

BOE Caucus Meeting Jan. 20, 2026

- Numerous contract updates from various committees
- New proposed state legislation would limit per year reduction in state aid
- First readings of new policies reported from committee meetings
 - library policy, "freedom to read" (not discussed)
- Discussed stricter requirements on background checks for volunteers in schools.
 - This could impact our Enrichment volunteers.
 - Discussion: Tia R raised concern that the cost of this could be a burden to some volunteers; Velazquez: district cannot reimburse volunteers for cost of background check; however, Dr. Fernandez explained that on a case by case basis, some other district fees could be waived for organizations/volunteers of limited financial means.
- New bylaw to prohibit derogatory / threatening remarks regarding school employees during public comment at school board meeting. In committee, it had been agreed that this still needed significant work to more clearly delineate border of first amendment rights and legitimate threats; tabled.
 - Point of this seems to potentially be to stifle JCPS employees from speaking out/complaining at the BOE meetings.
- JCBOE received STARR grant of almost \$5M over 4 years for improving mental health services
- Early "back of envelope" budget projection for next year will be provided in next executive session to start budgeting process
- Enthusiasm over new law allowing sharing of information with municipalities to enable payroll tax collection; optimism that new admin will be forthcoming with information on this; need to hold city accountable for getting collected taxes to district
- New community outreach committee (seemingly this is in part connected to concerns that VP Morris repeatedly raised about press reporting--at times he seemed to be expressing frustration with the press being present at meetings--as well as concern about district employees speaking in public comments on issues to which the school board cannot legally publicly respond)
- Discussion of improving African American history month presentation for board meeting so that it is of the same quality as other presentations, represents broader variety of voices
- Dr. Fernandez presented to board about difference between 504 and IEP: 504 is about access and can involve any disability, is controlled by a single coordinator; IEP requires specialized instruction for education related disabilities, including potential curriculum changes, involves full child study team. This difference needs to be clear in discussions of special education.
- Fernandez also presented plan for overcrowding at PS16, where enrollment has increased from 302 - 1142 since 2009. Previously, only preK students were bussed to Danforth center; now K will be bussed as well; 1st and 2nd will be in new Washington St building annex, 3-5 in "historic" PS 16.
 - The board anticipates lots of pushback, but there is no other viable option; Fernandez does not support redistricting, which would only shift the problem to other downtown schools.

- K. Gullace presented the "Corrective Action Plan" for special ed. This was presented quickly, as it was already 7:45; it was decided to do a slower presentation with discussion on Thursday.
 - Ms. Gullace presented at PS 37 on Feb. 12 re Corrective Action Plan. See separate meeting notes.

Regular BOE Meeting Jan. 22, 2026

Roll call:

- Dr. Norma Fernandez, **Superintendent**
- Dr. Francine C. Luce, **Business Administrator**
- Maryann McKenzie, **Board Secretary**
- Ramon Rivera, **Board Counsel**

Members of the Jersey City Board of Education

- Noemi Velazquez, President
- Dejon Morris, Vice President
- George P. Blount
- Natalia Ioffe
- Afaf Muhammad
- Alpa B. Patel
- Tia Rezabala
- Dr. Matthew Schneider
- Lorenzo Richardson

Key Takeaways

- Presentation by Karen Gullace of Special Education corrective action plan.
- Discussion regarding moving of PS 16 kindergarten program from Annex to Danforth to as temporary way to address downtown over-crowding issues.
- Many public comments regarding demand for special education audit and reforms, concerns regarding the use of technology in schools, and the Bright Street lease.
- Superintendent stated the second part of the Special Education audit will be released in the spring but would not commit to a date certain.

Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) Acting Special Education Director Karen Gullace presented a corrective action plan developed to address financial deficiencies in the JCPS special education department.

The corrective action plan was developed in response to the findings of a report presented last November as the first half of an audit of the special education department initiated in 2023. The report, which was prepared by an independent accounting firm, identified a slew of procedural

failures. These included overpayments to out-of-district schools and vendors, and payments made for invoices that were not supported by necessary documentation.

The actions taken this school year have included mandating various data cross-checks each week or month. Special education case managers, service providers, and the department's accountant are now required to regularly validate students' placements and services against their individualized education plans, tuition contracts, and other documents. Tuition invoices are not paid until student attendance and enrollment is verified, according to Gullace's presentation.

P.S. 16 parents spoke against a proposal to relocate the school's kindergarteners that JCPS Superintendent Norma Fernandez presented at Tuesday's JCBOE caucus meeting.

Parent also raised concerns about excessive use of technology in JCPS classrooms. Several parents thanked the district for developing a guide for principals to the appropriate use of digital instructional resources. According to a letter from Fernandez to parents about the new guidance, JCPS principals will complete a survey on how they have begun implementing it. This will allow them to relay the changes made in their schools and "the challenges anticipated in maintaining a balanced approach between digital and print resources," the letter said.

The board also voted to extend JCPS employees' rights to a "healthy workplace environment" to include JCBOE meetings, despite some trustees' concerns that the change could chill free speech. JCPS General Counsel Robert Pruchnik explained that the revisions would allow JCPS employees who felt a fellow employee had attacked or harassed them during a board meeting to report that colleague to the superintendent. If an investigation found that the statements were part of a pattern of repeated conduct that created a hostile work environment, the offending employee could be disciplined.

Trustees Rezabala and Schneider said they worried that concern over being reported for their public comments could have a chilling effect on employees' speech. Rezabala noted that what is hostile or offensive can be open to interpretation. She said she feared the policy could unfairly impact racial minority speakers and those without educational privilege, because their language or tone might be policed in ways others' would not.

The board voted 6-3 to approve the policy revisions, with Rezabala, Schneider, and Trustee Lorenzo Richardson voting no.

Votes

The JCBOE voted to approve 67 agenda items at its January meeting. These included:

- Adding language to JCPS's policies on volunteers and members or employees of outside groups who work in JCPS schools, requiring such individuals to have criminal background checks if they "provide services that involve regular contact with pupils".
- Approving the release of donations collected by JCPS faculty and students during two districtwide dress down days last year, including nearly \$12,000 raised for two childhood cancer charities and nearly \$6,000 collected for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

- Awarding a new, \$100,000 [contract](#) for freezer and refrigerator repair services and [amending](#) JCPS's previous such contract to raise its cap from \$105,000 to \$153,000.
- Renewing the district's \$275,000-per-year [contract](#) with the Center for Supportive Schools for its work converting the Whitney M. Young Jr. School (P.S. 15) to a community school.
- Approving two [contracts](#) with vendors who provide therapeutic and educational services to students with disabilities, including a \$407,625 [contract](#) for services provided to JCPS students placed in out-of-district schools.
- Amending a JCPS contract with the law firm that represents it in labor- and employment-related matters to [increase](#) the cap from \$225,000 to \$375,000.
- Accepting a nearly \$5 million, four-year federal grant for [Project STARR](#), a mental health initiative through which JCPS will seek to place 12 psychology trainees in its schools each year and hire 10 new school psychologists by 2030.