

James Solomon's Plan to Improve Education in Jersey City

As America's golden door, Jersey City has long been a place of opportunity, drawing strength from the grit of its people and its diversity. But despite the best efforts of Jersey City's educators, Jersey City is not providing all of our children with the education and resources necessary to succeed in school, the workforce, higher education and beyond. And teachers cannot do it alone; we must all take responsibility for ensuring our children thrive.

Currently, fewer than half of students in Jersey City are proficient in reading, and only a third are proficient in math, with proficiency rates significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Public school enrollment has also fallen, and rates of chronic absenteeism are shocking. Over 25% of Jersey City Public Schools (JCPS) students were chronically absent in 2023—meaning that they missed at least 10% of school days—up from roughly 15% before the pandemic.¹ These declines have reinforced existing inequities between different schools and neighborhoods across our city. And, despite worse outcomes, Jersey City residents are paying more than ever in property taxes.

Put simply, education and enrichment has, at best, been an afterthought for our current City leadership. They failed to fight back effectively when the State slashed school aid by two-thirds and rather than aggressively exploring how the City could support youth development—for instance by working to grow after-school and summer enrichment options and other support for families—they have used the severe dysfunction at the School Board to disclaim responsibility entirely.

As a parent of three daughters in the Jersey City Public School system, James is committed to making our schools a place where every student can thrive and graduate prepared to succeed. As Mayor, James won't shirk responsibility for our schools. Instead, he will make it the responsibility of every single part of the City Administration to find new and effective ways to support local students and their families. But we know that education doesn't end in the classroom. As part of this, **James will work to add 1,000 more annual slots in summer employment, internship, and mentorship programs for JCPS students,** make a range of after-school programs available for every student at every grade level, and cut absenteeism back to pre-pandemic levels by the end of his first term.

¹ Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research, *Education Recovery Scorecard* (February 2025). Available at: <https://educationrecoverycorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Pivoting-from-Pandemic-Recovery-to-Long-Term-Reform-A-District-Level-Analysis.pdf>

To get this done, James will:

1. **Guarantee after-school and summer enrichment opportunities for every student.**
 2. **Fight for fair funding for schools and facilities from Trenton and corporations.**
 3. **Push for professional School Board leadership.**
 4. **Appoint a Deputy Mayor for Education to lead coordinated education initiatives across the City.**
 5. **Support teachers with workforce housing and help them afford to live in our City.**
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1. **Guarantee after-school and summer enrichment opportunities for every student.**

Add one thousand slots for student employment and training opportunities like summer jobs, internships, mentorships, and apprenticeships. For James' entire career, he has prioritized hiring students and graduates from local high schools and universities, because he recognizes the talent that exists in our local schools. He knows that these types of opportunities are too often sorely lacking for students in Jersey City. As Mayor, James will make a full-court press to create a robust pipeline of youth employment opportunities throughout the City. First, James will scale-up existing City-led youth job and internship programs, like YouthWorks. Second, he will partner with local businesses—especially large corporations that have located in Jersey City—as well as unions, trade associations, and nonprofits to create and incentivize external opportunities for employment, apprenticeships, and skills training. As part of this, James's Administration will prioritize working creatively to get non-profits and funders with proven models to invest in programming in Jersey City. And James's Deputy Mayor for Education (see below), will be a key liaison coordinating programming and funding between City Hall and these external partners.

Dramatically increase the availability and variety of affordable after-school and summer enrichment programming. In recent years, Jersey City has implemented key before- and after-school programming, like S.T.A.R.S and C.A.S.P.E.R., but these programs are limited in terms of how many students they can support, have fewer offerings after elementary school, and are provided at a cost. As with summer employment, James and the Deputy Mayor for Education will work together to make Jersey City a leader in enrichment programming for out-of-school time. First, James will work to expand, support, and promote existing programming in schools and other community centers. For example, Jersey City Free Public Library currently operates a free summer learning program that every Jersey City student can participate in—and even get subsidized meals through—but this program needs to be supported and promoted in schools. Next, James will pursue additional partnerships with established enrichment organizations and programs that have proven effective, building on the success of local partnerships like that with Yonkers Partners in Education. Under James, every element of City government will work

together to “get to yes” on expanding programming rather than being a barrier, for instance, by making it easier for existing organizations to secure transportation or use school spaces for programming and events outside of school hours, and expanding staffing solutions like shared services agreements. As part of this, James will forge partnerships between schools and local universities, local arts and athletic organizations, city agencies, and other stakeholders to create a range of enrichment opportunities for children. Lastly, James will coordinate an effort to provide every single Jersey City student with a library card, so they can learn about and take advantage of valuable existing free resources and programming.

Partner with and support our local higher-educations institutions. Our local universities and colleges, like New Jersey City University, and Hudson County Community College, and Saint Peter’s University, are enormous assets for all Jersey City students. As Mayor, James will explore ways to nurture and leverage the City’s relationships with these institutions to benefit all students. For example, many of these institutions offer programs for high school students to complete associates degrees by twelfth grade, which allows them to graduate from college in less time (and paying less in tuition). James will ensure local schools and higher-ed institutions work together to promote opportunities like this to students who need them most. Through the Deputy Mayor for Education, James will also explore additional ways for Jersey City lower schools and higher-ed schools to work symbiotically, for example, through expanded mentorship and tutoring programs.

Help families find educational and enrichment opportunities for students. Jersey City families should be able to easily browse opportunities for educational enrichment and choose experiences that are the right fit for their children, based on their age, interests, cost, and more. But any family with children in Jersey City knows that, in reality, it is currently time consuming and difficult to research and vet opportunities for educational enrichment, like after-school programs, tutoring, camps, and more. While there exist some specific portals, like RecDesk from the Department of Recreation & Youth Development, there is currently no central hub for families to find information about programming for kids. James will spearhead the creation of a city-wide portal for families to make it easy to browse and filter opportunities for children based on their specific needs. James will also create and promote city-wide resource fairs for all school children and families. The City will invite all vendors, organizations, and programs that offer educational enrichment to participate in fairs at key times, like before summer breaks, so that students and their families can browse options and sign up for programming on the spot.

Establish the first permanent recreational center in Jersey City in or near Bayside Park. Public recreational facilities and programming for adults and children in the city are few and far between. New facilities are urgently needed to provide the public space for these enrichment activities. James will prioritize constructing and putting into operation a new full-scale

recreational center at Bayside Park on the southside of the City, in consultation and collaboration with the surrounding community and the Ward A councilperson.

2. Fight for fair funding for schools and facilities from Trenton and corporations.

Fight to get Jersey City its fair share of school funding from the State. More than half of funds for Jersey City schools comes from the state. But since 2018, the state has slashed school aid for Jersey City by almost 70% through a series of politically-motivated changes to the school funding formula. As Mayor, James will bring back Jersey City's credibility in Trenton and advocate fiercely to change the State school funding formula and restore previous levels of state aid for our schools. James will fight for a formula that accounts for the unique challenges faced by many Jersey City students, including by increasing the formula's weights for students in poverty and English language learners. James will also fight to claim the maximum amount of funding from the state Schools Development Authority to support the construction and rehabilitation of local schools, and leverage new development in the City to create new, appropriate facilities for JCPS students.

Ensure corporations comply with the non-resident payroll tax to fund our schools. Not long ago, the City enacted a 1% payroll tax for employers that hire non-resident employees. Those funds were supposed to be dedicated for Jersey City schools. But after passing that tax, Jersey City failed to enforce and collect it, and so James championed a citywide crack-down on noncompliant corporations, leading to an additional \$100 million in revenues for schools. More recently, James led the passage of another ordinance requiring developers and contractors to prove that they are in compliance with these payroll taxes before receiving any final construction permits. As Mayor, James will continue his fight to make sure that Jersey City collects every dollar of payroll taxes, and that those dollars remain allocated to support our local schools.

Make developers pay their fair share to support schools. Typically, when Jersey City property owners pay property taxes, a portion of that money goes into the schools' budget. But, where developers have negotiated PILOTs instead of property taxes, many of those buildings make payments directly to the city government—side-stepping schools entirely—for up to 30 years. James will ensure that any new development in this city, including those that receive PILOTs, pay their fair share towards our local schools.

3. Push for professional School Board leadership.

Demand the School Board perform—or support alternative candidates who will. Too often, the Jersey City School Board has devolved into chaos, replete with walk-outs, ousted members, leadership vacuums, and more. Under current leadership, student absenteeism has ballooned to utterly unacceptable rates: in recent years, over *one in four* students were chronically absent,

meaning they missed *10 percent* of school days. Jersey City students deserve far better than in-fighting and dysfunction, and students need a school system that supports them and achieves robust attendance, which is highly correlated with educational attainment. As Mayor, James will hold the School Board accountable to acting professionally and in the best interests of students, not Board members, and to providing thoughtful oversight to our schools. When the Board or its members fail to do so, James will not hesitate to put his full support behind alternative candidates for leadership.

Push the School Board to reevaluate its literacy curriculum and offer additional programming to improve outcomes. Literacy is critically important for success, but far too few Jersey City students are reading at grade level. As Mayor, James will push the School Board to review its use of the Benchmark Advance program to determine whether this choice of curriculum is still in line with the latest research on how young best learn to read. He will also work with the School Board to determine how best to expand evidence-based literacy programming.

4. Appoint a Deputy Mayor for Education to lead coordinated education initiatives across the City.

Appoint a Deputy Mayor for Education. In Jersey City, an independent School Board controls many aspects of local education. But preparing Jersey City students for academic and professional success is the responsibility of our entire city. As Mayor, James won't shirk responsibility for our schools, as too many mayors have done. Instead, he will make students' success a priority for every single city agency that provides any type of service or resource to young people and their families. To help execute on this promise, James will appoint a Deputy Mayor for Education who will be the top City liaison responsible for bringing together every education stakeholder in the city, including City agencies, the school board, the library, higher education institutions, nonprofits, and funders, among others.

Task the Deputy Mayor with coordinating among education stakeholders. The Deputy Mayor will be responsible for ensuring effective cooperation and communication among all of the City's many education stakeholders, which is currently lacking and leads to missed opportunities. For example, our City libraries offer incredible resources like laptops and wifi hotspots, which could be invaluable to students without digital access at home, but those resources can only be distributed effectively if our schools and libraries are talking to each other. Likewise, many Jersey City students face challenges at home, like lack of access to secure housing or healthy food, which interferes with their ability to attend or focus in school. But schools and City agencies need to coordinate in order to effectively connect children and families with the services they need. The Deputy Mayor will bring these various stakeholders to the table to work together and hold them all accountable.

Secure additional partnerships and funding sources to support our schools. There already exist a number of programs and funding streams that could be invaluable for Jersey City students. For example, many nonprofits provide tutoring, literary support, test preparation and other key educational services—and they are already well-funded to provide these services. The Deputy Mayor will be tasked with identifying programming and funding opportunities like these, and working to bring them into our city. In addition, the Deputy Mayor will work to resolve logistical barriers to high-quality programming in schools. For example, in Jersey City, it is currently difficult to organize programming in schools outside of school hours, because there is no simple and affordable method to hire the necessary security and janitorial staff. But the Deputy Mayor can identify and implement city-wide solutions to problems like these, to facilitate more programming and better use of City and school spaces.

5. Support teachers with workforce housing and help them afford to live in our City.

Prioritize developing workforce housing and downpayment assistance for teachers. Being a teacher in Jersey City is *hard*. Teachers work long hours, face challenging individual student needs, navigate limited resources and often sub-standard classroom environments, and they do it all for less than they might earn in the private sector. But despite all this hard work and dedication to our city, many teachers cannot afford to live in the city they serve. Unlike recent mayors, who have prioritized sweetheart deals for large luxury developments, James is committed to supporting teachers and other high-priority city employees, like first responders and healthcare workers, by building workforce housing. To make this development happen, the City will agree to convey vacant or abandoned properties that are sustainable for residential development to non-profit or for-profit developers who agree to build workforce housing. James will also explore local and state funding available to support downpayment assistance for teachers seeking to buy homes in Jersey City.

Explore free parking for teachers and other first responders. James is committed to understanding and alleviating the everyday challenges that teachers face. One frustration that is palpable among teachers is that they cannot afford to live in Jersey City and are constrained to commute by car, but then struggle to find parking and often have to leave school multiple times a day to move their cars and avoid tickets. To remove these unnecessary distractions from teachers' plates, James will explore a variety of options the City may have to improve quality of life for teachers, including free, designated parking. James will also task the Deputy Mayor for Education with having listening sessions with teachers in order to learn more about challenges and pressure points like these that the City can help relieve.