



NEW JERSEY SENATE

SENATE CHAMBERS
P.O. Box 099
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY 08625-0099

May 20, 2020

The Honorable Philip D. Murphy
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 001
Trenton, NJ 08625

Dear Governor Murphy,

After two months of lockdown to flatten the curve and slow the spread of the coronavirus in New Jersey, it's clear the tide is turning. As you have relayed in your daily briefings, the number of new infections is decreasing, hospitalizations are dropping, and, thankfully, fewer people are losing their battle with COVID-19. As a result of these positive trends, we are glad you have listened to some of the requests of legislators and the millions of New Jerseyans we represent to begin lifting restrictions to allow various commercial and recreational activities to resume in a safe and sustainable manner.

While these are steps that we support, we remain concerned by the slow pace of reopening. Further, we are troubled by your recent comments that our state cannot fully reopen until a vaccine is available, which might not occur for another 12 to 18 months based on the current guidance of public health experts. The economic health of the Garden State, the education of our students, and the overall mental and physical well-being of New Jerseyans will suffer tremendously if steps are not taken to accommodate a resumption of most regular activities, with the implementation of reasonable precautions, in the interim.

We are especially concerned by the lack of clear direction from the administration on expanding access to child care and the absence of communication about a plan, or even a timeline to expect a plan, for education to resume in some capacity at New Jersey's public and private K-12 schools, colleges, and universities.

In the very short term, the child care needs of working parents must be addressed as more employers begin to reopen their offices, stores, and workplaces. Under Executive Order 110, which you signed on March 25th, child care centers may only operate on an emergency basis to serve the children of "essential workers," including health care workers, first responders, and social workers.

We have been advised by Early Childhood Education Advocates and the New Jersey Child Care Association, which represent facilities that care for hundreds of thousands of New Jersey children, that they have detailed operational plans that would allow them to serve many more children safely. Given that assurance, you should lift restrictions to allow the children of any parent who must return to work to attend their day care or child care center as needed. Without this critical action, New Jersey's economic recovery will be impeded unnecessarily.

Similarly, we have heard from countless parents and day camp operators that they remain in limbo with no hint from your administration regarding the possibility that restrictions on camps will be lifted for this summer. Many of these facilities will require additional time to prepare, especially with new precautions necessary, should they be allowed to open. It is imperative that you clearly convey your intentions on this front immediately as some of these programs would normally begin operating just one month from now.

In the longer term, families and school districts alike want to know what to expect for the upcoming school year. Under the emergent threat of COVID-19, education across the state at every level shifted quickly to online and remote learning. While we are proud of the flexibility and skill demonstrated by students, teachers, and parents, we must acknowledge that more preparation before the crisis could have resulted in a smoother transition. In late February, for example, we were the first to call for your administration to acknowledge the possibility that schools might close due to the coronavirus and to begin planning for this outcome. It was only after repeated calls from our caucus that the New Jersey Department of Education directed schools to begin preparing for possible closures, and it was only on March 13th that schools were finally directed to prepare plans for home instruction.

We should not repeat the mistake of waiting until the last minute to offer critical direction to our educational institutions for the upcoming school year. The administration must set clear expectations for the manner in which schools, colleges, and universities will be permitted to operate this fall.

Definitive guidance must be provided that addresses important matters, including:

- the conditions under which educational institutions will be permitted to offer in-person instruction;
- any plans being produced by the administration that might recommend a mix of remote and classroom learning, including alternating or split days for classes, grades, or subsets of students;
- any plans to account for the child care needs of working parents who might be impacted by non-traditional school schedules, including families with multiple children who may be on different schedules;
- the needs of students with special learning requirements;
- how transportation, including busing, should be handled;
- whether students will be allowed to live at residential schools and colleges;
- how or whether tuition should be modified to address a shift to online education; and
- the resumption of athletics, including requirements for both athletes and spectators.

It must be acknowledged that our schools will need months to develop effective plans to serve students once they have received guidance on the aforementioned topics and other important issues of concern from the State. We urge you to offer a timeline for this guidance or an actual plan prior to the end of the current academic year. This will ensure that schools can spend every day this summer preparing for the fall term.

On a final note, New Jersey's high school graduating seniors deserve the opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments with their friends, classmates, and loved ones at in-person graduation ceremonies. The Air Force Academy recently graduated close to 1,000 cadets at such a ceremony with masks and proper social distancing. Given all of the other venues from beaches to grocery stores that can be visited today with much less preparation, it's hard to believe we cannot trust our high schools to stage well

planned events that would offer New Jersey's young adults the recognition they deserve with minimal risk. We encourage you to announce that these celebrations may be planned.

We hope you will agree that New Jersey deserves clarity on these matters as we move forward. Without timely transparency, we risk compounding the harm of an already costly crisis. We are ready to assist you to ensure that the Garden State safely emerges from this crisis with both strength and resiliency.

Sincerely,

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