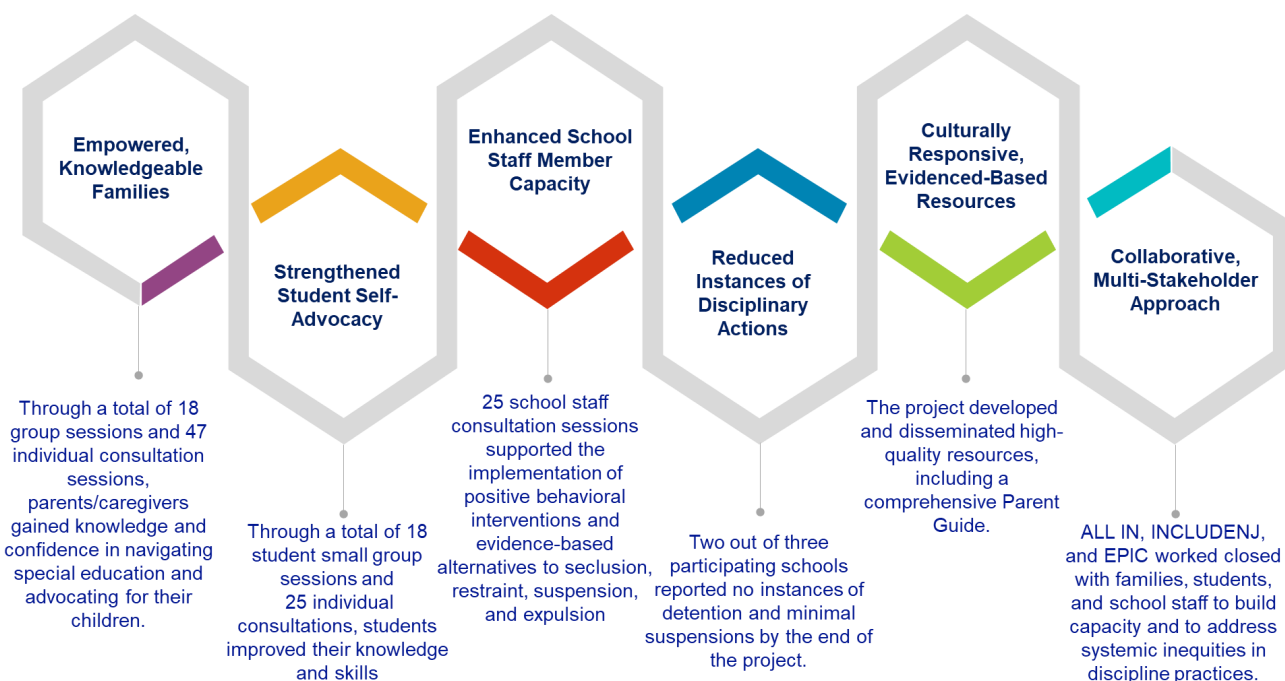
Our strategy was comprehensive and collaborative, as we equipped all stakeholders with evidence-based resources, delivered high-quality training, and developed practical and accessible resources to sustain impact beyond the scope of our work. Each partnering organization brought its own unique expertise to this project. ALL IN served as the lead agency, providing both services to stakeholders and project evaluation. EPIC assisted in providing services to parents/caregivers. IncludeNJ developed the comprehensive parent manual for use and dissemination during this project. Together we cultivated capacity for lasting change, as all organizations committed to and brought experience in helping build and sustain inclusive school communities.

This report documents the theory of change, major project highlights, activities undertaken, outcomes achieved, and the lasting impact of the project. This report was developed to provide NJCDD with a comprehensive account of how project resources were utilized, the impact of collaborative efforts, and the progress made toward reducing seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion in three school districts serving higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students.

Project Theory of Change



Major Project Highlights



Part I: Overarching Project Goals

This project had four overarching goals, which included:

- Goal 1: Provide advocacy-related training, support, information, and/or technical assistance to at least 30 families in 3 different school communities.
- Goal 2: Provide students with information and support to build their self-advocacy skills within school systems.
- Goal 3: Build school-based capacity to utilize best practices in positive behavioral supports and research-based alternatives to seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion.
- Goal 4: Develop and distribute high-quality reports of progress and utilize best practices in sustainability and replication.

Part II: Project Narrative, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation

Project Narrative

Project team members implemented a multi-pronged, comprehensive approach designed to meet the four primary goals of the EPIC Project. Core components included parent, student, and school staff training, consultations, and resource dissemination geared towards building capacity of all stakeholders to reduce the use of seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion. The multi-pronged approach embedded best practices in culturally-responsive and evidence-based provision of services. Figure 1 highlights the integral components of the multi-pronged intervention model implemented for this project.



Figure 1: Multi-Pronged Intervention Model



Development

A range of high-quality resources were developed to ensure effective, culturally appropriate implementation of this multi-pronged effort. For the EPIC Project, high-quality was defined as research-based and specifically tailored to meet the needs of our participants. All materials and practices were grounded in evidence and selected to ensure relevance and effectiveness for the communities we served. Additionally, our work was guided by a commitment to culturally appropriate and responsive practices, which encompassed utilizing resources and engagement strategies that were intentionally designed and implemented to reflect, affirm, and draw upon cultural background, identities, and lived experiences of participating students, parents, and caregivers. By centering cultural relevance and inclusivity, the project fostered meaningful

engagement and equitable participation for all involved. Highlights of development materials are summarized below.

1. **Parent/Caregiver Supports**

- a. Recruitment Materials
- b. Consent Forms
- c. Intake/Data Gathering Forms
- d. Progress Monitoring Materials
- e. High-Quality, Culturally Appropriate Parent Meeting Presentation Materials and Resources around the following topics:
 - i. Parental Rights
 - ii. Understanding the IEP
 - iii. Self-Advocacy for Students and Families
 - iv. Building School-Parent Partnerships
 - v. Strategies for Home and School
 - vi. How to Create a Special Education Advisory Group (SE PAG)

2. **Student Supports**

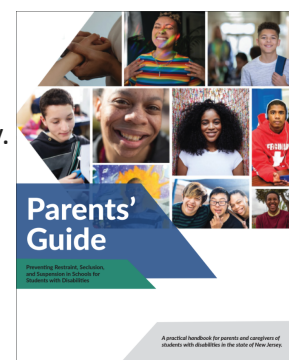
- a. Consent Forms
- b. Intake/Data Gathering Forms
- c. Progress Monitoring Materials
- d. High-Quality, Developmentally and Culturally Appropriate Student Group Session Materials focused on the following topics:
 - i. Self-Advocacy
 - ii. Conflict Resolution
 - iii. Personal Goal Setting
 - iv. Self-Regulation
 - v. Self-Esteem

3. **School Staff Supports**

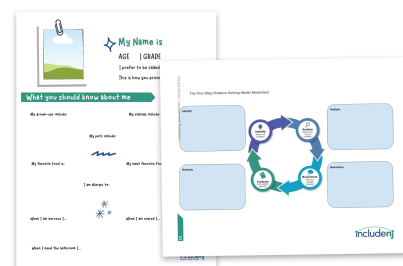
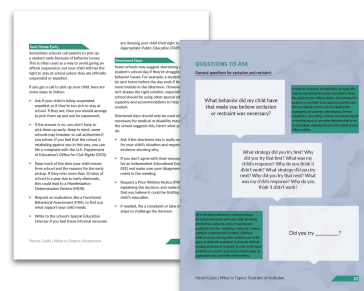
- a. Student and School-Specific Consultation Materials and Resources

4. **Parent Manual and Policy Guidance**

- a. Parents' Guide
 - i. This parent guide shares valuable information about the policies and procedures related to restraint, seclusion, and suspension in New Jersey. The team designed the comprehensive handbook to help parents and caregivers understand all rights and to share resources available to support in advocacy efforts. Topics covered in the handbook included:
 1. When School Isn't Safe
 2. Federal and State Statutes and Policies on Restraint, Seclusion, and Suspension



3. Who is Affected Most
4. The Basics of an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
5. How Restraint, Seclusion, and Suspension are Reflected in the IEP
6. What to Expect from Your District in the Event of Restraint or Seclusion
7. What to Expect from Your District in the Event of Suspension
8. Building School-Parent Partnerships
9. Creating a Community of Support
10. Frequently Asked Questions
11. Samples and Templates
12. Getting Your Children's Behavior in Shape at Home Using PBIS
13. Glossary and Terms



5. Ongoing Project Evaluation and Refinement

- a. Comprehensive Evaluation Plan
- b. Intake Materials
- c. Progress Monitoring Materials and Procedures
- d. Reporting Materials including:
 - i. Presentation for the Council on March 13, 2025
 - ii. Final Report Submitted to the Council on September 23, 2025

Implementation

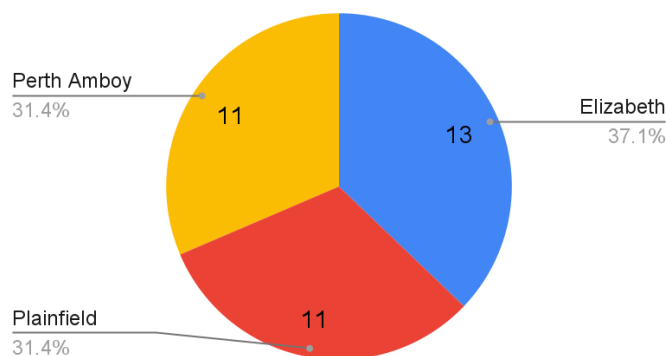
In order to successfully meet the goals of this EPIC project, team members implemented a strategic recruitment process, successfully delivered programmatic supports for parents/caregivers, students, and school staff members, and collected and aggregated data to monitor progress, evaluate effectiveness, and determine overall impact.

1. Recruitment Process

- a. The EPIC Project recruited at least 30 families from three New Jersey school districts with high rates of seclusion, restraint, suspension, and/or expulsion. Recruitment efforts focused on parents, caregivers, and guardians of Black and Hispanic students with disabilities, who experience these practices at disproportionately higher rates compared to their peers. Using district-level data to guide a rigorous selection process, the EPIC team identified Perth Amboy, Elizabeth, and Plainfield as partner districts. Figure 2 presents the number of families recruited by each district.



Figure 2: Number of Families Recruited by Participating District



2. Project Implementation

- a. In total, EPIC team members provided the following:
 - i. 18 Parent/Caregiver Group Sessions,
 - ii. 47 Parent/Caregiver Consultation Sessions,
 - iii. 18 Student Support Sessions
 - iv. 25 Individual Student Consultation Sessions
 - v. 25 Teacher Consultation Sessions

Evaluation

In order to effectively individualize support, monitor progress, and evaluate effectiveness and impact, project staff members implemented a robust evaluation process that encompassed various data sources, including:

- Parent/Caregiver Reports of Key Demographic Information and Level of Understanding of Special Education Rights and Resources,
- Parent/Caregiver and Student Pre- and Post-Assessments,
- School Reports of Instance of Detentions and Suspensions, and
- Parent/Caregiver, School Staff, and Student Satisfaction and Feedback Surveys

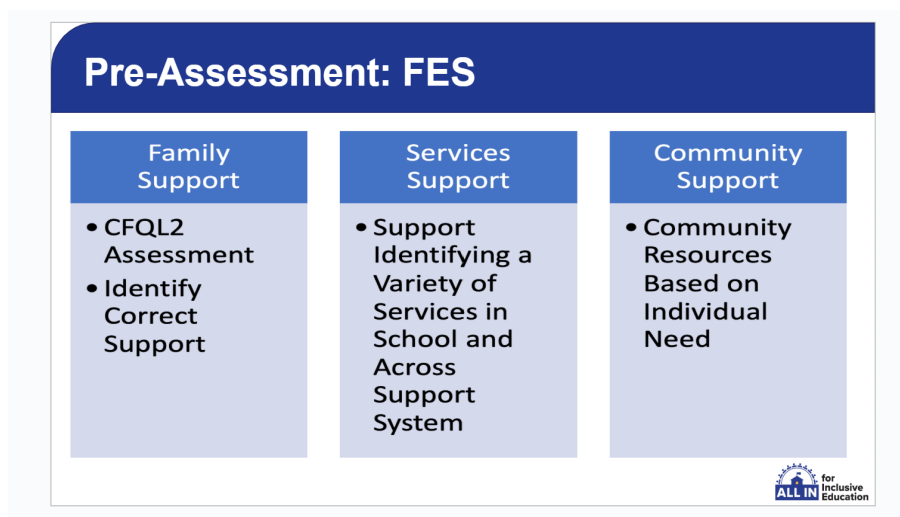
Parent/Caregiver Data

At the beginning of the EPIC Project, parents/caregivers provided demographic information and reported their level of understanding of special education rights, procedures, and resources. In addition, parents/caregivers completed the Family Empowerment Scale (FES), which is a standardized self-report tool designed to measure the level of empowerment among families, particularly those with children with emotional, behavioral, and/or development needs.

Developed by Koren and colleagues (1992), the FES assesses how confident and capable caregivers are with regard to managing services, advocating for their children, and working within various support systems. The FES consists of 34 items that measure empowerment across three particular domains:

- Family (Personal) Empowerment

- Confidence and Competence in Managing Daily Family Life
- Service System Empowerment
 - Ability to Navigate, Access, and Influence Child's Service Systems (e.g., education, mental health)
- Community/Political Empowerment
 - Involvement and Influence in the Broader Community and Policy-Level Decisions Affecting Families



At the end of the EPIC Project, parents/caregivers were asked to provide feedback on how the project helped them build their knowledge and further support their child in their educational journey, particularly in special education, IEPs, and transition services.

Student Data

At the beginning and end of the EPIC Project, team members collected data from participating students around self-advocacy skills. The EPIC Project team created a developmentally appropriate questionnaire that included questions like “Do you tell your teachers, staff, and family what you like to do?”, “Do you ask for help when you need it?”, “Can you describe and talk about your challenges at school?”, and “Do you make choices regarding support, accommodations, and activities that you want or need?”.

At the end of the EPIC Project, students were asked to complete the same questionnaire. Additionally, they were asked to rate their agreement with questions like “I have been suspended or given detention less since participating in this project.”, “I am better able to advocate for myself due to this project.”, and “I like going to school more due to this project.”

School Data

As a condition of participation in the EPIC Project, partnering school districts agreed to provide data related to discipline rates and overall project satisfaction. Data collected from schools included rates of detention and suspension over time for participating students. Data for this

was collected at three points: baseline (prior school year's data), beginning of the project, and end of the project. In addition, school staff members provided feedback related to the EPIC Project, which encompassed providing ratings related to their satisfaction with the project.

District-specific data is presented in Part III: Executive Summary.

Part III: Executive Summary

Meeting Key Goals

All key goals were met by the EPIC Project team. In terms of *Goal 1*, which was to provide advocacy-related training, support, information, and/or technical assistance to at least 30 families in three different school communities, team members initially recruited 35 families and students from Perth Amboy, Elizabeth, and Plainfield (see Figure 2). Due to attrition, 22 families/caregivers and students completed the full course of support through the end of the school year. Throughout project implementation, families were provided a total of 18 small group sessions and 47 individual family consultation sessions to support further understanding of parental rights, IEPs, self-advocacy skills, building school-parent partnerships, behavior support strategies, and guidance on how to create SEPAGs in their home districts. Assessment results demonstrate that parents/caregivers significantly increased their knowledge of special education rights, IEP processes, and advocacy strategies. Families reported feeling more confident and empowered to engage with schools, support their children, and actively participate in decision-making about educational services.

With regard to *Goal 2*, which encompassed providing students with information and support to build their self-advocacy skills within school systems, the EPIC Project team provided a total of 18 small group student support sessions and 25 individual student consultations. Sessions and consultations were individualized to best meet the needs of participating students and families/caregivers. Small group sessions and individual consultations were geared toward building self-advocacy skills and knowledge of rights. Additionally, support was provided around conflict resolution, personal goal setting, self-regulation, and self-esteem. Assessment results indicate that students demonstrated meaningful growth in self-advocacy, independence, and confidence. Participants reported increased ability to express their needs, seek support, articulate challenges, and make informed decisions, as well as enhanced self-esteem, goal-setting skills, and positive engagement with school.

Goal 3, which consisted of building school-based capacity to utilize best practices in positive behavioral supports and research-based alternatives to seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsions, was also successfully accomplished by the EPIC Project team. In total, 25 individual teacher consultation sessions were conducted across the three participating districts. Post-project feedback and survey results indicate that school-based staff members increased their knowledge and confidence in implementing positive behavioral supports and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. School-based staff members reported applying practical strategies from consultations, leading to more inclusive practices and improved engagement with students.



Lastly, in regard to Goal 4, which was to develop and distribute high-quality reports of progress and utilize best practices in sustainability and replication, the EPIC Project team successfully gathered pre-assessment, mid-assessment, and post-assessment data in order to assist in the progress monitoring process, inform potentially warranted programmatic changes, and provide data and information related to the success and impact of the overall project. Evaluation procedures included parent/caregiver reports, parent/caregiver completing of various surveys, periodic school reports on detentions and suspensions for all participating students, and parent/caregiver, school staff, and student satisfaction and feedback surveys. Results of all evaluation data are presented below by each individual district. The collected data enabled comprehensive tracking of project outcomes and informed strategies for sustainability and replication.

District-Specific Data

In alignment with NJCIE's comprehensive evaluation plan, this section highlights the impacts this program had on educators, leaders, schools, and students. Through closely examining participant reports, pre- and post-assessments and surveys, and session fidelity, it is evident that all aspects of the RAPID Initiative were effective, far-reaching, and impactful.

Elizabeth

Demographic Information

At the beginning of the EPIC Project, demographic data was collected related to race/ethnicity, gender, and IEP classification categories. Out of the 10 parents/caregivers that provided this data, it was reported that 50% of students identified as Black and 50% identified as Hispanic. Seven students were male and three students were female. Reported classification categories included Other Health Impairment (OHI), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Cognitive Impairment. Figures 3 through 5 highlight this data as well.

It is important to note that "Other Health Impairment" means "a disability characterized by having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness with respect to the educational environment, due to chronic or acute health problems, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, diabetes, or any other medical condition, such as Tourette Syndrome, that adversely affects a student's educational performance. A medical assessment documenting the health problem is required." (NJ Administrative Code Chapter 14).

Approximately one-quarter of students receiving special education services in New Jersey are classified under the "Other Health Impairment" (OHI) category. While the official definition is intended to include students with medical, emotional, or mental health conditions that impact educational performance, in practice, the interpretation and application of this classification category varies widely across districts. Notably, many students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are also being classified under OHI. Given this information, drawing valid or generalizable conclusions from the classification data alone is not feasible.



Figure 3: Race/Ethnicity of Participating Students

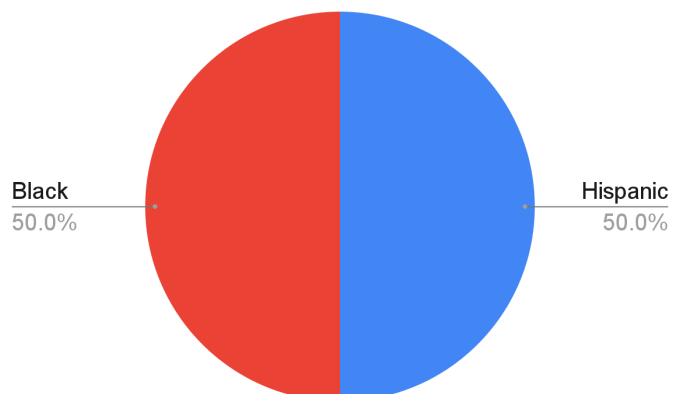


Figure 4: IEP Classification Categories of Participating Students

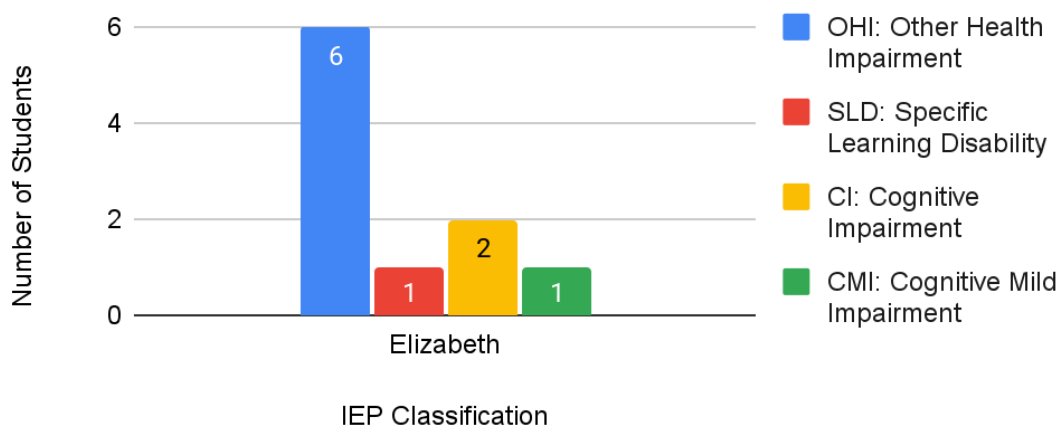
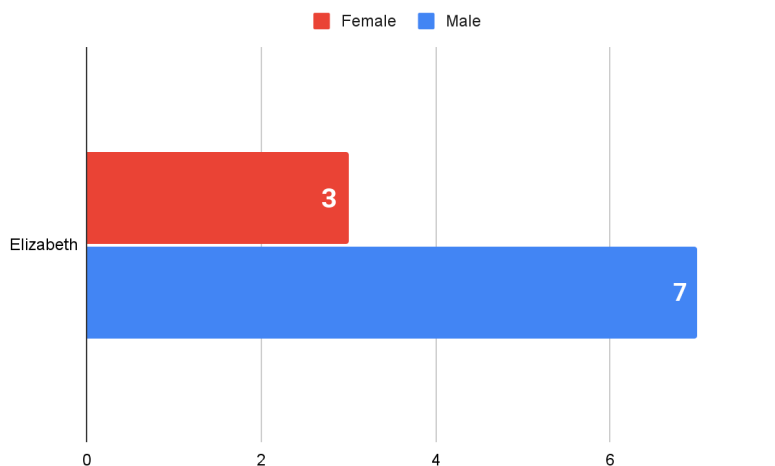


Figure 5: Gender of Participating Students



Parents/Caregiver Data

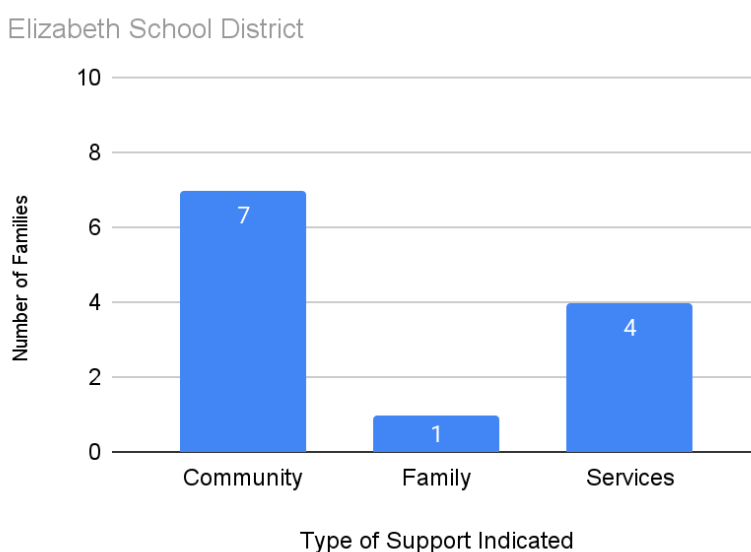
Level of Understanding of Special Education Rights and Resources

At the beginning of the project, Elizabeth's parents/caregivers indicated a strong interest in better understanding special education services and the IEP process. Many parents/caregivers expressed needing more information about their child's rights, available supports and accommodations, and how the school implements individualized plans. Some parents/caregivers shared they had some questions, while others wanted to learn more about all topics, from legal protections to daily practices within the school setting. A recurring theme among responses was a desire to know what is happening at school and how to ensure their child receives the appropriate support. This feedback suggested a need for increased communication, transparency, and educational resources to empower families in the IEP process and promote meaningful collaboration between schools and parents/caregivers.

FES Results

Parents/caregivers completed the FES at the beginning of the EPIC Project. Figure 6 highlights the results of parents/caregivers responses on the FES.

Figure 6: Areas of Support Indicated by FES Results



Parent Post-Assessment Comparison Summary

As part of the post-assessment, parents/caregivers were asked to reflect on how the project helped them support their child's educational journey, particularly related to special education, IEPs, and transition services. Compared to the beginning of the project, where many parents/caregivers reported limited knowledge of how special education services function

within the school system, post-assessment responses show notable improvements in knowledge, awareness, and skills.

Parents/Caregivers shared the following insights:

- “I learned how things work.”
- “I learned that I need to get involved with school services.”
- “I learned how to track my son’s services.”
- “I learned the rights.”
- “I understand the services my child gets at school.”
- “It helped me understand the system.”
- “I now understand transition services.”
- “I understand the system better.”

This feedback indicates that the EPIC Project successfully helped parents/caregivers increase their understanding of educational rights, school-based services, and the importance of their involvement.

Rates of Detention and Suspension Over Time for Participating Students

In order to monitor progress related to detention and out-of-school suspension, EPIC Project team members collaborated with school-based staff members to collect data on discipline rates. Information was gathered for three time points:

- Baseline (Prior School Year)
- Start of the Project, and
- End of the Project

Figures 6 and 7 highlight the number of detentions and number of suspensions over time, as reported by school-based staff members working with the EPIC Project. Following the implementation of the EPIC Project, there was a reduction in both instances of detentions and out-of-school suspensions. These outcomes indicate that the project was highly effective in promoting positive behavioral changes and reducing disciplinary actions within the school environment.

Figure 6: Number of Detentions

Elizabeth - Number of Detentions

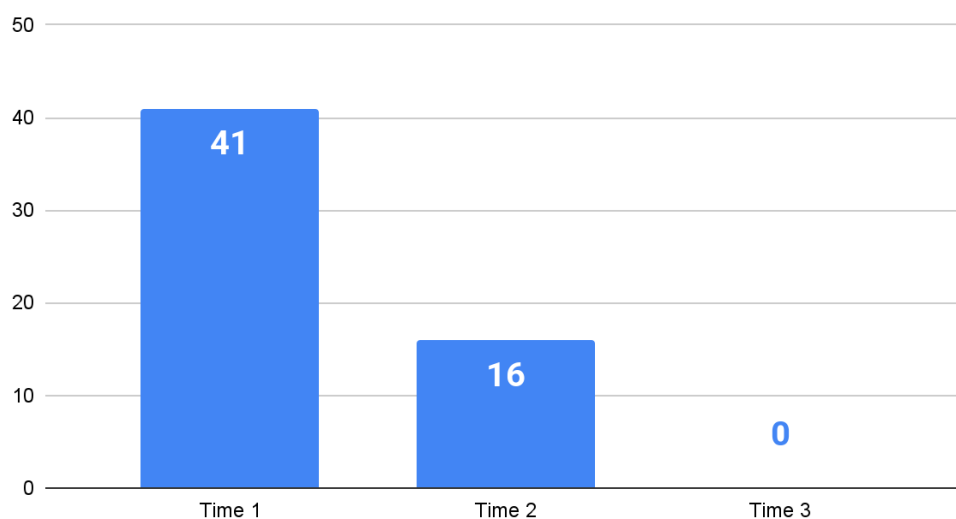
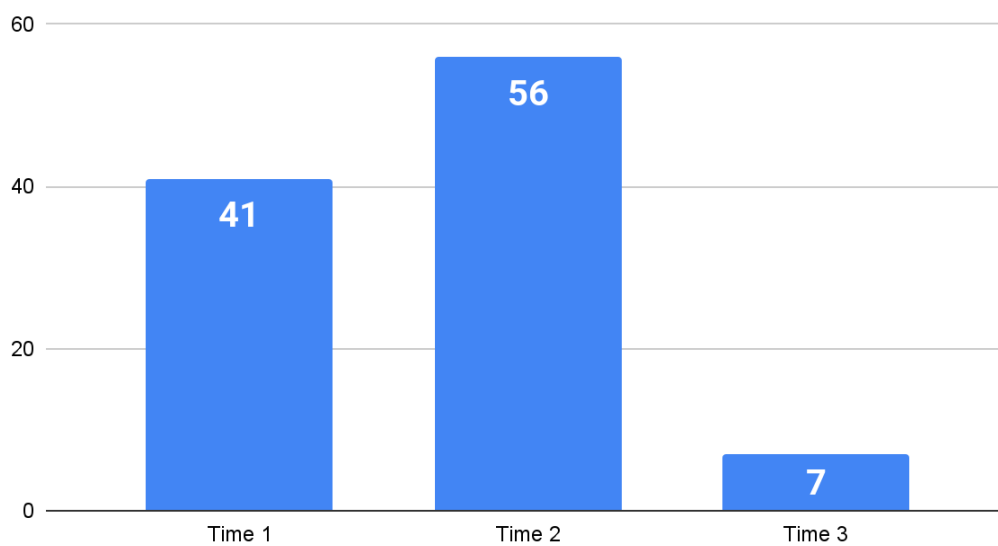


Figure 7: Number of Out-of-School Suspensions

Elizabeth - Number of Out-of-School Suspensions



Student Data

Student Surveys

At the beginning and the end of the EPIC Project, data was collected from participating students related to self-advocacy skills using a developmentally appropriate questionnaire. In addition, at post-assessment, students were asked to provide feedback regarding their experiences and self-perceptions of improvement. Overall, students indicated increased independence related to requesting what they need, asking for help, and describing challenges and accommodations at school. Student responses captured at post-assessment also revealed a strong sense of personal growth and future-oriented thinking. Many students reported that the topics helped them organize their careers, plan for the future, and set meaningful goals. Several mentioned learning to structure their studies and take active steps toward success. One student shared, *“These topics helped me learn to set my goals in place.”* Additional feedback pointed to fewer instances of suspension and detention, along with increased positivity toward attending school. Collectively, these findings suggest that the EPIC Project provided meaningful value to all participating students.

Attrition

During the project, attrition emerged as a barrier to overall participation. Five students from this school withdrew from the project before its completion due to various individual and external factors. Despite this attrition, the project maintained strong engagement among the remaining participants.

School Data

At the end of the EPIC Project, school-based staff members were asked to provide feedback related to the overall efficacy of the project and associated staff. One respondent from Elizabeth completed the feedback survey. The school psychologist, with whom EPIC staff members worked mostly closely, indicated high satisfaction with the EPIC Project. It was indicated that participants displayed positive growth, parents, family members, and caregivers showed more positive engagement in the school process, and the input and suggestions provided by the EPIC Project staff members were helpful.

Plainfield

Demographic Information

At the beginning of the EPIC Project, demographic data was collected related to race/ethnicity, gender, and IEP classification categories. Out of the 10 parents/caregivers that provided this data, it was reported that 40% of students identified as Black and 40% identified as Hispanic. Seven students were female and three students were male. Reported classification categories included Other Health Impairment (OHI) and Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Cognitive Impairment. Figures 8 through 10 highlight this data as well.



It is important to note that “Other Health Impairment” means “a disability characterized by having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness with respect to the educational environment, due to chronic or acute health problems, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, diabetes, or any other medical condition, such as Tourette Syndrome, that adversely affects a student’s educational performance. A medical assessment documenting the health problem is required.” (NJ Administrative Code Chapter 14).

Approximately one-quarter of students receiving special education services in New Jersey are classified under the “Other Health Impairment” (OHI) category. While the official definition is intended to include students with medical, emotional, or mental health conditions that impact educational performance, in practice, the interpretation and application of this classification category varies widely across districts. Notably, many students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are also being classified under OHI. Given this information, drawing valid or generalizable conclusions from the classification data alone is not feasible.

Figure 8: Race/Ethnicity of Participating Students

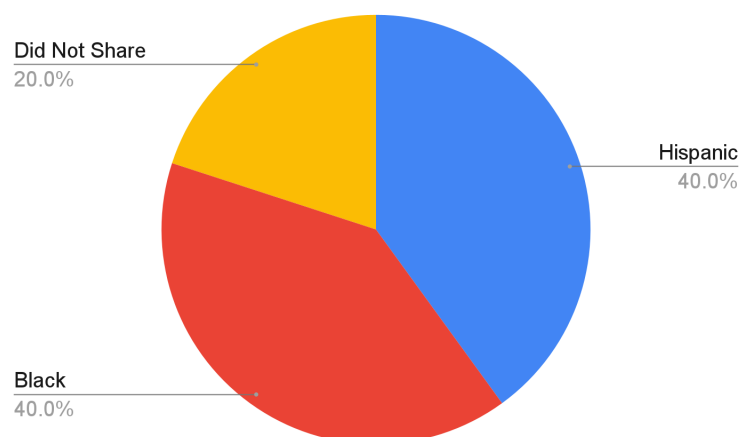


Figure 9: IEP Classification Categories of Participating Students

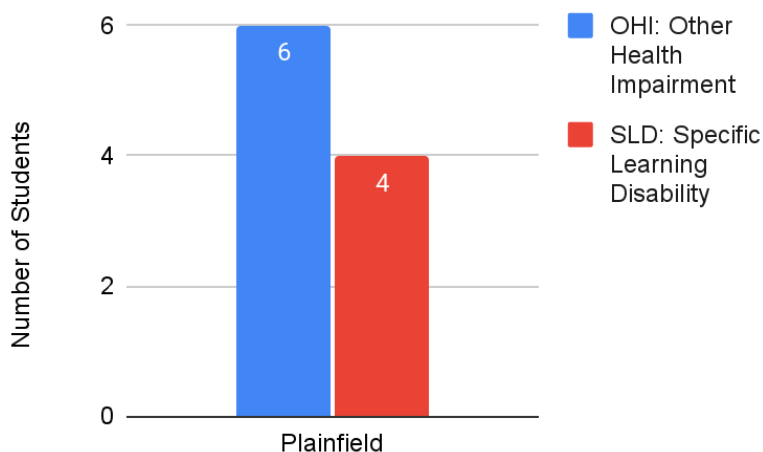
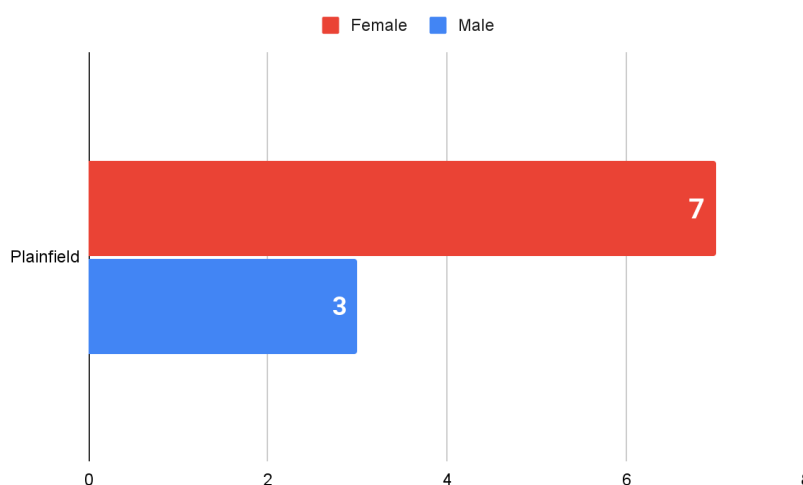


Figure 10: Gender of Participating Students



Parents/Caregiver Data

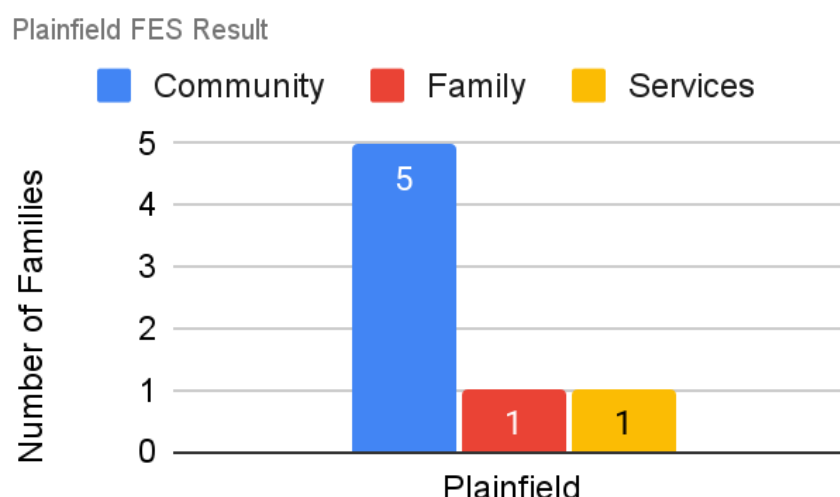
Level of Understanding of Special Education Rights and Resources

At pre-assessment, Plainfield's parents/caregivers indicated limited understanding of how special education operates. Responses revealed that parents/caregivers need both general and specific information, including further information about their rights and responsibilities as well as procedural guidelines. Responses indicated that while parents/caregivers understand the importance of special education, they often lack the tools, confidence, or knowledge needed to participate actively in their child's IEP process.

FES Results

Parents/caregivers completed the FES at the beginning of the EPIC Project. Figure 11 highlights the results of parents/caregivers responses on the FES.

Figure 11: Areas of Support Indicated by FES Results



Parent Post-Assessment Comparison Summary

As part of the post-assessment, parents/caregivers were asked to reflect on how the EPIC Project helped them support their child's education journey, particularly related to special education, IEPs, and transition services. Compared to the beginning of the project, where many parents/caregivers reported limited knowledge of how special education services function within the school system, post-assessment responses indicated notable improvements in knowledge and self-advocacy skills. Parents/caregivers also reported feeling more informed and better equipped to navigate services.

Parents/Caregivers shared the following comments related to the EPIC Project:

- "Helped me understand how to get involved with my son's services."
- "I learned how to request my son's support in school."
- "I learned how to request services."
- "I now understand my granddaughter's disability better."
- "It was good."

These responses indicate that the EPIC Project successfully enhanced family engagement, increased understanding of rights and services, and encouraged more active participation in the educational support process. The EPIC Project impacted parents'/caregivers' abilities to understand, access, and advocate for special education services.

Rates of Detention and Suspension Over Time for Participating Students

In order to monitor progress related to detention and out-of-school suspension, EPIC Project team members collaborated with school-based staff members to collect data on these discipline rates. Information was gathered for three time points:

- Baseline (Prior School Year)
- Start of the Project, and
- End of the Project

Figures 12 and 13 highlight the number of detentions and number of suspensions over time, as reported by school-based staff members working with the EPIC Project. Following the implementation of the EPIC Project, there was a reduction in both instances of detentions and out-of-school suspensions. These outcomes indicate that the project was highly effective in promoting positive behavioral changes and reducing disciplinary actions within the school environment.

Figure 12: Number of Detentions

Plainfield - Number of Detentions

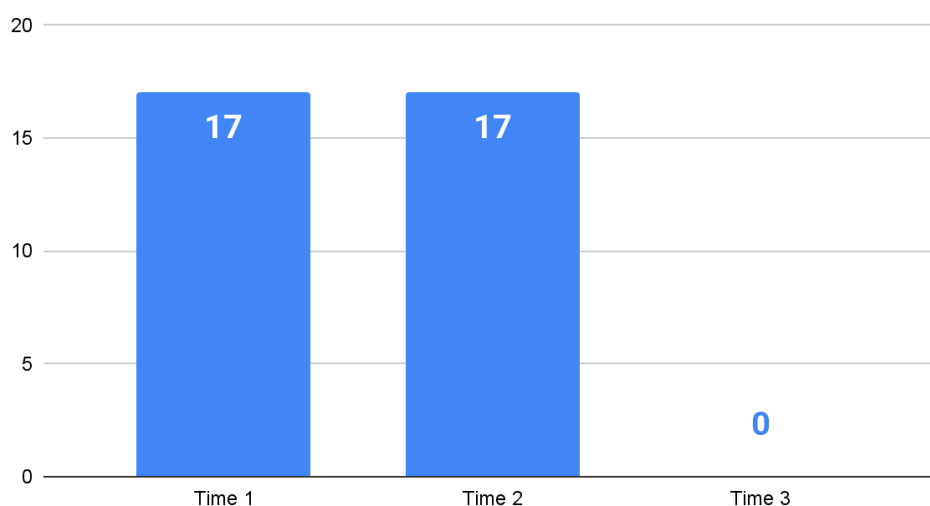
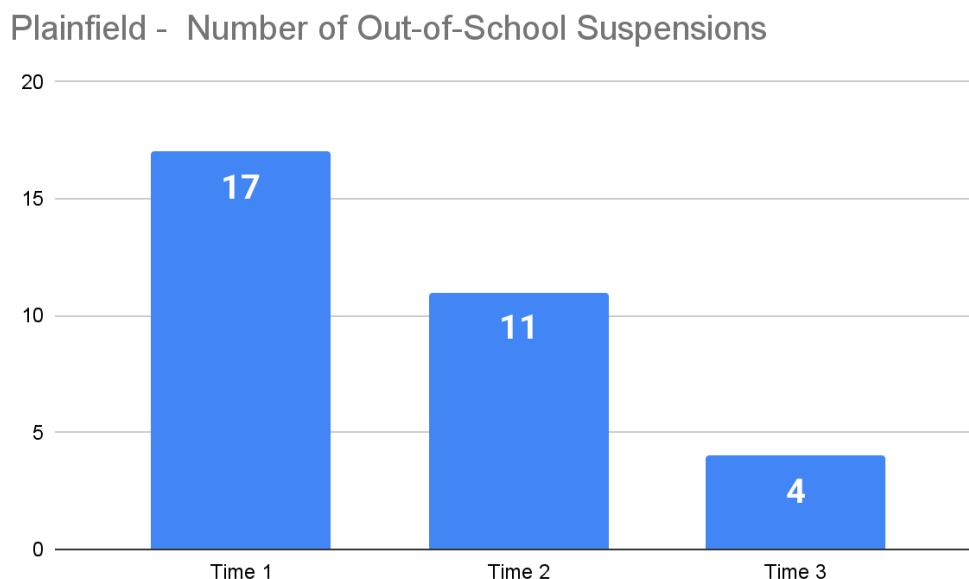


Figure 13: Number of Out-of-School Suspensions



Student Data

Student Surveys

At the beginning and end of the EPIC Project, students completed a developmentally appropriate questionnaire assessing self-advocacy skills. During the post-assessment, students were also invited to share feedback on their experiences and perceptions of growth connected to the project. Results indicated increased independence in areas such as requesting support, seeking help, and articulating challenges and preferred accommodations in school. Reflections further highlighted meaningful personal growth, with many students reporting improvements in their ability to advocate for themselves. Additional responses pointed to reductions in suspensions and detentions, along with more positive attitudes toward school overall. Collectively, this feedback demonstrates that the EPIC Project effectively strengthened students' knowledge and skills.

Attrition

During the project, attrition emerged as a barrier to overall participation for the duration of the EPIC Project. Four students withdrew from the project before its completion due to various individual and external factors. Despite this attrition, the project maintained strong engagement among the remaining participants.

School Data

At the end of the EPIC Project, school-based staff members were asked to provide feedback related to the overall efficacy of the project and associated staff. One staff member from Plainfield, the School Counselor, completed the survey. The school counselor indicated a high level of satisfaction with the EPIC Project, noting that students demonstrated meaningful growth, families and caregivers became more positively engaged in school processes, and the guidance and recommendations provided by the EPIC team were both relevant and valuable.

Perth Amboy

Demographic Information

At the beginning of the EPIC Project, demographic data was collected related to race/ethnicity, gender, and IEP classification categories. Out of the 10 parents/caregivers that provided this data, it was reported that 10% of students identified as Black, 80% identified as Hispanic, and 10% of students did not share this information. All participants were male. Reported classification categories included Other Health Impairment (OHI) and Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Cognitive Impairment. Figures 14 through 16 highlight this data as well.

It is important to note that “Other Health Impairment” means “a disability characterized by having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness with respect to the educational environment, due to chronic or acute health problems, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, diabetes, or any other medical condition, such as Tourette Syndrome, that adversely affects a student’s educational performance. A medical assessment documenting the health problem is required.” (NJ Administrative Code Chapter 14).

Approximately one-quarter of students receiving special education services in New Jersey are classified under the “Other Health Impairment” (OHI) category. While the official definition is intended to include students with medical, emotional, or mental health conditions that impact educational performance, in practice, the interpretation and application of this classification category varies widely across districts. Notably, many students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are also being classified under OHI. Given this information, drawing valid or generalizable conclusions from the classification data alone is not feasible.



Figure 14: Race/Ethnicity of Participating Students

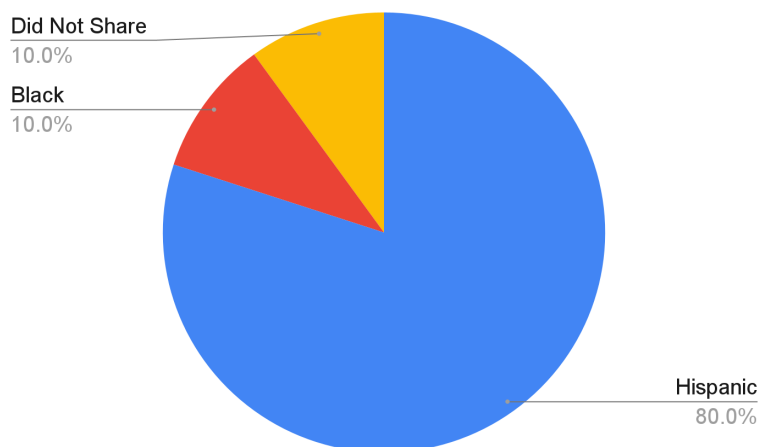


Figure 15: IEP Classification Categories of Participating Students

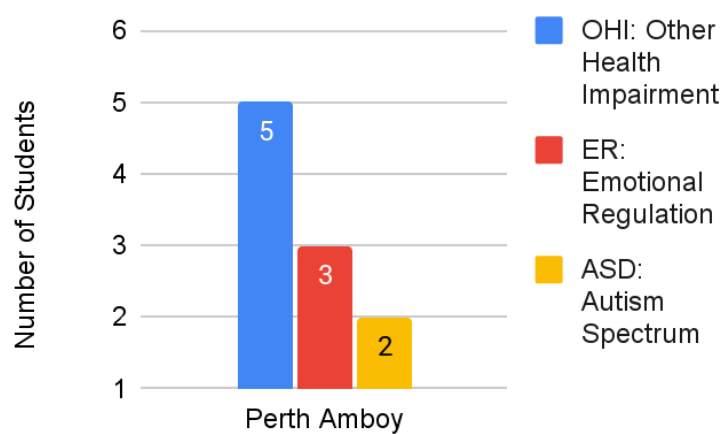
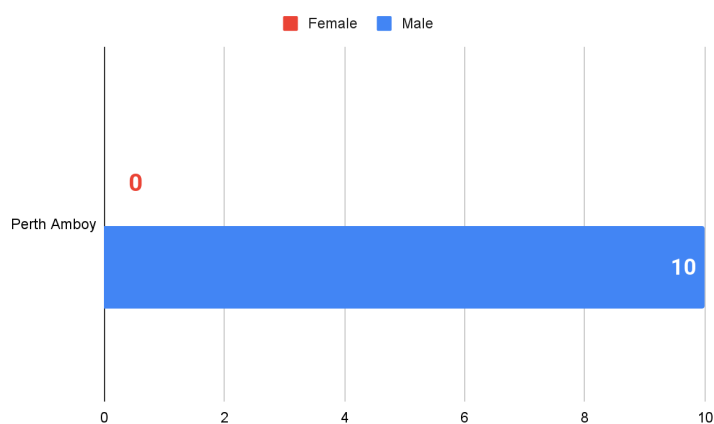


Figure 16: Gender of Participating Students



Parents/Caregiver Data

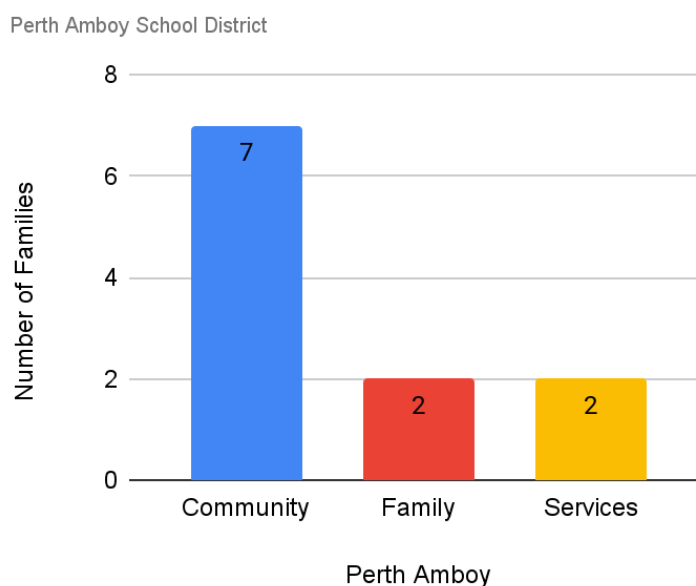
Level of Understanding of Special Education Rights and Resources

At pre-assessment, Perth Amboy's parents/caregivers indicated that families wanted to learn more about special education, IEPs, and available services; many needed guidance, a deeper understanding of the law, and strategies to support their children. Empowerment was strongest in the community domain, while confidence in navigating services and managing family needs was limited.

FES Results

Parents/caregivers completed the FES at the beginning of the EPIC Project. Figure 17 highlights the results of parents/caregivers responses on the FES.

Figure 17: Areas of Support Indicated by FES Results



Parent Post-Assessment Comparison Summary

As part of the post-assessment, parents/caregivers were asked to reflect on how the EPIC Project helped them support their child's educational journey, particularly as related to special education, IEPs, and transition services. After participating in the project, parents/caregivers reported increased understanding of their rights, how school services work, and how to track and manage their child's supports. Parents/caregivers reported clear growth in understanding and engagement. Key gains included:

- Increased knowledge of how the special education system works,
- Greater awareness of their child's rights and transition services,



- Improved ability to track and manage the services their children receive, and
- Recognition of the need to actively participate in school processes/decision-making.

Parents/Caregivers shared the following comments related to the EPIC Project:

- “I learned that I need to get involved with school services.”
- “Helped understand the system.”
- “I learned how to track my son’s services.”

Similarly to other participating schools, these responses indicate that the EPIC Project successfully enhanced family engagement, increased knowledge of how special education works, and overall built parents/caregiver capacity to assist their children in their educational journeys.

Rates of Detention and Suspension Over Time for Participating Students

In order to monitor progress related to detention and out-of-school suspension, EPIC Project team members collaborated with school-based staff members to collect data on these discipline rates. Information was gathered for three time points:

- Baseline (Prior School Year)
- Start of the Project, and
- End of the Project

Figures 18 and 19 highlight the number of detentions and number of suspensions over time, as reported by school-based staff members working with the EPIC Project. This data demonstrated an increase in both detentions and suspensions for students in this partnering school. Several factors, which varied from other schools, could have contributed to the increase instead of anticipated decrease in these rates of disciplinary actions for participating students. Throughout our partnership with Perth Amboy, we observed significant progress and several meaningful outcomes for students, families, and school-based staff members. Our collaborative work supported measurable improvements in areas such as family engagement, student self-advocacy, and the use of positive behavior supports. One area of growth identified through this partnership involved building deeper administrative alignment around the implementation of behavior intervention plans and positive behavior supports. In comparison, other partner districts where administrators showed higher engagement and buy-in saw greater reductions in detentions and suspensions. These districts more consistently approached challenging behaviors through a preventative, proactive lens prior to issuing suspensions and/or detentions.



Figure 18: Number of Detentions

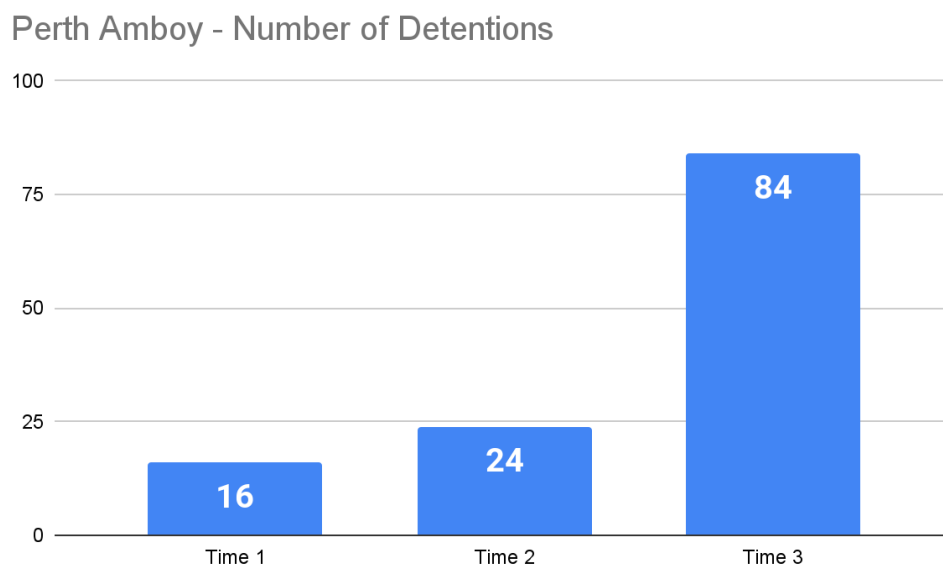
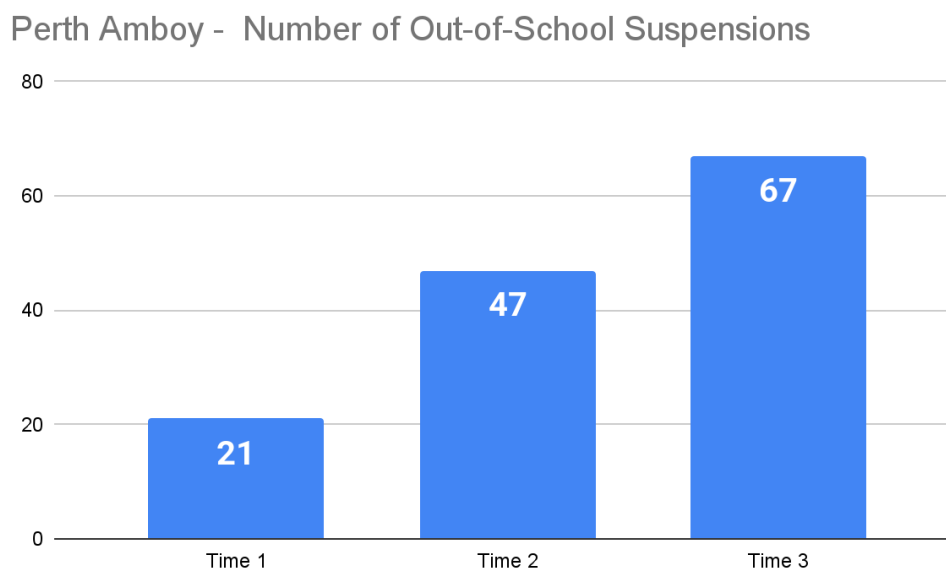


Figure 19: Number of Out-of-School Suspensions



Student Data

Student Surveys

At the beginning and end of the EPIC Project, students completed a developmentally appropriate questionnaire assessing self-advocacy skills. During the post-assessment, students

were also invited to share feedback on their experiences and perceptions of growth connected to the project. On the pre-assessment, most participating students reported needing assistance from family and/or friends to express their needs and preferences. However, on the post-assessment, all students indicated increased independence in expressing their needs and preferences. Post-assessment student responses also indicated increased abilities to advocate for themselves and increase positivity around school after participating in the EPIC Project.

School Data

At the end of the EPIC Project, school-based staff members were asked to provide feedback related to the overall efficacy of the project and associated staff. Two staff members from Perth Amboy provided feedback: a supervisor and the school psychologist. The Supervisor of Special Services reported positive changes in student behavior following the implementation of recommendations by the EPIC Project staff. Specifically, the behavior specialist helped staff members understand the root causes of students' challenging behaviors, which lead to more effective and individualized support strategies. It was also emphasized that the most valuable aspect of the project was the targeted focus on Black and Hispanic students exhibiting significant behavioral challenges. This respondent also provided positive feedback in regards to the dedicated work of both Ana Rivera and Bill Davis for helping students and their parents/caregivers to understand behaviors and learn practical strategies to prevent less desirable behaviors in the future.

The school psychologist also reported that the project had a positive impact, particularly highlighting the student small group sessions. This respondent indicated that increasing the number of visits could enhance the outcomes for participating students. This respondent also provided positive feedback for Ana River, indicating that her suggestions and strategies were insightful and expressed interest in having Ana return to the district in the future.

Aggregate Data Across Schools in the EPIC Project

In order to support the understanding of impact and reach related to the implementation of the EPIC Project, team members aggregated various data sources across the three participating districts. Figures 19 through 23 provide demographic, race/ethnicity, IEP classifications, detentions, and suspensions data for all participating schools combined.



Figure 19: Race/Ethnicity of Participating Students Across Schools

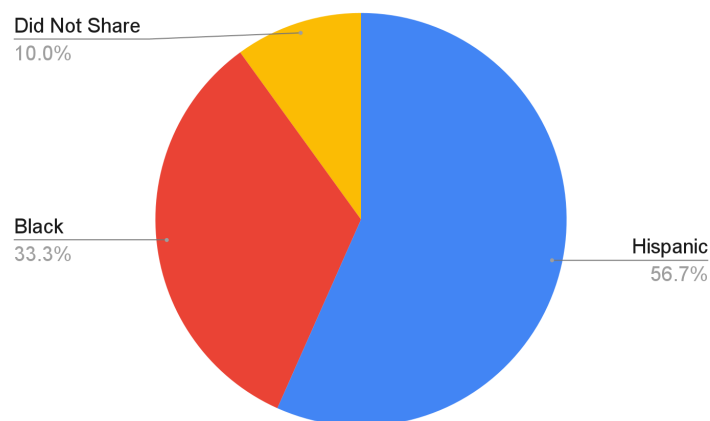


Figure 20: IEP Classification Categories of Participating Students Across Schools

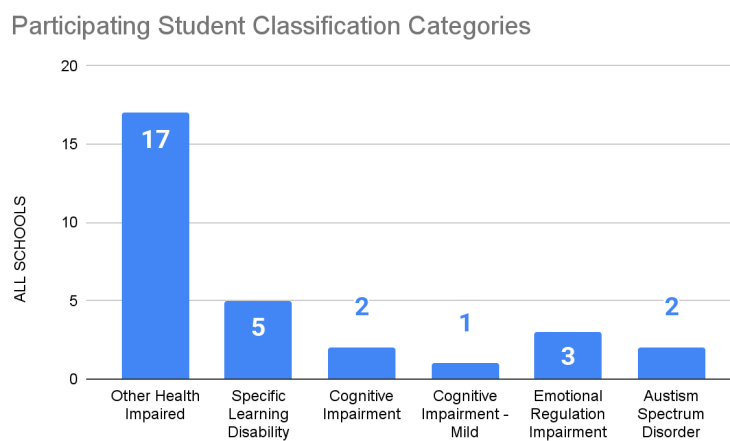


Figure 21: Gender of Participating Students

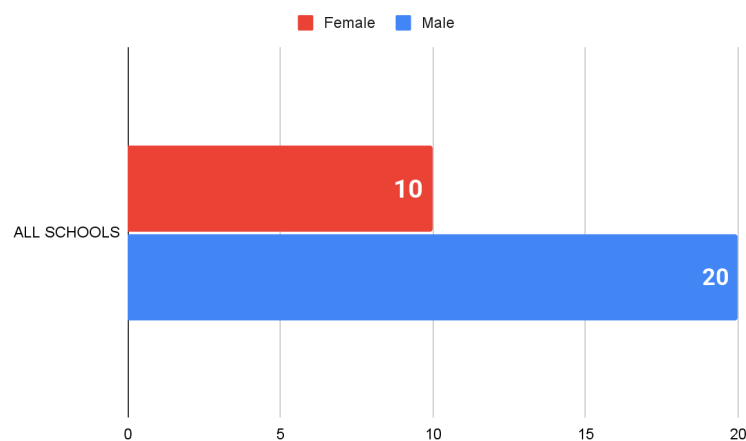
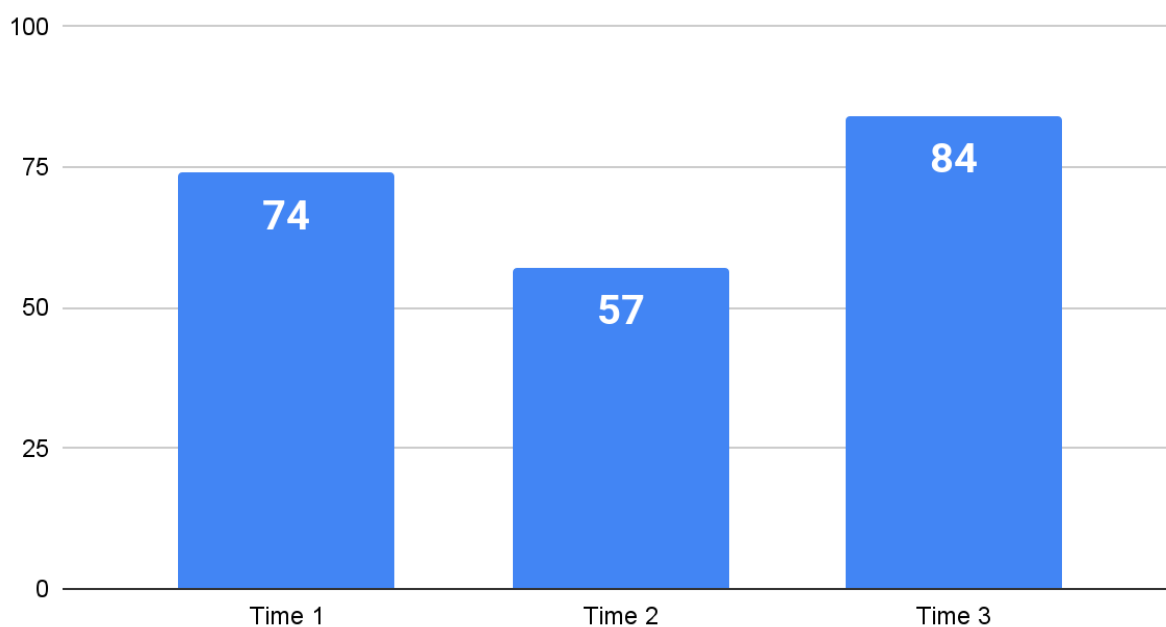


Figure 22: Number of Detentions Over Time

- Time 1 - Baseline (Prior School Year)
- Time 2 - Start of the Project, and
- Time 3 - End of the Project

All Schools - Number of Detentions

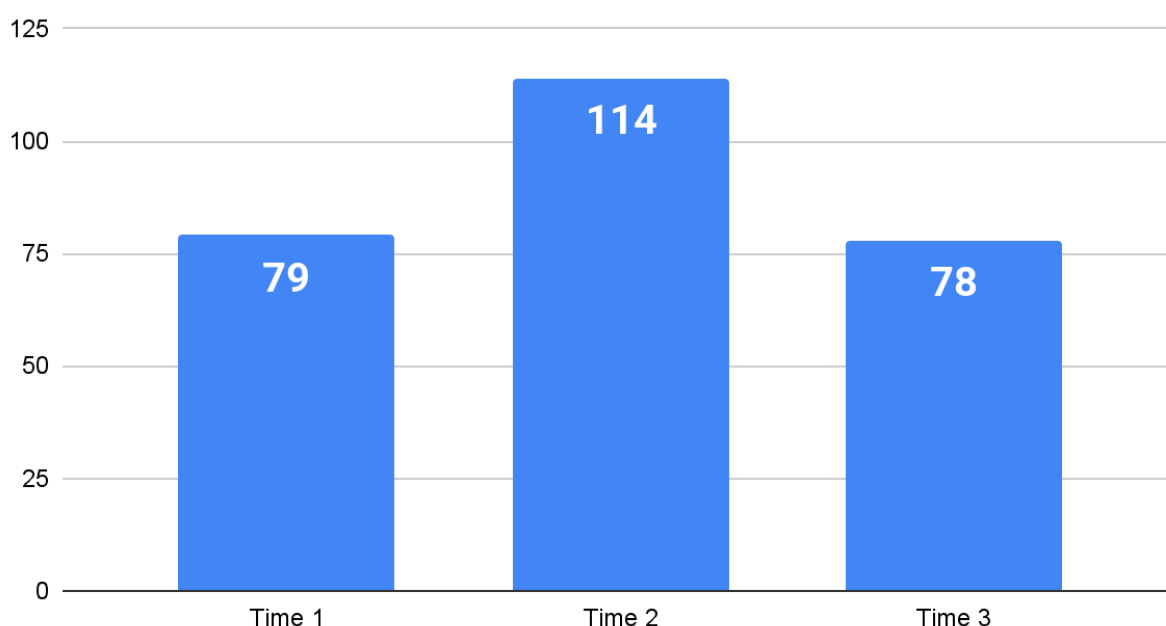


***It is important to note that for Elizabeth and Plainfield there were ZERO combined instances of detention at Time 3. The 84 is strictly from Perth Amboy, where various barriers impacted effective and consistent implementation. [See district-specific results for Perth Amboy for additional details.](#)

Figure 23: Number of Suspensions Over Time

- Time 1 - Baseline (Prior School Year)
- Time 2 - Start of the Project, and
- Time 3 - End of the Project

ALL SCHOOLS - Number of Out-of-School Suspensions



***It is important to note that for Elizabeth and Plainfield there were only 11 combined instances of suspension at Time 3. Sixty-seven instances of suspension were strictly from Perth Amboy, where various barriers impacted effective and consistent implementation. [See district-specific results for additional details.](#)

Conclusions

The EPIC Project, led by ALL IN in collaboration with INCLUDENJ and EPIC, with support from the NJCDD, successfully implemented a comprehensive capacity-building initiative aimed at reducing the disproportionate use of seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion among Black and Hispanic students with disabilities in New Jersey schools. This multi-pronged project addressed systemic inequities in education by providing evidence-based, culturally responsive training, resources, and support to students, families, and school staff.

The project pursued four overarching goals:

- Goal 1: Provide advocacy-related training, support, information, and/or technical assistance to at least 30 families in 3 different school communities.
- Goal 2: Provide students with information and support to build their self-advocacy skills within school systems.



- Goal 3: Build school-based capacity to utilize best practices in positive behavioral supports and research-based alternatives to seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion.
- Goal 4: Develop and distribute high-quality reports of progress and utilize best practices in sustainability and replication.

The EPIC Project recruited 35 families from three districts, including Elizabeth, Plainfield, and Perth Amboy. Twenty-two families completed the full program. Across all districts, the project delivered:

- 18 parent/caregiver group sessions and 47 individual consultations
- 18 student support group sessions and 25 individual student consultations
- 25 teacher consultation sessions

These activities were paired with rigorous evaluation and progress monitoring, including pre- and post-assessments for students and families, satisfaction surveys, and school-based disciplinary data collection.

Parents/Caregivers:

- Reported increased knowledge of special education rights, IEPs, transition services, and strategies to support their child's education.
- Demonstrated measurable gains in confidence and empowerment across personal, service system, and community domains.
- Shared qualitative feedback indicating improved engagement with schools and understanding of educational processes.

Students:

- Exhibited increased self-advocacy skills, independence in seeking support, and ability to articulate challenges and necessary accommodations.
- Reported positive growth in self-esteem, goal-setting, and school engagement.
- Reported reductions in suspensions and detentions and increased enjoyment of school activities.

Schools:

- Reported high satisfaction with consultation sessions and training materials.
- Demonstrated improved capacity to implement positive behavioral supports and alternatives to exclusionary discipline.
- Schools in Elizabeth and Plainfield showed reductions in detentions and suspensions, while outcomes in Perth Amboy highlighted barriers to consistent implementation, including staffing, scheduling, and administrative support.

Across all three districts, the EPIC Project reached families, students, and educators with measurable improvements in knowledge, skills, and practices related to equity-focused behavioral interventions. Notably, Elizabeth and Plainfield achieved zero detentions at project



end, and minimal suspensions, highlighting the efficacy of targeted, culturally responsive interventions.

Overall, the EPIC Project successfully met its goals by building capacity within families, students, and schools to reduce the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for Black and Hispanic students with disabilities. By equipping stakeholders with knowledge, practical strategies, and advocacy tools, the project fostered inclusive, culturally responsive school environments that support equitable educational outcomes. The work demonstrates that comprehensive, collaborative, and evidence-based interventions can create meaningful, sustainable change, informing future replication efforts across New Jersey and beyond.

Part IV: A Special Thank You to the New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities

The EPIC Project team extends our deepest gratitude to the NJCDD for their generous support and unwavering commitment to equity, inclusion, and the empowerment of Black and Hispanic students with disabilities. This project would not have been possible without NJCDD's vision, trust, and dedication to fostering meaningful, lasting change in schools and communities in New Jersey.

NJCDD's investment in this work allowed families, students, and educators to engage in transformative learning experiences, access critical resources, and develop the skills and confidence needed to advocate for inclusive and culturally responsive education. Beyond funding, NJCDD's guidance and encouragement inspired our team to reach higher, collaborate more deeply, and center the voices of the students and families most impacted by seclusion, restraint, suspension, and expulsion.

We are profoundly grateful for NJCDD's partnership and shared belief in the power of collaborative, evidence-based, and equity-focused initiatives. Your support has made a tangible difference in the lives of students and families, helping to create safer, more inclusive, and empowering school environments across the state.

