



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

New Jersey State Policy Lab

# 2025

## *Annual Report*





"Conscious of our many problems,  
I seek today to lay a  
*foundation to our public policy.*

My fundamental purpose is to  
devote my term of office to  
*raising the standard of public service*  
in New Jersey."

— Charles Edison  
42nd Governor of New Jersey



# A note from our Principal Investigator:

The New Jersey State Policy Lab (NJSPL) was created as the result of a grant from the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) in April 2021. Thus, we are celebrating our fourth birthday this month. The following annual report chronicles our activities over a very busy fourth year.

The NJSPL was formed with the intent of being an independent, evidence-based entity that focused on policy issues relevant to the State of New Jersey. We particularly (but not exclusively) focus on issues that most prominently impact our disadvantaged populations. Throughout our first four years of existence, our primary means of producing research has been funding a diverse array of scholars around New Jersey to do research in policy areas that interest them. These include academics on all three Rutgers campuses and at other universities in New Jersey.

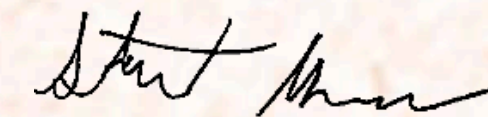
Since our inception we have issued more than 40 reports. In the past year, we have issued 12 reports. Recent reports include:

- [A Review of the State of Higher Education in New Jersey](#)
- [Transforming Mental Health Care and Addiction Treatment for People Involved in the Justice System in New Jersey](#)
- [Transportation Priorities in Camden County](#)
- [Linking Broadband Availability and Education to Digital Skills](#)

But we are doing a lot more than just issuing reports. Other accomplishments from the past year include:

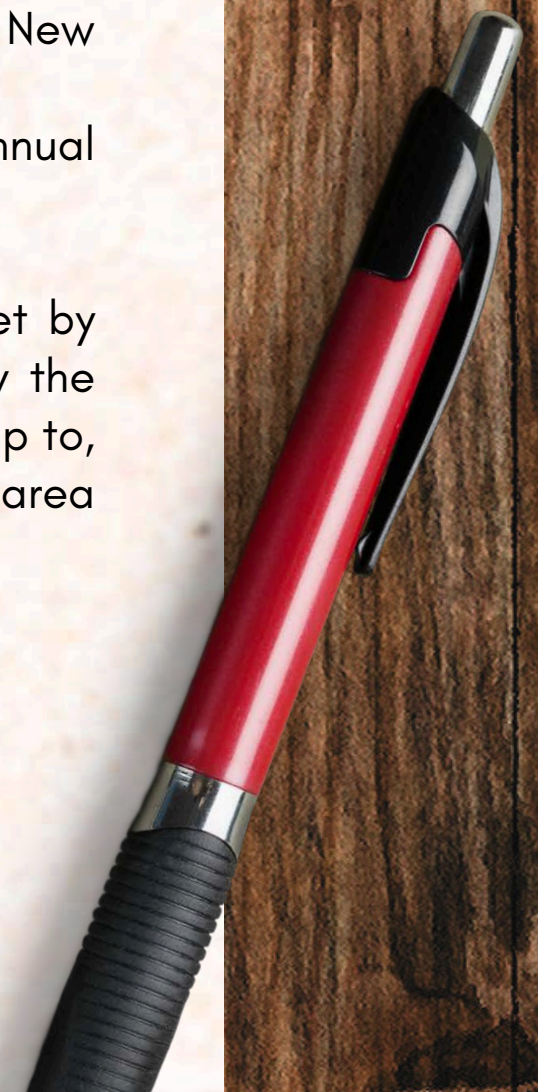
- Three [economic forecasts](#) for the state of New Jersey.
- A special issue of the [Journal of Policy Studies](#) featuring earlier work from the Lab
- The [Promising Practices Summit](#), a one-day, collaborative event for and by educators in the Garden State and held by the NJSPL, Cornwall Center, and the New Jersey Department of Education.
- The second annual [Policy Collaboratory](#), a team effort between graduate students at Rutgers and Princeton universities in which they workshopped solutions to affordable housing problems in New Jersey.
- In the summer, we'll be holding the fourth annual [summer internship](#) program.

It's been a busy year building on the foundation set by the activities of the three years prior. Please enjoy the report below to get an idea of what we have been up to, and I'm sure you will find something relevant to your area of interest.



**Dr. Stuart Shapiro**

Dean, Rutgers University Bloustein School  
of Planning and Public Policy





# A note from our Executive Director:

As the New Jersey State Policy Lab reaches its fourth anniversary, it is my honor to serve as the Executive Director, working with an incredible team of dedicated professionals to better understand policy issues impacting the state. In addition to the work that Stuart referenced above, we collaborate with experts to research a wide range of policy challenges confronting the state with the goal of improving the quality of life for everyone in New Jersey. This year's projects focused on:

- Reducing overdose deaths by implementing **buprenorphine** as a treatment alternative for those with opioid use disorder;
- Providing **safety education for e-bike riders** and motor vehicle drivers;
- Evaluating the effectiveness of **property assessed clean energy (PACE)** programs;
- Analyzing **corporate and investor housing ownership** in New Jersey;
- Developing **New Jersey's Induced Travel Calculator**;
- Exploring language disparities in **English and Spanish chatbot technologies** in New Jersey;
- Keeping **children safe on their travels** to and from school;
- Identifying water bodies in NJ with a history of **flooding and sewer overflow**;
- Examining trends in "close calls" (i.e., **nonfatal vehicle crash data**) to make roads safer;
- Considering legal issues surrounding **internet access for imprisoned individuals**;
- Ranking **New Jersey's financial literacy**;
- Addressing **health insurance literacy** challenges;
- Compiling a database and interactive map of all **housing apartments available to low-income adults** in NJ;
- Assessing community needs related to **perinatal mental health** in New Jersey;
- Calculating the distribution of **American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)** funds across NJ municipalities
- Examining the effects of ending the **Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA)**;
- Creating a **database of legislators with scientific expertise**;
- Documenting **environmental justice policies**;
- Understanding complexities surrounding **prosecutorial misconduct cases** in NJ;
- Developing the **State AI Preparedness Index** to ensure governance frameworks are secure and benefit society while mitigating risks; and,
- Researching the quality ratings of **NJ's nursing homes**.

Additionally, the NJSPL conducted a **survey** of key stakeholders in the fall of 2024 and found that **housing** (50%), **cost of living and inflation** (48%), the **environment/climate** (47%), and **healthcare access and affordability** (46%) topped the list of policy priorities for New Jersey. These findings informed our focus for the Policy Collaboratory with SPIA in NJ, where Rutgers and Princeton University students contemplated creative solutions to affordable housing challenges.

Our summer internship program is another initiative that encourages students' growth as researchers. In this fourth year of this program, eight students research a policy issue of their choosing. These interns are guided by two teaching assistants, who create a collaborative environment where students learn from them and each other. I am proud of this program's success in building students' confidence as researchers, and in expanding the pipeline of students dedicated to serving the state as policy analysts.

An important goal for the Policy Lab is the broad dissemination of our research findings, which we distribute in blogs, reports, press releases, and posts on social media. Additionally, our team compiles weekly policy updates, highlighting key legislation proposed and passed into law in New Jersey. In one month, our website was viewed almost 8,000 times by more than 4,000 users; plus, more than 1,200 individuals follow us on LinkedIn, where we post several times each week.

As a result of these efforts and the broad reach of our work, I am immensely proud of the work that our team and our affiliated researchers are doing to better understand issues impacting New Jersey. We are committed to making the world a better place.

Thanks to everyone who contributes to this important work. Together, we're making a difference.

*Elizabeth Cooner*  
**Dr. Elizabeth Cooner**

**Executive Director,  
New Jersey State Policy Lab**





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# Our Leadership



**Elizabeth Cooner, Ed.D.**  
*Executive Director*



**Stuart Shapiro, Ph.D.**  
*Principal Investigator*



**Charles Menifield, Ph.D.**  
*Co-Principal Investigator*



**Kelcie Ralph, Ph.D.**  
*Co-Principal Investigator*



**Gregg Van Ryzin, Ph.D.**  
*Co-Principal Investigator*



# Our Team



**Megan McCue**  
*Public Relations Specialist*



**Angie Nga Le, Ph.D.**  
*Postdoctoral Associate*



**Kevin Majewski, Ph.D.**  
*Research Manager*





**Candace Harrison**  
*Administrative Coordinator*



**Patricia Walsh, Ed.M.**  
*Research Co-Adjutant*



# Our Mission



The **New Jersey State Policy Lab** assists the State of New Jersey and its many communities in the **design, implementation, and evaluation of state policies and programs** by conducting **rigorous evidence-based research** that considers equity, efficiency, and efficacy of **public policies and programs** in holistic and innovative ways.

By utilizing the combination of strong ties to New Jersey's **diverse communities** and **significant expertise** in collecting, cleaning, and analyzing data, the **New Jersey State Policy Lab engages and collaborates with stakeholders** such as community groups, the state government, and municipal governments to create **high quality datasets and evidence** that reflects our state's diversity and **empowers state policymakers** to address the needs of New Jersey communities more effectively, innovatively, and equitably.



# Our Work

**The New Jersey State Policy Lab (NJSPL) formally began in April 2021** after a competitive grant process from the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE). The NJSPL, jointly managed by the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy in Rutgers-New Brunswick and the School of Public Affairs and Administration in Rutgers-Newark, has developed and published a solid foundation of **public policy research** on a wide array of subjects, including the economy, education, healthcare, and more.

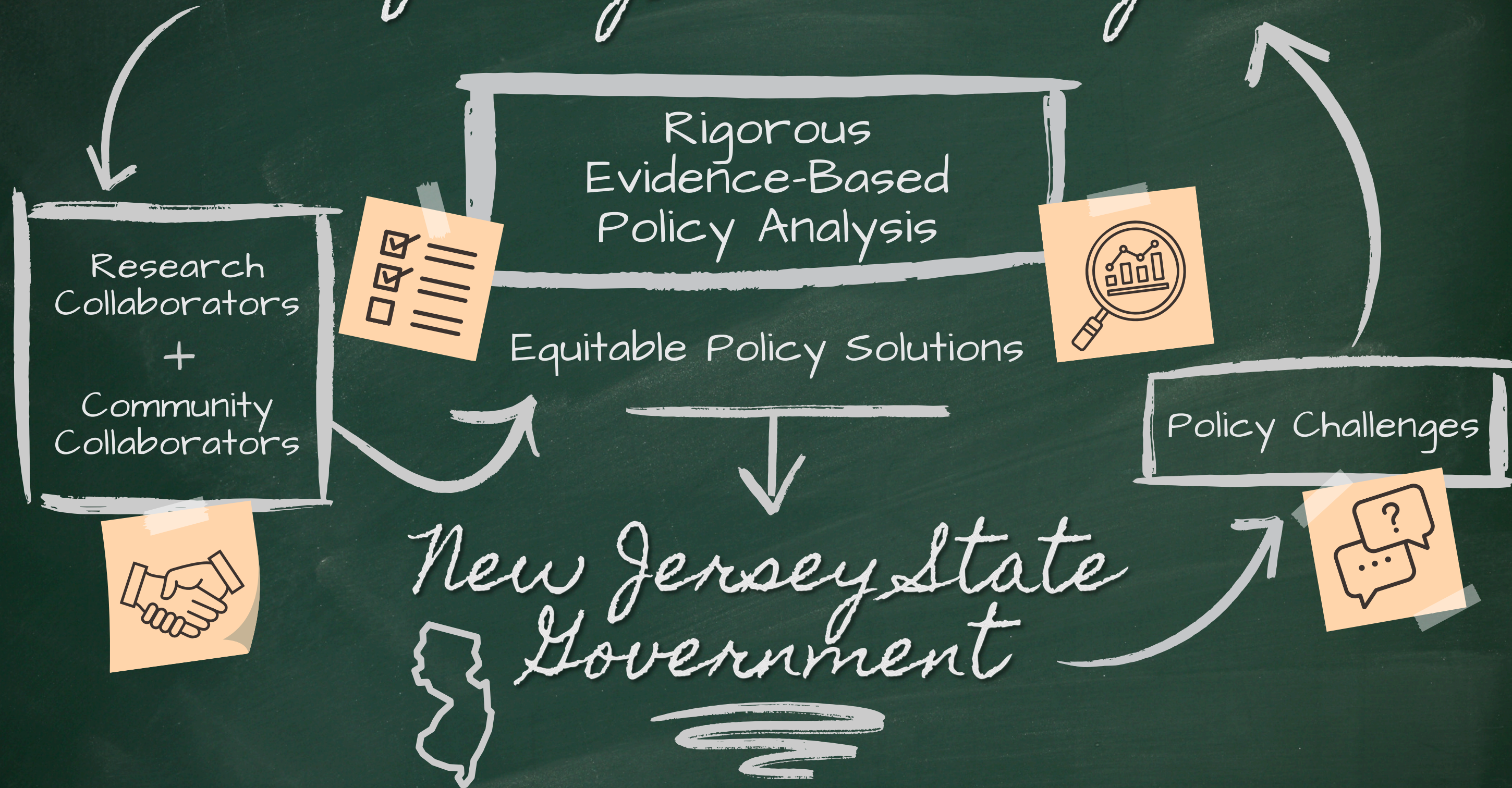
The NJSPL now regularly solicits **proposals for policy analysis from scholars** throughout the Garden State annually, evaluates and selects proposals for funding, and then works with project leaders to publish blogs throughout their research process along with a final report in conclusion of their findings. The NJSPL team, led by Executive Director Elizabeth Cooner, then endeavors to ensure the **research gets in front of policymakers** at the local, municipal, and state levels to whom it might be most relevant.

In the four years since its formation, the NJSPL has published over 40 reports in a variety of important policy areas, some of which have had impacts on policy in New Jersey such as:

- Our reports for the [Wealth Disparity Task Force](#) bolstered understanding of issues surrounding criminal justice, the economy, education, health, and housing, and helped inform Governor Murphy's FY2024 investments to increase access to homeownership, reduce medical debt, and increase access to capital.
- [The Impact of Cannabis-Related Businesses on Home Sale Prices](#) report has been cited in the development of municipal cannabis ordinances.
- The City of Newark launched the Newark Women Forward Initiative, citing the NJSPL and Center for Women and Work report on [The Impact of Inflation on Women in New Jersey](#).
- Our research on [Youth Mental Health in New Jersey](#) documented the challenges New Jersey youths face, and supported increased funding for the NJ Statewide Student Support Services network.
- Our report on [Higher Education in New Jersey: A Policy Review](#) assessed New Jersey's progress toward the goals laid out in the state's higher education plan.



# New Jersey State Policy Lab





The following are some key insights derived from research the NJSPL has released in the past year:

### Higher Education in New Jersey - A Policy Review

**Graduation rates at two-year institutions saw an increase nearly 4% and four-year institutions saw an increase of 1%** from 2019 to 2023 per statewide data, according to this report which aimed to assess how the Garden State has progressed in its higher education goals.

### Transforming Mental Health Care and Addiction Treatment for People Involved in the Justice System in New Jersey

In partnership with the NJSPL and the New Jersey Reentry Corporation, researchers engaged over 80 diverse stakeholders, including those involved in the justice system and community leaders, through virtual forums and individual surveys to develop **comprehensive policy recommendations to address mental health and addiction-related illnesses for individuals recently released from incarceration.**

### R/ECON Economic Forecast: Winter 2025

**New Jersey's gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to decline in 2025 but rebound slightly in 2026.** The Garden State's GDP improved in Q2 and Q3 of 2024, with stronger growth pushing the annual estimate to 2.1%, equal to the growth in 2023 but still markedly slower than the projected national rate of 2.8%

### Outlining the Transportation Priorities and Recommendations of Communities in Camden County

**Nearly two-thirds (64%) of commuters traveling in and around Camden County reported using public transportation at least once a week,** according to this study from NJSPL and the Walter Rand Institute which utilized surveys and focus groups to identify community transportation priorities and recommendations.

### Linking Broadband Availability and Education to Digital Skills

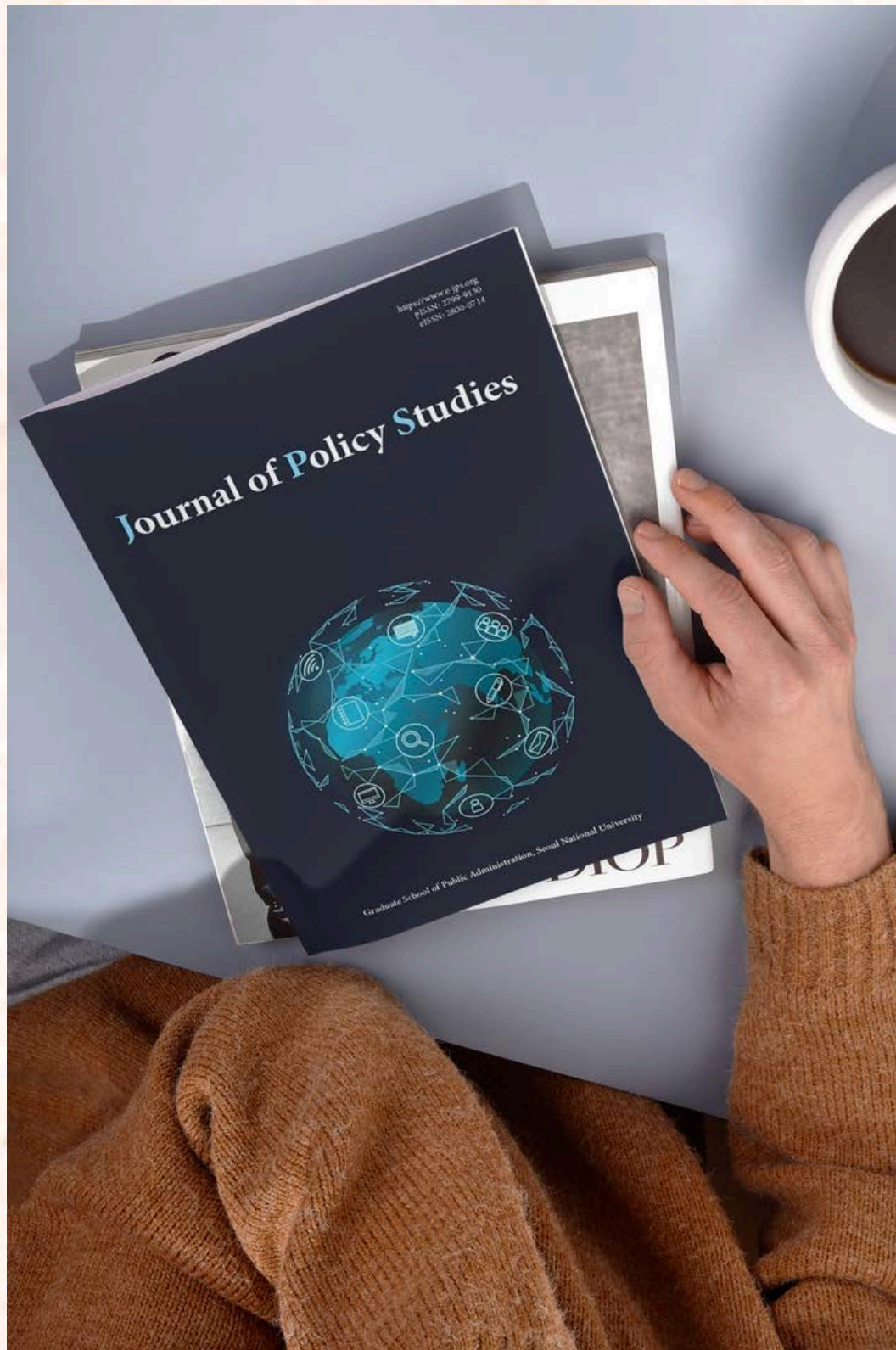
Researchers examined a 2022 survey from the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling and broadband data from Microsoft to explore the effects broadband availability played on residents' digital skills. The report found that **increasing broadband infrastructure and access should also include investing in educational digital literacy programs.**

### 15-Minute Neighborhoods: A Pathway to Creating Healthier, More Just, Resilient, & Sustainable Communities in New Jersey

This report is a summation of a collaborative, two-year study examining the concept of what **15-minute accessibility could mean for New Jerseyans.** The research involved implementing case studies in Newark, Cherry Hill, and Bridgeton to gain a better understanding of **how a healthier and more equitable planning model could be utilized in the Garden State.**



# The Journal of Policy Studies: The New Jersey State Policy Lab Special Issue



From its inception, the New Jersey State Policy Lab has aspired to produce work that is both academically rigorous and equally relevant to current policy issues in the state of New Jersey. Our strategy has been to support and fund the many brilliant scholars in and around the Garden State to conduct research on policy questions within their area of expertise. Recently, we were grateful to partner with the **Journal of Policy Studies** to highlight some of the work produced by the NJSPL in a special issue.

**Dean Stuart Shapiro, Dr. Elizabeth Cooner**, and graduate student **Ciera Gaither** co-authored an article introducing this full issue, which included six additional articles covering the following subjects:

- Disparities in educational opportunities, particularly in the context of pathways toward STEM education through middle and high school,
- The legalization of cannabis and its impacts on residential property sale prices in New Jersey,
- The societal and cultural shifts in working from home demographics post-COVID,
- Equity in budgeting, and in particular examining what budget actions have been taken at the state and local levels to structure taxing and spending to advance social equity goals,
- Administrative burdens in technology impacting families from utilizing child care subsidies, and
- The relationship between New Jerseyans' digital literacy, perceptions of e-government services, and trust in the state government.



The background of the image is a photograph of the New Jersey State Capitol building. The large, ornate, golden dome is the central focus, rising against a clear blue sky. Below the dome, the classical columns and architectural details of the building are visible. In the lower left, another part of the building with a smaller dome is seen. An American flag flies on a pole to the right of the main dome. The overall scene is bright and clear.

# *Policy research for a* **STRONGER, FAIRER, & MORE RESILIENT** *New Jersey*

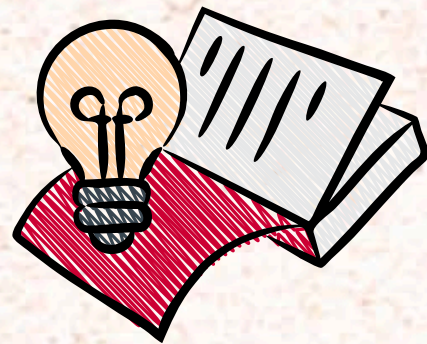
Since its creation in 2021, the New Jersey State Policy Lab has  
funded *50+* research projects, published *40+* policy reports,  
worked with *170+* researchers, faculty, & associates  
across *20+* centers, schools, & universities in New Jersey.



# Our Partnerships

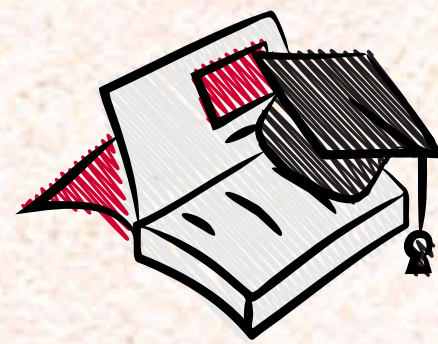
From the very beginning, one of the key objectives in creating the New Jersey State Policy Lab has been to establish a **network of scholars and research centers within New Jersey institutions** of higher education to coordinate state policy research and facilitate collaboration. In the four years since, the NJSPL has **forged connections with dozens of universities, schools, and centers** within the Garden State and beyond.

Further, the NJSPL guiding mission is to identify and respond to **state government and community needs for effective policy solutions** through firsthand research and coordination with relevant experts across the state. Our cohort has grown to include:



## Research Collaborators

- Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center
- Eagleton Institute of Politics
- Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies
- Ralph W. Voorhees Center for Civic Engagement
- Rutgers Graduate School of Education
- Rutgers School of Public Health
- Rutgers School of Communications and Information
- Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs
- SPIA in NJ



## Strategic Partnerships with New Jersey Institutions

- Rutgers–Newark
- Rutgers–New Brunswick
- Rutgers–Camden
- NJIT
- Princeton University
- Princeton School of Public and International Affairs
- Montclair University



## State & Local Government

- New Jersey Office of the Governor
- New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education
- New Jersey Department of Education
- New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection
- New Jersey Department of Human Services
- New Jersey Governor's Office of Equity
- New Jersey Wealth Disparity Task Force





# NJ Promising Practices Project

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically disrupted K-12 education as school staff were faced with the unprecedented task of delivering high-quality instruction amidst a global health crisis. **In New Jersey, approximately 15% of K-12 public schools managed to improve proficiency rates** in math and/or English language arts (ELA) on the New Jersey Student Learning Assessment from 2018-19 (pre-pandemic) to 2021-22 (post-pandemic).

Motivated by the evident resilience of these schools, the New Jersey Department of Education commissioned the New Jersey State Policy Lab, in partnership with the Joseph C. Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, to **investigate the factors that may have led to such successes**. The research team developed a rigorous, mixed methods approach to identify positive outlier schools (i.e., those exceeding predicted academic growth).

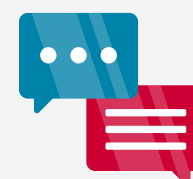
Once identified, **a subset of schools was selected and invited to participate in in-depth interviews to document the innovative and promising practices** they believe contributed to their success. From these quantitative analyses and qualitative interviews, the Rutgers research team has compiled a wealth of research in the form of **[reports which are available to read today.](#)**

The research team identified several practices across the sample of schools interviewed that were **“innovative” or “promising,”** either because the educators labeled them as such, or because their descriptions struck the team as relatively distinctive, exemplary, and of benefit to peer schools. This collection of practices serves as a mere snapshot of the various topics discussed:



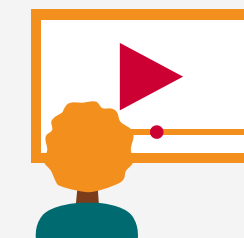
**Accelerating instruction** through math and English language arts intervention programs designed to identify and remediate learning gaps.

**Supporting multilingual learners and students with disabilities** through expanding access to curricula, employing strategic staff allocation, leveraging external partnerships, and fostering community within and beyond the school building.



**Partnering with parents** to plan for and support their students' ongoing success throughout the school year.

**De-privatizing teaching and administration** through staff collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional development.



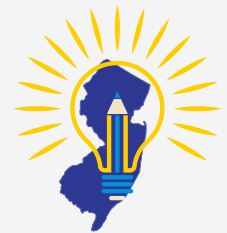
**Intentionally building relationships and implementing social-emotional supports** that aim to promote a favorable learning environment for students and staff members.

**Centering equity and justice** by bolstering initiatives that support historically underserved student groups and their families.



**Promoting college and career readiness** by exposing students to postsecondary academic and professional pathways, maximizing public-private partnerships, and prioritizing enrollment and dual-credit opportunities.





# NJ Promising Practices Summit

In April 2024, the NJ Promising Practices research team held a **one-day summit for NJ educators** at the Busch Campus in Rutgers-New Brunswick. **More than 200 teachers, administrators, and NJDOE staff attended** this event, which featured opening remarks delivered by NJDOE Assistant Commissioner Jorden Schiff and a keynote presentation from Stefanie Lachenauer, 2024-2025 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year.

The summit also included **thirteen breakout sessions, led by and for NJ educators**, sharing their insights on a range of innovative and promising educational practices. These sessions centered on peer-to-peer discussions of practical approaches to topics such as social-emotional learning, supporting historically underserved student populations, tiered instructional interventions, and utilizing data to improve educational outcomes. At the end of each session, **educators were encouraged to write down the practices or insights** they were most excited to bring back to the classroom. These are a few of their responses:

The Early College Program - we have dual credit, but I love the idea of our students leaving high school with an associate's degree, & having a dedicated staff member to support the students.

We already do a Student of the Month program based on character traits—but I love the idea of having teachers include a handwritten note describing exactly what the student demonstrated.

I liked the idea of bringing in the Scholastic Book Fair to math/literacy nights or the open house. I can totally see more family engagement if they had the opportunity to shop for books with their kids.





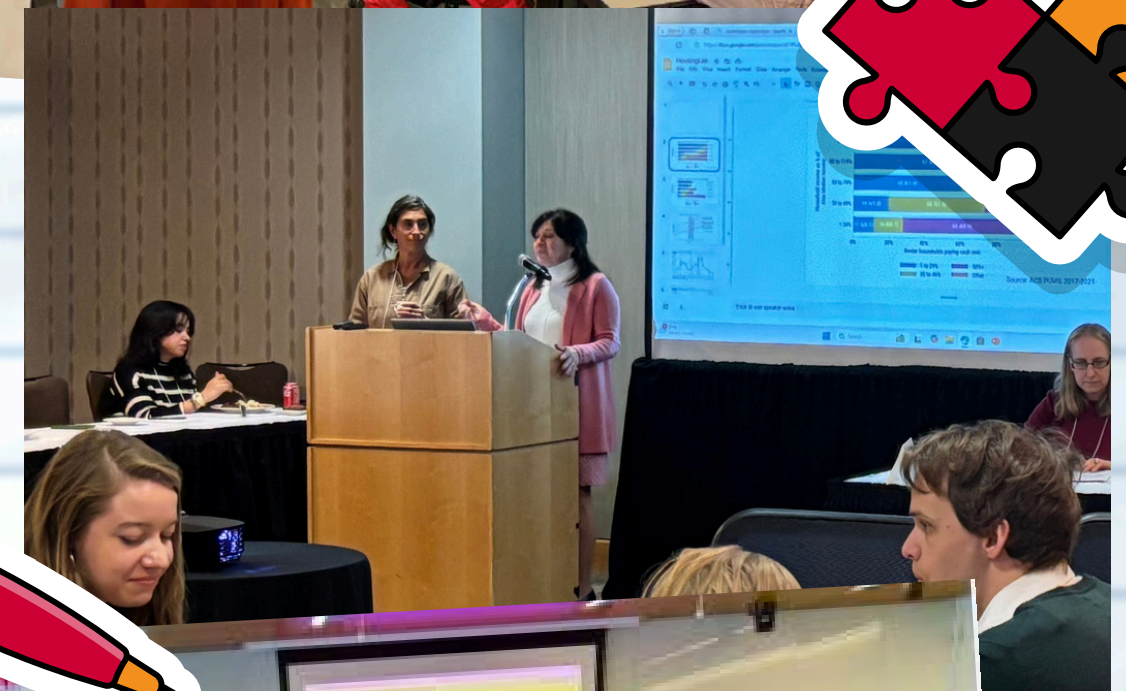
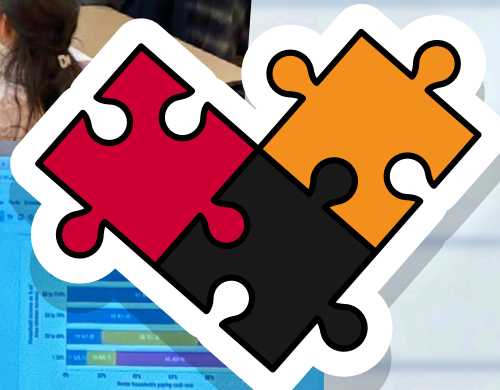
# Policy Collaboratory



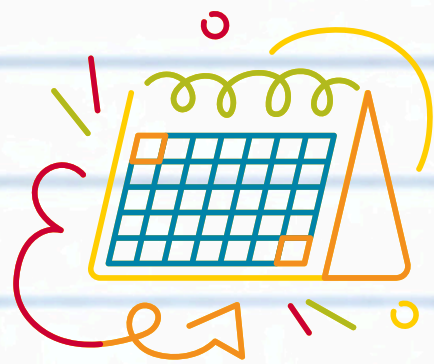
In March 2024, the New Jersey State Policy Lab partnered with SPIA in NJ at the Princeton University School of Public and International Affairs, along with the Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, the Center for Policy & Research on the Environment, and the Environmental Analysis and Communication Group at Rutgers University to hold the **first annual policy research collaboration**. Initially named the Policy Hackathon, the one-day event brought together **graduate students from Rutgers and Princeton** to brainstorm various approaches to address managed retreat due to climate change and sea level rise.

A year later, the NJSPL and SPIA in NJ announced the now-rebranded **Policy Collaboratory** event, which took place in April 2025 at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development in downtown New Brunswick. For this second annual event, more than 40 graduate students from both Rutgers and Princeton listened to a panel of experts discuss **affordable housing issues in the Garden State**, and afterward worked together to identify opportunities to address housing needs and challenges.

**We thank all the students who participated, as well as the panelists, experts, and moderators who graciously donated their time**, from organizations which include: the Bloustein School, the School of Public and International Affairs, Make the Road New Jersey, Fair Share Housing, Community Investment Strategies, the Ralph W. Voorhees Center for Civic Engagement, the Rutgers Center on Law, Inequality, and Metropolitan Equity, the Pace Center for Civic Engagement, BARO Strategies, and New Jersey Future.







# Summer Internship



In addition to funding research related to assorted policy issues, the New Jersey State Policy Lab is **creating opportunities for students to get involved in policy research and analysis** through various student work opportunities as well as our annual summer internship.

In 2022, the NJSPL initiated our first paid summer internship program which enabled cohorts of both graduate and undergraduate students to develop research skills and knowledge pertaining to the policy development process.



Over the course of the ten-week program, the interns researched specific policy issues, met with state and municipal legislators, and designed presentations to highlight their findings at the end of their internship.

As our annual summer internship has continued to grow and develop, we have incorporated various tasks and assignments to allow the students to expand their expertise within the realm of policy research and development. **The interns complete literature reviews and research blogs which culminates in a final presentation to an audience of policymakers, faculty, and staff.** This summer will mark the fourth year of our program.





# Events & More throughout New Jersey



NJSPL Researchers share findings  
at the New Jersey League of  
Municipalities

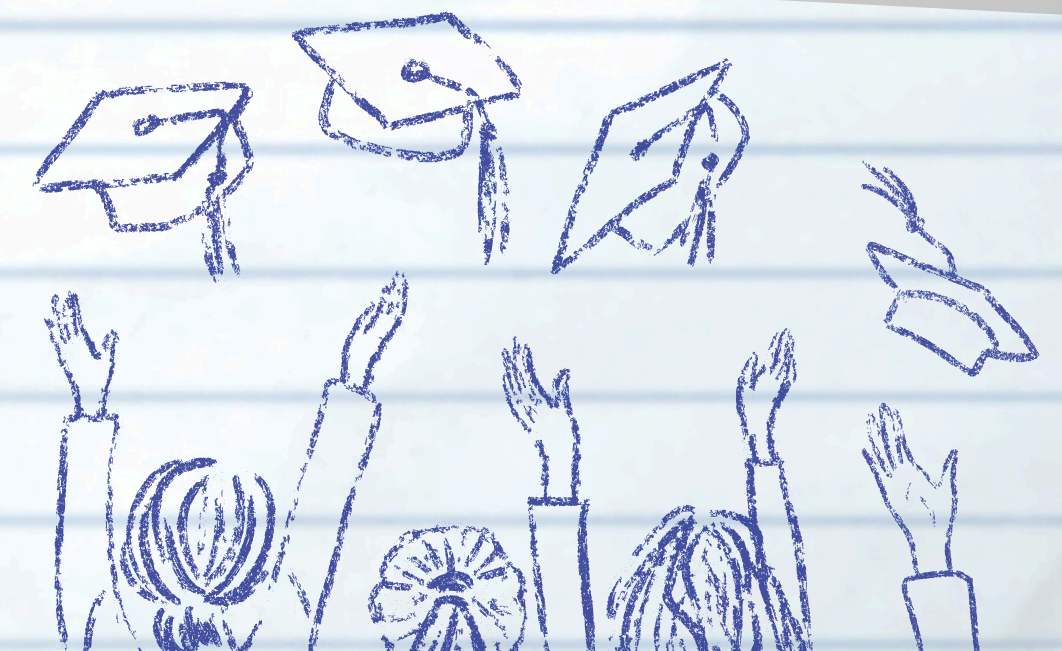
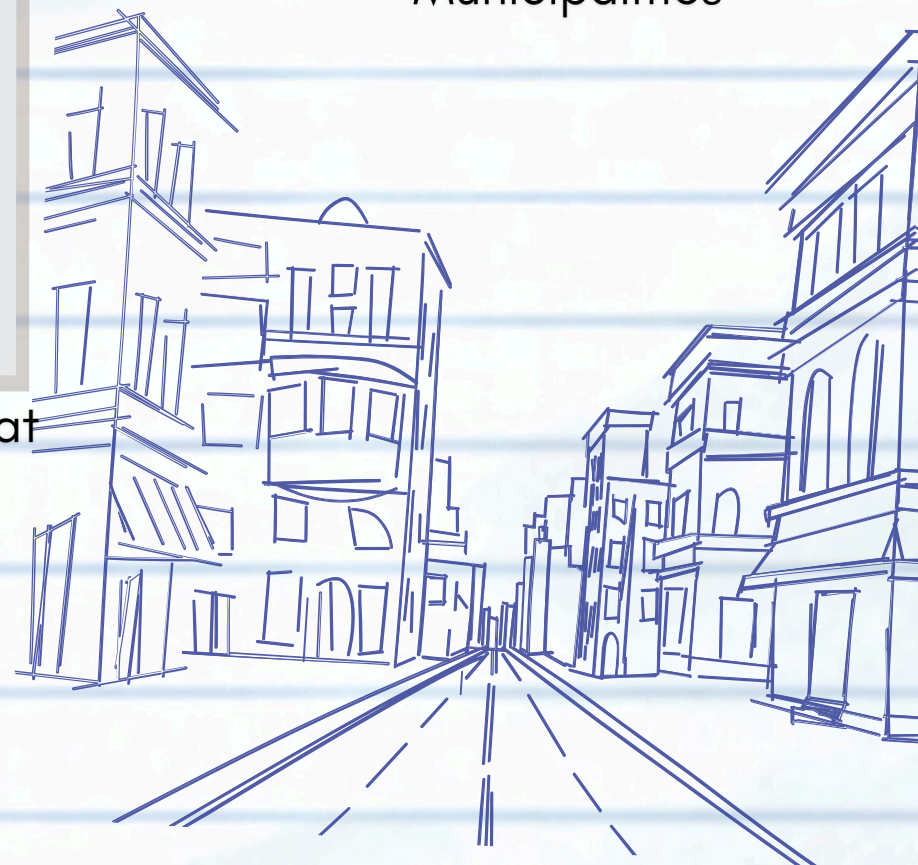


Dr. Brian K. Bridges, Secretary  
of the Office of Higher  
Education, held a talk and  
Q&A hosted by the NJSPL



Lt. Governor Tahesha Way  
presents at Rutgers-Newark

Promising Practices team exhibits at  
the New Jersey Education  
Association Convention







# Acknowledgments

While the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education administers the partnership that funds the New Jersey State Policy Lab, the contents of this report do not necessarily represent the policy of the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education and you should not assume endorsement by the State of New Jersey, elected leadership, or other employees of the State of New Jersey. Any omissions or errors are the sole responsibility of the author(s).

The Promising Practices Project, spearheaded by the NJSPL and with support from the Cornwall Center for Metropolitan Studies, would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions of many individuals and organizations. The research team would like to extend gratitude to the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) for providing ongoing support and collaboration throughout this project. The team also would like to extend deepest appreciation to the school leaders, teachers, and staff members who took time out of their busy days to share their insights and experiences. It was an honor to spend time with so many thoughtful and dedicated educators.

The New Jersey State Policy Lab would like to sincerely thank and acknowledge all the Rutgers faculty and staff that have provided countless hours of research, support, mentorship, and more on behalf of the NJSPL and our interns. Furthermore, we express our sincere appreciation for the many centers, schools, and universities that have partnered with us over the course of the last four years. This collaborative spirit has strengthened the NJSPL and our team, and enabled us to continue to provide rigorous, evidence-based policy research in support of all New Jerseyans.





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