

The Future of Education in New Jersey

In New Jersey, we often say every child deserves a fair chance. But a short bus ride from one neighborhood to another shows how uneven that promise still is. New buildings quickly turn into broken windows. Quiet study halls turn into crowded cafeterias used as classrooms. Behind this is a hard truth: despite some progress, serious gaps in education still shape the futures of Black students in New Jersey. To understand where we are going, we need to be honest about how we got here. The future of equity in our state depends on whether we are willing not just to talk about change, but to create it, policy by policy, classroom by classroom, and community by community. New Jersey is often praised for having some of the best public schools in the country, but that praise hides a divided reality.

In the early and mid-twentieth century, New Jersey, like much of the country, used both open and subtle forms of segregation. The state did not always have the same formal "Jim Crow" laws as the Deep South, but it built its own version of separation through housing rules and school boundaries. Through redlining, banks and federal agencies labeled neighborhoods where Black families lived as too "risky" for investment. They denied these families fair loans while nearby white suburbs received strong financial support. Because public schools are funded mostly through local property taxes, schools followed the money. Wherever wealth went, stronger schools appeared. Black families, pushed into neighborhoods with lower property values and fewer resources, were also pushed into school districts with fewer dollars per student, larger class sizes, and older buildings. The school map copied the housing map, and the color line running through our towns cut into our classrooms. Over time, legal challenges tried to fight back. Important court cases such as *Abbott v. Burke* in the 1980s and 1990s exposed deep

funding gaps between wealthy and poor districts, many serving Black and Latino students. The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that the state constitution promises a "thorough and efficient" education for everyone, not just people living in certain zip codes. The court ordered more funding and support for high-need "Abbott districts." These decisions led to key reforms such as universal preschool in some communities and extra resources for students living in poverty. But money alone could not undo decades of segregation and neglect. Neighborhood and district lines stayed mostly the same, and so did inequality. Some conditions improved, but the problems remained deeply rooted.

New Jersey's history makes one idea clear: racial inequity in education did not happen because Black families and students lacked effort or ambition. It was created and strengthened by public policies and shared decisions. If policy created these inequities, then strong, community-guided policy must help remove them. The impact of these choices is easy to see today. Walking through two New Jersey high schools just a few miles apart can feel like walking into two different futures. In one building, the hallways are bright and freshly painted. Advanced Placement courses are common, computer labs are modern, the library looks like one on a college campus, and counselors help students find new opportunities. In another school, the ceilings leak when it rains. Some textbooks are older than the students. Wi-Fi does not fully reach every classroom, and long waiting lists limit access to basic services like tutoring or mental health support. Teachers work with great dedication, but they are constantly asked to do more with fewer resources. Too often, it is Black students who attend that second school. Today, Black communities in New Jersey still feel the effects of these unequal conditions.

The results of these inequities appear in many ways. First, there are opportunity gaps. Schools in higher-income, mostly white districts usually offer more advanced courses, electives,

clubs, and enrichment programs. Without similar chances, Black students in underfunded districts may reach college or the job market already a few steps behind. This is not because they lack talent, but because opportunities were never put within their reach. Second, there are discipline gaps. Across New Jersey and the country, Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers for similar behaviors. This pattern supports what many call the "school-to-prison pipeline." It pushes students out of classrooms and into systems of punishment instead of systems of support, and it reflects the same unfair patterns later seen in the criminal justice system. Third, there is constant pressure on resources. In many districts with mostly Black students, counselors, social workers, and special education services are stretched thin. Students dealing with trauma, instability, or financial hardship may not receive the steady support they need to succeed, even when they show great strength and resilience. Finally, these conditions create a gap in trust. Years of neglect send a painful message. When Black children study in crowded, aging schools while wealthier districts are regularly upgraded, it can seem as if some children's futures are valued more than others. This weakens trust in public institutions and makes it harder for families to believe new promises about reform. Yet Black communities in New Jersey are not only victims. They are leaders in the fight for something better, organizing, speaking out, and building support systems when the larger system fails them.

To move toward real equity for Black students, we need a clear and realistic plan. One possible plan is a policy and community initiative called the New Jersey Educational Equity Compact. It would be an ongoing commitment built on three main pillars: fair funding that follows student need, culturally responsive and justice-centered classrooms, and real community power in school decisions. The first pillar, fair funding that follows need, would guarantee a basic level of funding for districts that serve larger numbers of low-income students, English

language learners, and students with disabilities. This funding would be protected from simple budget cuts. The state would keep a public online dashboard that shows per-student spending, building conditions, class sizes, and access to advanced courses in every district. When gaps reach a certain level, the state would be required to add extra resources or demand a plan to fix the problem. The second pillar would invest in culturally responsive, justice-centered classrooms. This would include Black history across the curriculum, ongoing training on implicit bias and restorative practices for educators, and expanded pathways to recruit, hire, and support more Black educators. The third pillar would build community power through student and parent equity councils, participatory budgeting for key supports, and a yearly Youth Equity Summit where students share policy recommendations with state leaders.

New Jersey's story is full of contrasts. Our state includes both celebrated schools and forgotten classrooms, major court victories and stubborn inequalities. For Black communities in particular, the classroom has been both a doorway to opportunity and a reminder of how far we still need to go. The future of equity in New Jersey will not just appear on its own. It will be shaped by the choices we make: how we draw district lines, how we raise and share funds, how we train and support teachers, and whose voices we choose to listen to. Education is more than test scores or graduation rates. It is the soil where we plant our dreams. If we continue to water some gardens and leave others dry, we should not be surprised when inequality grows. But if we decide, together, to support every child's future with fair funding, affirming classrooms, and real community power, we can change the story our schools tell about whose lives matter. The future of equity in New Jersey is not far away. It is a choice we make every budget cycle, every school board meeting, and every time we listen to the communities most affected. If we are brave enough to face our history and bold enough to imagine something better, then classrooms in

every zip code can finally become what they should be: places where every Black student is not only present, but powerful.

