

Responses from Board of Ed President, Nubia DuVall Wilson

1. Do you agree with The New Jersey Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, that expansion of the Interdistrict School Choice Program is “the best remedy to diversify schools”? If yes, why? If no, what do you think is the best remedy?

I appreciate that the New Jersey Policy Institute is advancing proposals like the expansion of the Interdistrict School Choice Program as a potential remedy for segregation in our schools. However, the evidence to date demonstrates mixed results. For example, [state data show](#) that in the 2018–2019 school year, more than 60% of Choice students were white, compared to about 40% of students statewide. This suggests that the program has not consistently fostered integration, since many white students transferred to other largely white districts rather than into more diverse environments.

The program also has limitations because district participation is voluntary, and the majority of the 600 districts in NJ—including South Orange–Maplewood—are not part of the program. Without broader buy-in, stronger incentives for districts, and robust transportation funding to ensure equitable access, the impact will remain limited. My own experience growing up in Prince George’s County, Maryland, illustrates how interdistrict choice can succeed when implemented comprehensively. In Maryland, countywide open enrollment and magnet programs, supported by reliable transportation, expanded student opportunities and gave families meaningful agency in shaping their children’s education.

I respect the deeply held value of neighborhood schools in our small NJ towns, where children grow up alongside their peers from the same community. At the same time, rising costs for both school systems and municipalities continue to drive property taxes higher. These increases are causing the “small town” model to become unsustainable. Expanding interdistrict choice with appropriate financial supports could be one part of that solution, but only if the state addresses the program’s current shortcomings.

2. How could possible statewide remedies impact our III? Or is our III a model that could be expanded statewide? If so, how would that work?

The single most critical factor in sustaining or expanding integration initiatives statewide is adequate funding for transportation. Transportation is not optional; it is the backbone of any successful integration effort. In our district, we have invested millions of dollars in busing because without it, equitable access to schools simply does not exist. When I studied other districts that The Alves Group supported around the country, each had a robust transportation policy that included courtesy busing well below the state-mandated mile threshold—sometimes as low as one mile. By comparison, in South Orange–Maplewood, providing courtesy busing at

the one-mile mark proved prohibitively expensive because we outsource our buses. Ultimately, we settled at 1.25 miles, funded through a Board of School Estimate tax increase in 2023.

Before courtesy busing was expanded, a majority of families were left with the burden of arriving late to work, leaving work early, purchasing a car or arranging additional childcare services simply to ensure their children could arrive at school on time—all as a result of randomized III placements that were not taking distance from homes into account. When there is no system to request a socioeconomic-neutral transfer, that is not equity—it is a burden that can prevent a family from financially thriving in our community.

Over the years we have learned that farther distances to school disproportionately impacted low-income students of color. These populations are not always the loudest voices in public debate, but they are the most directly impacted by our III policy choices. I was encouraged to learn that the 2025-2026 SY III placements used proximity to schools as part of the algorithm to enable more students to go to one of their closest schools while still maintaining our variance. Another step towards progress was the Board passing updates to policies 5124 (Internal Transfers) and 5120 (Assignment of Students), which enable caregivers to request a transfer for their III-placed child based on hardships. I often reflect on the inequity of randomly forcing one student to wake up at 6 a.m. to endure a 50-minute bus ride, while another reaps the benefits of sleeping until 7 a.m. and walking to school in 10 minutes. Enabling hardship transfers makes it possible for parents to advocate for their family's unique needs and challenges. With sufficient transportation funding, we could also reduce such disparities by avoiding tiered routes, shortening ride times, and ensuring that integration does not come at the expense of students' daily well-being.

3. What do you think has been the most successful aspect of III? Or is it too early to tell? Can you talk about the importance of the Rutgers Recommendations in remedying access and equity issues?

If you take a purely statistical perspective, then our Intentional Integration Initiative (III) can be considered successful because our elementary schools now appear balanced from a socioeconomic standpoint. However, student demographics in school (which will impact a student's experience in the classroom) is not solely a data point; from a racial lens, the picture is more complex. Anecdotally Black families have shared with me that

they preferred their child to be in a mostly BIPOC environment in school (e.g., be at Seth Boyden, which for years had a voluntary opt-in program to help increase diversity) vs. now being "the only Black kid in class". We cannot legally integrate students by race, yet we track that data in our schools. I also remain deeply concerned about the declining presence of Black students in our district. Families are moving away, choosing private schools, or deciding not to relocate to South Orange and Maplewood in the first place. During the past decade, the nonprofit South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race has worked hard to survey and understand why Black families are choosing other towns, as well as market our two towns

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as an inviting place to live for Black families. It is also important to recognize that most of the Rutgers Recommendations address middle and high school remedies, while the Intentional Integration Initiative is most felt in the K–5 years. Our middle schools were already relatively balanced racially, and in fact, they were never initially intended to be part of the III. Their inclusion was a late-stage decision that, in my view, was not necessary, based on the data. The Board has had conversations with the district to consider phasing out that component. A natural progression of diverse student populations into the middle schools can occur through a permanent, designated feeder structure from each elementary school.

I greatly value the role of the Rutgers Recommendations and the accountability they have brought. The district, working closely with the Black Parents Workshop and in collaboration with the Board's oversight, has made significant strides in tracking and implementing those recommendations. As we enter the final year of the settlement, the key question becomes: what comes next? My position is that the district should treat these changes not as temporary fixes but as the foundation for a culture of continuous monitoring and improvement. This will ensure that equity and access remain guiding principles well beyond the life of the settlement.