

## Creative New Jersey's Statewide Conversations – COVID-19 Response

### Call #4 – April 22, 2020

Editor's note: This summary covers the general topics and resources shared during the fourth call in a [series of statewide conversations](#) hosted by Creative New Jersey to bring together our network and help people across our state keep connected, share information, and unite in solidarity as we navigate the Coronavirus response in New Jersey.

To register for Creative New Jersey's Statewide Conversations on COVID-19 Response, click the following link: <https://bit.ly/34WETWm>. Calls take place every Wednesday in April and May 2020 (April 1, 8, 15, 22 and 29; May 6, 13, 20, and 27) at 10am.

## SUMMARY

### Topic: The State of Education during COVID-19

**Guest speaker #1:** John Mooney, CEO and Education Reporter – NJ Spotlight  
<https://www.njspotlight.com/>

**Guest speaker #2:** Angela Garretson, Chief External Affairs Officer, New Jersey Institute of Technology  
<https://www.njit.edu/>

**Guest speaker #3:** Patrick Wall, Senior Reporter – Chalkbeat Newark  
<https://Chalkbeat.org/newark/>

CREATIVE NEW JERSEY'S  
STATEWIDE CONVERSATIONS  
COVID-19 RESPONSE

- EVERY WEDNESDAY AT 10AM ON ZOOM
- DIFFERENT TOPICS ADDRESSED EACH WEEK •

Call # 4  
APRIL 22

TOPIC: The State of Education  
During the Pandemic

Registration is  
Required  
[www.creativenj.org](http://www.creativenj.org)

GUEST SPEAKERS FOR CALL # 4

John Mooney  
CEO & Education Writer  
NJ Spotlight

Angela R. Garretson  
Chief External Affairs Officer  
NJ Institute of Technology

Patrick Wall  
Senior Reporter  
Chalkbeat Newark

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### Resources shared by speakers and participants during the call include:

- Alternative online learning programs
- Reporting on how COVID-19 is affecting virtual learning, attendance, food accessibility, special education and more
- Examples of how STEM students at NJIT are making a difference
- Technology gap and how it affects students – articles with more information
- Mental Health hotlines and virtual offerings

Watch the full recording of this conversation here: <https://tinyurl.com/yc6yzzuq>

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## John Mooney (NJ Spotlight)

<https://www.njspotlight.com/>

John Mooney shared the 30,000-foot view of how our educational system is being affected during the COVID-19 pandemic based on his reporting across New Jersey.

This is an unprecedented time in terms of what has happened to schools, they will be a different place. Nobody was ready for this and definitely not our schools.

Schools across our state already had equity issues before COVID-19 and we are seeing some troubling signs that those equity issues mean some kids are getting left behind, or not getting the same opportunities as others.

Core issues include but aren't limited to:

- Big technology challenges - the State early on said that 100,000 students are without suitable access for distance learning (even if they have a device they may not have internet access at home) – that's 1 in 10 students in NJ, and that number might be undercounted.
- Students with special needs or disability often need therapy, one-on-one sessions, hands-on learning, or tactile therapies and these cannot happen in this current situation, so how are they being served? Not to mention how is this working out and the added burden on families during this time?
- High Schools were fairly adept to distance learning so the transition was a little easier; but it's certainly not the case across all grade levels, even understanding that there are non-digital ways to do remote learning.
- It's a mixed bag and we are learning a lot from this situation; hopefully, there will be lots of lessons going forward from this.
- People are telling Mooney that there is nothing like being in the classroom and having the contact between students, teachers and counselors. In addition to learning schools play a huge role in:
  - Mental health
  - Building social skills
  - Nutrition and fitness
  - We'll see the effects of missing these supports moving into the future.

What is being done about this?

- Mooney has heard about some truly inspiring and uplifting ways that schools, teachers and families are being creative, and local leaders. A couple of examples:
  - Camden raised \$500K from funders, including Campbell Soup Foundation to supply Chromebooks to students. The challenge is how to ensure that opportunities like this are happening everywhere across our state.
- Educators have managed to reinvent how they do schooling. at least for the time being – and a big shout out to the educators have gone above and beyond in doing this.
- There are lots of alternative learning options being launched, including:
  - NJTV Learning LIVE (supported in part by NJEA and the State Department of Education): a daily TV show for grades 3 to 6; top notch teachers give lessons from home.  
<https://www.njtvonline.org/programs/njtv-learning-live/>

- A participant shared that Liberty Science Center is doing a daily science broadcast:  
<https://lsc.org/education/lsc-in-the-house>

**Comments from participants and responses from Mooney included:**

**C: A teacher shared her experiences over the last few weeks: I holds Zoom calls with students 3 times a week and I post lessons in google classroom. Since we started I've seen a decline in kids showing up for the virtual classes. I work in an economically underprivileged area. Many of the students don't have access to the internet or computers. Like many schools, my school district was not prepared. My school is currently working on sending out technology surveys to find out who does not have access to internet, and the school is also working with T-Mobile for service. I'm worried about those kids who are slipping through the cracks and that I'm losing contact with my kids.**

*R: A lot of districts are not prepared for this and it is concerning how slowly the schools are responding to the inequity. What we want to know more about is how are schools, and the State, responding to obvious inequity? This may go on for 6 months. How are schools going to handle this? Any of us who are familiar with education are familiar with the term "Learning Loss" and how that affects students. I wish states would move faster.*

**C: Do families have help/support at home? Do kids have support at home to participate in these educational programs? There are so many issues in making this transition people are stressed and feel burdened.**

*R: What I've been hearing from the Department of Children and Families, is about the drop in abuse and domestic violence case is worrisome. This is not because there is a drop in cases but rather a drop in reporting of cases. Largely it's attributed to schools not being in place as a safety net for these kids and monitoring this. We don't have teachers and coaches who see kids every day and it speaks to the role that schools play.*

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## **Angela Garretson (New Jersey Institute of Technology -- NJIT)**

<https://www.njit.edu/>

Even as a technology school that has a lot of experience in digital learning, NJIT was not prepared for everything that came with COVID 19, despite the fact that they had launched a COVID-19 Task Force as early as January and were able to take significant steps in response to COVID-19 as it began to impact New Jersey and Newark, where NJIT is located. Some of those steps included:

- Extended spring break and turned to remote learning
- Cancelled travel and events on and off campus
- Anyone who was exposed or thought they may have been exposed were requested to self-quarantine
- **NJIT Coronavirus Updates page:** <https://www.njit.edu/coronavirus>
- All that comes with managing a transition from being a campus where classes are primarily not online to a campus that is fully remote
- NJIT still had to remain open to support the students that were in transition or could not go home.

- 16.4% of NJIT's student population are international students, NJIT needed to make sure that dining halls, residence halls, administrative offices and cleaning staff were still able to do their jobs.
- By March, NJIT leadership was able to execute all classes online and classes were only cancelled March 12-14<sup>th</sup> to get the students and faculty prepared for what was ahead.
- NJIT had to get students off campus and back home - which was unheard of.

NJIT had some pre-planning in place because of the work of the Task Force, and so they had a bit smoother transition and other institutions:

- Week 1 – NJIT surveyed students and faculty to have real time data and information about what NJIT can do to help during this specific pandemic. This was a new form of engagement and participation.
- Around April 15<sup>th</sup> (about a month after initial steps taken to address COVID-19), NJIT held a virtual Community Forum with the President Joel Bloom & Provost Fadi Deek, focused on health and safety looking at:
  - How may NJIT need to adjust their policies and requirements to make sure these students have the best chance of graduating?
  - What are students struggling with?
  - How do we adjust our grading policy?
  - Addressing graduation
- And don't forget there were many parents who work at NJIT who had to pick up their children from other institutions because those campuses also shut down.

Another huge piece that educational institutions are having to grapple with are the financial challenges, especially around the fiscal year that begins July 2019 to June 2020.

- Having to give back stipends for housing.
- Supplying vouchers for students
- Offering rebates and other offers to come back for those who aren't graduating this year
- There are specific challenges for a large institution that deals with flying and international student and faculty travel
- Students who did not need FAFSA before may need it now
- Educating students on the **\$4 million that is available to students from the CARES Act**
- COVID-19 is impacting higher education and the funding they would typically receive will be cut by millions and millions of dollars across our country.
- There is great leadership at NJIT, in Newark's Mayor Ras Baraka, and in Governor Phil Murphy, but the economic impact is huge. Where is the funding coming from? How is this affecting higher education? These are questions we are trying to answer.

Other impacted areas that NJIT is working on included:

- Their pre-college program that has 4,000 students from public, private and charter schools. The entire educational pipeline is impacted.

What's next:

- On an uplifting note: NJIT has been working with the county OEM office, local city, Governor's office to help provide support within the state through their means as a poly tech institution.

- **NJIT Scholars Produce Hundreds of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Newark Hospitals:**  
<https://news.njit.edu/meeting-demand-honors-scholars-produce-hundreds-personal-protective-equipment>
- Our city (Newark) was impacted by the recession 10 years ago and we will be engaging all our stakeholders to create the next steps. We want to be a resource and a partner.
- NJIT is fully operable but will remain on remote learning through the summer and will work with other institutions to assist in this process.
- We are all in this together
- **NJIT Coronavirus Updates page:** <https://www.njit.edu/coronavirus>

**Questions for NJIT included:**

**Q: What is NJIT doing for those programs that are more on the hands-on side of education – what are some of the best practices that NJIT professors can recommend?**

*A: Garretson offered to put the participant in direct touch with professors who teach subjects that are traditionally more hands-on (such as chemistry, physics, engineering, etc.), and who could provide more detailed information about teaching methodologies.*

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## **Patrick Wall (Chalkbeat Newark)**

<https://Chalkbeat.org/newark/>

Patrick Wall has covered education in different cities and states during the course of his career. Chalkbeat Newark has been around for the past 2 years. Wall has been talking to teachers, parents, students in Newark about their experiences and what this all means for them. It seems most districts are facing similar challenges:

**School Food:**

- Children eat many meals at schools so right away this became a big issue to figure out how to provide meals. Many students are getting at one to two meals a day (breakfast and lunch) and if students are also in an afterschool program they may get snacks and sometimes dinner.
- In Newark the vast majority of students qualified for subsidized meals (19,000 students for Breakfast & 21,000 for Lunch).
- Right away the district started grab and go meals. Wall has heard there are issues getting those meals to families – some are not able to pick it up, some may be unable to leave the house:  
<https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/23/21232050/newark-schools-take-home-meals>
  - Newark has distributed an average of 4,000 meals per day since the coronavirus shot down school buildings, in contrast to the 40,000 meals per day they were serving when schools were open.
  - Paterson has given out 208,000 in the past 5 weeks and Newark has given out 100,000 -- half as many, so there are questions on the best ways to get these students access to food, including ideas like giving out multiple meals at once to reduce the risk of going out.

### **Remote Learning:**

- High tech learning is not what is happening on the ground in most places. Many teachers had never used ZOOM prior to the pandemic
- Newark had paper packets ready to go from the day the schools shut down, which included two weeks' worth of work. Newark made because the school district knew not every family had access to technology for distance learning. Now that the shutdown is longer than expected, districts are starting to think how they can do more interactive learning.
- Newark had to address that a lot of families did not have technology.
  - 1 in 3 families did not have internet access, 1 in 5 did not have a smartphone.
  - Some had Chromebooks, but as of the beginning of April, there were still about 2,000 families that had no computers at home.
  - Some families with multiple kids have been trying to use one Chromebook for all their children.
  - If families had multiple devices connected to the internet, that became an issue for bandwidth – connection became strained and spotty. Access to updated technology has been prohibitive.
  - There are a lot of tech issues you don't think of at first.

### **Tech Savviness:**

- Being able to actually use these online tools has been a learning curve, as well - not only for the students but for the teachers and parents, too.
- Most teachers and students have not used Zoom or Google Classrooms. Many teachers had to connect with parents to troubleshoot getting students online and become, essentially, tech support for families.
- When some teachers have tried to do Zoom meetings, they are having mixed results - low turnout, tech issues getting online, and how to use unfamiliar technology.
- Even if they are doing Zoom classes, it just doesn't compare to the classroom – students can't ask questions and get immediate feedback from teachers, they can't work with their peers, there's a lot of stress of working from home and it is really new and hard for students.
- Students sleep schedules are also being affected – from social/emotional issues, fear for parents who are essential workers

### **Attendance and Assignments:**

- There is no clear picture of how and how many students are engaging in remote learning -- the districts can't calculate it.
  - One high school teacher from the south ward called all 94 of her students - one of the students had just lost her father, other families still didn't have internet or computers, and the teacher hadn't been able to reach 6 students since schools closed. This teacher told Wall, "I can't find them and I am thinking about going to their house but it's too dangerous."

Schools are putting in an incredible effort without any preparation. The longer this goes on the more these challenges will make things harder and more children will be left behind.

### **Links to some stories Wall mentioned:**

- Virtual learning: <https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/6/21225469/newark-schools-are-going-virtual-but-is-everyone-ready>

- Attendance: <https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/17/21230488/i-can-t-find-them-attendance-was-already-a-challenge-in-newark-the-coronavirus-created-new-barriers>
- High school seniors: <https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/3/31/21225549/it-s-really-heart-wrenching-newark-high-school-seniors-worry-coronavirus-will-disrupt-prom-graduation>
- Special education: <https://newark.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/15/21225553/as-newark-moves-to-virtual-learning-special-education-is-an-especially-heavy-lift>
- Budget challenges: <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2020/04/07/coronavirus-school-funding-great-recession-lessons-equity/>
- Next school year: <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/4/16/21225529/students-will-go-back-to-school-eventually-here-are-5-concrete-ideas-for-helping-them-catch-up-readj>

### **Questions for Chalkbeat included:**

**Q: Why do you think there are so few students accessing the free meals in Newark?**

*A: It is a puzzle. The theories are that parents are scared to come out of their houses. A lot of other meal resources are being provided which may mean parents are getting to other sources. Access to food closest to home is the ideal situation to get good.*

*A participant who lives in Newark added that the quality of the lunches is not good and students are not eating them and food closer to home is more accessible – families are relying on food pantries.*

**Q: Have schools tried creating family "teams" to keep tabs and encourage each other – either student groups or parents in order connect during the course of the week and combating isolation?**

*A: I've definitely heard that parents are helping one another and teachers are putting in BIG overtime (even when they have their own school-aged children). There is an attendance counselor using the basketball team to try and use social media to reach students who have been out of touch and that teachers are having difficulty reaching.*

*Mooney added: It's taking a lot of individual ingenuity and it's hard to sustain – most of these kinds of efforts are scattered and depend on the school or the district.*

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## RESOURCES

Additional resources shared by participants on our call:

### **Technology gap**

- Is Technology Gap Impeding Remote Learning?: <https://www.njspotlight.com/2020/04/is-technology-gap-impeding-remote-learning-for-100000-nj-students/>

- Reporting from Connecticut on how the technology gap is affecting students there:  
<https://apnews.com/7f263b8f7d3a43d6be014f860d5e4132>

**Mental health services and support:**

- NJ Mental Health Cares, the state's behavioral health information and referral service, now offers help to people dealing with anxiety and worry related to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.
  - New Jerseyans can call 1-866-202-HELP (4357) for free, confidential support, 7 days a week
  - <https://www.mhanj.org/virtual-support-and-learning-opportunities/>
  - Any questions, feel free to reach out to Jaime Angelini: [jangelini@mhanj.org](mailto:jangelini@mhanj.org)
- The arts are a key player for our overall health as human beings. It needs to be remembered and considered as time goes on. This is a larger and longer situation than nonprofits anticipated and how the arts and artists can be involved in the recovery should be considered.

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