

SENATE, No. 3979

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

219th LEGISLATURE

INTRODUCED JUNE 21, 2021

Sponsored by:

Senator LINDA R. GREENSTEIN

District 14 (Mercer and Middlesex)

SYNOPSIS

Directs Commissioner of Education to establish New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative, appropriates \$2,000,000.

CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT

As introduced.



1 **AN ACT** concerning services for students with dyslexia and other
2 learning disabilities, and making an appropriation.

3
4 **BE IT ENACTED** *by the Senate and General Assembly of the State*
5 *of New Jersey:*

6
7 1. The Legislature finds and declares that:

8 a. Students who struggle with reading and other forms of
9 specific learning disabilities often go undiagnosed until the student
10 is failing in school, while many students are never diagnosed and
11 never receive services. Early identification and intervention with
12 students showing signs of dyslexia are critical for improving
13 student outcomes.

14 b. The most effective treatment for students who struggle with
15 reading and related language problems is early diagnosis and skilled
16 teaching. For that reason, it is critical that educators receive
17 evidence-based practices and strategies informed by research to
18 reduce the impact on long-term educational outcomes.

19 c. The New Jersey Dyslexia Guidelines, developed by the State
20 Board of Education, adopt the International Dyslexia Association's
21 definition of dyslexia into the New Jersey Administrative Code,
22 thereby outlining the requirements for the provision of special
23 education programs and services to students. The regulations
24 provide guidelines for educators, parents, and other stakeholders in
25 identifying, assessing, and supporting students with dyslexia.
26 While these guidelines created a road map for supporting students
27 with dyslexia, the guidelines were developed before the
28 establishment of the Statewide system of support and are therefore
29 not integrated into that system.

30 d. The State board regulations list dyslexia as one of the
31 specific learning disabilities that may impair a person's ability to
32 understand or use language, or perform mathematical calculations.

33 e. The State Board of Education incorporated the definition of
34 dyslexia, as follows: "Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that
35 is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with
36 accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and
37 decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit
38 in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected
39 in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective
40 classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include
41 problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience
42 that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge".

43 f. To ensure existing research and available resources lead to
44 improved outcomes for all students, the State must expand its focus
45 to all struggling readers, even those in the general education
46 population, and invest in a Statewide effort to build upon the New
47 Jersey Dyslexia Guidelines, create literacy teaching guidelines and

1 disseminate best practices throughout the Statewide system of
2 support for literacy and language teachers.

3 g. The Statewide system of support requires the Commissioner
4 of Education to distribute to each board of education information on
5 available screening instruments to identify students who possess
6 one or more potential indicators of dyslexia or other reading
7 disabilities. Each board of education is required to select and
8 implement age-appropriate screening instruments. The school
9 district is then required to screen students, who have exhibited one
10 or more potential indicators of dyslexia or other reading disabilities,
11 no later than the student's completion of the first semester of
12 second grade. Furthermore, if students show indications of dyslexia
13 or other reading disabilities during this screening process, each
14 board of education is to employ appropriate intervention strategies
15 with those students. This system of support should include
16 expertise and resources to help school districts, offices of the
17 executive county superintendents of schools, and charter schools
18 improve their ability to identify signs of struggling readers and
19 other specific learning disabilities as early as possible and to
20 provide evidence-based support and services to students once
21 identified.

22 h. Each district's board of education is required to establish
23 and implement a coordinated system in each school for the planning
24 and delivery of intervention and referral services. Intervention and
25 referral services are designed to assist students who are
26 experiencing learning, behavioral or health difficulties, and to assist
27 staff who have difficulties in addressing students' learning,
28 behavioral or health needs. It is particularly important that these
29 services begin in kindergarten and first grade for students struggling
30 to acquire early reading skills.

31

32 2. The Commissioner of Education shall establish the New
33 Jersey Equity in Education Initiative for the following purposes:

34 a. to build capacity in the Statewide system of support for
35 school districts, charter schools and offices of the executive county
36 superintendents of schools to provide early intervention services
37 and support for students with specific learning disabilities, such as
38 dyslexia, with a focus on improving outcomes for students in all
39 education settings;

40 b. to identify effective models for diagnosis and treatment of
41 specific learning disabilities;

42 c. to develop effective professional development for educators
43 on evidence-based instruction and strategies informed by research
44 to reduce the impact on long-term educational outcomes;

45 d. to develop effective partnerships between school districts,
46 charter schools, offices of the executive county superintendents of
47 schools, and nonprofits in using the Statewide system of support

1 structure administered by the Commissioner of Education and the
2 resources of the Department of Education; and

3 e. to disseminate the resources, information, and models
4 identified in this section.

5
6 3. The Commissioner of Education shall designate one office
7 of an executive county superintendent of schools to administer the
8 New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative in direct consultation
9 with the Department of Education and the institution of higher
10 education selected pursuant to section 4 of this act. The designated
11 office shall demonstrate a willingness and capacity to:

12 a. work collaboratively with the department and the selected
13 institution of higher education to further the purposes of the New
14 Jersey Equity in Education Initiative;

15 b. communicate regularly with the department;

16 c. document the outcomes of its efforts throughout the duration
17 of the New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative; and

18 d. play a leadership role in the New Jersey Equity in Education
19 Initiative.

20
21 4. a. The Commissioner of Education shall select one
22 institution of higher education to enhance the early identification of
23 dyslexia and specific learning disabilities and expand evidence-
24 based best practices for supports and services in furtherance of the
25 New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative. The institution shall be
26 selected no later than 30 days after the effective date of this act.
27 The selected institution may utilize the services of a literacy
28 specialist, consultant, or company in furtherance of its work
29 pursuant to this section.

30 b. The selected institution shall identify existing evidence-
31 based resources, professional development activities, and other
32 efforts currently available at the State, federal, and local levels, and
33 develop new evidence-based resources and activities designed to
34 help local educational agencies across the State identify and provide
35 services and supports to students with specific learning disabilities,
36 as defined by the State Board of Education, such as dyslexia. The
37 identified and developed resources and activities shall be able to
38 accomplish, at a minimum, all of the following:

39 (1) develop professional development through train-the-trainer
40 models or online training modules;

41 (2) provide technical assistance to local educational agencies;

42 (3) develop a network of educators who can provide coaching
43 and training to other local educational agencies; and

44 (4) develop evaluation tools to measure the effectiveness of
45 identified evidence-based strategies.

46
47 5. No later than 18 months after the effective date of this act,
48 the commissioner shall issue a report to the Governor, and to the

1 Legislature pursuant to section 2 of P.L.1991, c.164 (C.52:14-
2 19.1), on the collective efforts of the department, the designated
3 office of an executive county superintendent of schools, and the
4 selected institution of higher education in furthering the goals of the
5 New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative. The initiative shall
6 expire upon the submission of the report.

7
8 6. There is appropriated from the General Fund to the
9 Department of Education the sum of \$2,000,000 to be provided as a
10 grant to the institution of higher education selected pursuant to
11 section 4 of this act, in furtherance of the goals of the New Jersey
12 Equity in Education Initiative.

13
14 7. This act shall take effect immediately.

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17 STATEMENT

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19 This bill directs the Commissioner of Education to establish the
20 New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative. The bill also makes an
21 appropriation of \$2,000,000 from the General Fund for the bill's
22 purposes.

23 The New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative will serve the
24 following purposes:

- 25 • to build capacity in the Statewide system of support for
26 school districts, charter schools and offices of the executive
27 county superintendents of schools to provide early
28 intervention services and support for students with specific
29 learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, with a focus on
30 improving outcomes for students in all education settings;
- 31 • to identify effective models for diagnosis and treatment of
32 specific learning disabilities;
- 33 • to develop effective professional development for educators
34 on evidence-based instruction and strategies informed by
35 research to reduce the impact on long-term educational
36 outcomes;
- 37 • to develop effective partnerships between school districts,
38 charter schools, offices of the executive county
39 superintendents of schools, and nonprofits in using the
40 Statewide system of support structure administered by the
41 Commissioner of Education and the resources of the
42 Department of Education; and
- 43 • to disseminate the identified resources, information, and
44 models.

45 The bill directs the Commissioner of Education to designate one
46 office of an executive county superintendent of schools to
47 administer the New Jersey Equity in Education Initiative in direct
48 consultation with the Department of Education and the institution of

1 higher education selected pursuant to the bill. The county office
2 will play a leadership role in the New Jersey Equity in Education
3 Initiative.

4 The bill also directs the commissioner to select one institution of
5 higher education to enhance the early identification of dyslexia and
6 specific learning disabilities and expand evidence-based best
7 practices for supports and services in furtherance of the New Jersey
8 Equity in Education Initiative. The institution must be selected no
9 later than 30 days after the bill's effective date. The selected
10 institution may utilize the services of a literacy specialist,
11 consultant, or company in furtherance of its work. The selected
12 institution is tasked with:

- 13 • identifying existing evidence-based resources, professional
14 development activities, and other efforts currently available
15 at the State, federal, and local levels; and
- 16 • developing new evidence-based resources and activities
17 designed to help local educational agencies across the State
18 identify and provide services and supports to students with
19 specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia.

20 Finally, the bill directs the commissioner to issue a report to the
21 Governor and the Legislature no later than 18 months after the bill's
22 effective date on the collective efforts of the department, the
23 designated county office, and the selected institution of higher
24 education in furthering the goals of the New Jersey Equity in
25 Education Initiative. The initiative will expire upon the submission
26 of the report.