

Special Message



New Jersey AASA Governing Board Members

from left, NJASA Past President Dr. Scott Rocco, NJASA Morris County Executive Committee Representative Dr. Mitzi Morillo and NJASA Ocean County Executive Committee Representative Dr. Thomas Farrell

The 50-Year Wait: NJASA Advocates for Members of Congress to Fully Fund IDEA

Annual Advocacy in DC

Each summer, AASA, the School Superintendents Association, brings superintendents from across the country as part of their advocacy initiative. AASA serves as the national voice for public education and district leadership on Capitol Hill each year. Every July, representatives from across the country can advocate for their districts, colleagues, and states.

AASA does this through its governance structure, which engages the considerable talents of its diverse, dynamic membership. This structure assures that AASA's voice reflects the viewpoints of school administrators throughout the country and AASA's mission.

AASA Governing Board

AASA policy is set by its 135-member Governing Board, drawn from seven distinct U.S. geographic regions. The Governing Board meets twice each year.

Membership on the AASA Governing Board is based on the number of eligible voting members in each state affiliate. Each state affiliate is guaranteed at least two representatives on the Governing Board.

Governing Board members have dual responsibilities. They represent their home state on the Governing Board, and they report the work of the Governing Board to their home state affiliate.

Members have a voice in AASA decision-making through the Governing Board elected representatives.

Governing Board Regions:

Region 1: AK, CA, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, WA, WY

Region 2: AR, AZ, CO, KS, NM, OK, TX, UT

Region 3: IA, MI, MN, ND, NE, SD, WI

Region 4: IL, IN, KY, MO, OH, Canada

Region 5: AL, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA

Region 6: DE, MD, NJ, PA, WV (our region)

Region 7: CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT

New Jersey Advocacy in Action

New Jersey is actively represented on AASA's Governing Board. On July 8th, 9th, and 10th, AASA held its annual Advocacy Conference in Washington, DC. Dr. Mitzi N. Morillo, Superintendent of Mendham Borough School District (Northern Region), Dr. Scott Rocco, Superintendent of Hamilton Township School District (Central Region), and Dr. Thomas Farrell, Superintendent of Brick Township Public Schools (Southern Region) are the three NJASA members who represent New Jersey on the Governing Board.

During the three-day conference, we met with leaders in our region and from across the country. We listened to legal and educational experts on current educational issues and court cases. And we learned more about advocacy's impact on federal education policy and funding; specifically, how that advocacy can, and does, drive change at the local, state, and national levels.

Focused Advocacy in DC

AASA identified fully funding IDEA as our top federal appropriations "ask" while advocating during these three days. IDEA funding affects all districts of varying demographics and populations. This year, 2025, marks 50 years since Congress passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that transformed access to education for students with disabilities. When Congress passed IDEA, they committed to funding 40% of the additional cost of educating students with special needs, a commitment they've never come close to honoring. The closest the federal government has come to honoring this commitment via annual appropriations was 18% in 2005, and now, 20 years later, the federal share hovers around 10%.

Investing in IDEA, a federal flagship formula program designed to help level the education playing field for students with disabilities, is an investment in our nation's students and their future. It indicates that Congress is serious about keeping its word to help school districts cover the additional cost of educating students with disabilities.

The House and Senate have introduced the IDEA Full Funding Act (H.R.2598, S.1277), which would put Congress on a ten-year path to honor its commitment to fully funding the program with permanent, mandatory funding for IDEA grants to states.

With the IDEA focus and some issues specific to New Jersey, we prepared for Wednesday, which was dedicated to visits on Capitol Hill. We were able to arrange meetings with representatives of Senator Corey Booker, Congressman Thomas Kean, Jr., Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill, and Congressman Christopher Smith.

During our meetings with Congresswoman Mikie Sherrill's Legislative Director, Julie Jochem; Senator Cory Booker's Legislative Policy Personnel, Mia Furtado; Congressman Christopher Smith's Legislative Assistant, Kemper Jolly; and Tara Snowden, Legislative Assistant for Congressman Thomas Kean Jr., we were able to share stories from our district on why IDEA funding is essential. We asked our Senators and Representatives to safeguard IDEA funding in the FY26 appropriations process and to invest as much money as possible. With limited time for each meeting, we also spent a few minutes addressing state-level issues.

Over three days in July, we learned much about the need for and how to advocate at the federal level. Although we had positive conversations at each meeting, work still needs to be done. To extend the work done in DC by the AASA Governing Board, you can advocate too.

- *Contact your local, county, state, and federally elected officials through letters and meetings. Get to know them and let them get to know you.*
- *Inform elected officials of the issues in your district and provide ideas and solutions.*
- *Ask your representative and senators to support the IDEA Full Funding Act (S.1277, H.R.2598). Encourage them to join Senator Chris Van Hollen (Maryland) and Representative Jared Huffman (California) as cosponsors of this pivotal bill (or thank them if they have already signed on).*

It was our honor and privilege to represent you, NJASA, and our state as members of the AASA Governing Board.

*Reference

Leadership & Governance | AASA | AASA. <http://www.aasa.org/about-aasa/leadership-governance>