

**NJPSA Testimony Before the Joint Committee on the Public Schools**  
**Student Mental Health and the Need for School-based Services**  
**May 8, 2026**

Good Morning, Chairman Cryan, Chairwoman Reynolds-Jackson and members of the Joint Committee on the Public Schools. I am Debbie Bradley, Director of Government Relations at the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association. NJPSA represents school leaders across New Jersey serving as principals, assistant principals, directors, and supervisors. Thank you for the opportunity to offer a new lens on the issue of NJ4S and student mental health support in New Jersey - that lens is the experiences, perspectives and priorities of school leaders who are one of the major groups that are actual “users” of the NJ4S system.

When Governor Sherrill presented her proposal for the 2027 State Budget, she very clearly prioritized New Jersey’s children noting that they are struggling with “issues that did not exist” in the past, including the “always online culture, threats of school violence, fierce competition and concerns about their future.” Within her budget recommendations, the Governor suggested phasing out the existing NJ4S framework, which currently provides mental health assistance to school communities via a regionalized model under the DCF. Her plan envisions replacing this with the SPARK initiative, a program designed to target intensive, clinical mental health interventions for students, a focus our members applaud. NJPSA values the productive, ongoing dialogue on these issues with the Governor’s office and this committee.

**NJPSA Survey**

As an association, we know that student mental health is a top concern of our membership so we decided to “check the pulse” of our members’ current experiences with NJ4S, their local priorities to address student mental health, and to seek their recommendations on what this should look like at the school building level.

We shared a report with this committee detailing the results of a statewide membership survey held between March 27 and April 14, 2026, where 201 school leaders shared their perspective on these issues. The respondents serve in a broad range of school leadership roles, serve diverse populations of students at all grade levels, and serve in all of the regions of the state. We have shared our survey report with the Governor’s office, legislative committees, agencies and staff to inform this policy conversation with the lens of one group of “users” of the NJ4S system.

## **Key Findings on Student Mental Health Needs in School**

New Jersey school leaders report a systemic and escalating student mental health crisis that schools are increasingly unable to manage with current resources. Schools are functioning as a primary mental health provider in many cases, due to failures in access to community-based care, though 73% of respondents also identified a lack of parental follow-through as an important barrier. Additionally, insurance barriers, cost, long wait times, stigma and transportation issues are some of the major challenges faced by schools, students and families with high level needs.

School resource gaps complicate the landscape. These gaps include funding, a shortage of clinical health staff in most schools, training gaps, a lack of programs and services at the elementary levels, language barriers, and the uneven availability of regional mental health services, both in and outside the school. Members noted the need for multi-lingual service support and family programming.

What keeps our members up at night is the continuing increase in crisis events, school avoidance and unmet student needs. Over 90% of our members identify student anxiety as the most prevalent issue, followed by depression, trauma, and home-related stresses. Our members also identify the scope of the crisis noting the prevalence of these issues across their student populations.

## **NJ4S Review and Recommendations**

In this context, the school leaders who responded to our survey strongly value the services provided by NJ4S. A strong preponderance of survey respondents **shared these experiences:**

1. The critical impact that NJ4S services have had on their **neediest students**;
2. Significantly **enhanced student access** to mental health services at school;
3. The positive **removal of key barriers** to student mental health services through the provision of on-school-site services including the minimization of insurance and transportation barriers;
4. The proactive approach NJ4S makes possible through the provision of early intervention services before situations escalate;
5. The **empowerment of school staff** through on-site student supports, the presence of additional professional clinicians at school, specialized training, and preventative programming for the school community; In fact, many members described NJ4S staff as integral members of their school community;
6. Overall **positive member ratings on the effectiveness** of NJ4S services, particularly Tier III that received the highest concentration of top ratings;

7. Positive reviews on the responsiveness and quality of services schools received from **NJ4S providers**, though this varied in certain regions and service areas; and
8. The clear and continuing need for broad-ranging mental health services **at the school site with the most urgent need being increased clinical capacity at school.**

As our staff reviewed the survey results, many things stood out and some trends in the extensive comments surprised us. The consistency of themes, sentiments and positive comments on NJ4S was made very clear to us with **many members urging us to advocate for the continuation of these services.** I urge you to review our full report as you consider the issues ahead.

### **Areas for Improvement in NJ4S**

Our members did see clear areas where improvement in NJ4S services is needed and we offer their comments constructively while supporting the continuation of level NJ4S funding for the 2027 fiscal year while exploring the parallel opportunities being created in SPARK.

1. Despite the existing program benefits, barriers continue to exist.
2. Members criticized the grade level restrictions on service eligibility for only middle and high school students and families.
3. Others noted that the 6 to 8 week window of services is too short, particularly for students with high acuity or ongoing needs.
4. Some experienced difficulties in accessing Tier III services, sometimes leading to long waiting times for students and families in crisis.
5. Many members wish to increase the availability and their local utilization of Tier II and Tier III services.
6. Some members noted a lack of provider experience with school-age populations thus leading to a disconnect in the level and relevance of workshops provided.
7. Members noted a rocky start to the NJ4S program where disorganized service delivery, inconsistent follow through on Tier I and II promises, difficulty staffing in-school programs and a need for more consistent providers colored their initial view of the program. However, members positively noted that the program has improved over time and, as such, their reliance on NJ4S has grown.
8. Due to the variation in service quality and availability, members recommend more guidance, support and monitoring of the service hubs to provide greater consistency, capacity and responsiveness.

### **Final recommendations**

Our last survey question asked respondents for their recommendations to the Governor and Legislature on NJ4S, SPARK and any considerations that should be incorporated into the school mental health program ultimately adopted for the 2027 school year.

They recommend:

1. School leaders strongly value the support and programming services they have experienced through NJ4S and **recommend that there be no break in the delivery of NJ4S services next school year.** They believe that the abrupt ending of NJ4S will result in a quick and direct loss of student access to services, increased burdens on school staff, increased wait times for treatment, and likely increases in student behavioral issues, absenteeism and family strife.
2. Since student needs for mental health interventions far exceeds the availability of services statewide, **NJPSA recommends flat funding of NJ4S at the FY 2026 levels in the FY 2027 budget.** The \$38 million proposed for the proposed SPARK program does not meet the \$45 million level spent on NJ4S in the current school year. School leaders fear a loss in services will significantly hurt students experiencing mental health challenges.
3. **School leaders stress the need to thoughtfully transition to any new system that provides direct mental health services to students.** Our members emphasize their **steadfast commitment** to addressing the wellness of their students and seek an active role in the **ongoing policy dialogue** regarding the evolution of statewide mental health initiatives. **We recommend a stakeholder engagement process with agencies, school leaders and other stakeholders, and experts collaborating on the development of new approaches to student mental health.**
4. School leaders understand that for many students, school is their safe place, where they feel most comfortable sharing their feelings, thoughts and needs. The need for expanded in-school resources and staffing is critical to meet students where they are. **Recognizing that schools cannot do it all, however, they seek supplemental support, a focus on higher levels of student interventions, and direct local financial support as proposed in concept in the SPARKS program.**
5. In the context of a difficult budget year, **it is important to coordinate inter-agency resources related to student mental health to promote breadth of services, accessibility and tiered interventions without duplicating resources or creating confusion in the field.**

Thank you for your consideration of the recommendations of school leaders in New Jersey on the critical issue of supporting our student mental health in our state.

Submitted by: Debra J. Bradley, Esq., NJPSA Director of Government Relations