Education and Civics in Delaware CLE
May 12, 2026
Delaware State Bar Association

Agenda

11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. – Check In

12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. - Presentation

Presenters:
Betsy Renzo, Esq. | Executive Director, The Delaware Law Related Education Center
Oluwatobi "Tobi" Omotoso, Esq. | Education Equity Fellow, ACLU Delaware

The Delaware Law Related Education Center (DELREC) and the ACLU are teaming up to provide an update on the state of education and civics in Delaware. Do you know where Delaware ranks in reading and math amongst the 50 states? Do you know about the proposed change to school funding and redistricting in Wilmington? From desegregation efforts, to busing, charter schools, school choice, neighborhood schools, and school unit funding, our panelists will explain where we are today in Delaware education and how we got here. As organizations hoping to improve civic knowledge and engagement in Delaware, DELREC and the ACLU will engage participants in a discussion of best practices and future plans.

This seminar offers 1.5 ethics credits to Delaware and Pennsylvania Attorneys; and 1.8 ethics credits to NJ Attorneys.



Betsy Renzo, Esq

Executive Director, DELREC

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Both an attorney and experienced K-12 teacher, Betsy Renzo is the Executive Director of the Delaware Law Related Education Center (DELREC). Prior to DELREC, Betsy was the Director of Advancement at the Community Education Building, in Wilmington. Betsy was a classroom teacher and program leader for ten years, teaching AP Government, Speech & Debate, Global Pease & Social Justice, and U.S. History. Before teaching, she worked as an attorney in Pennsylvania, focusing on juvenile criminal justice and family law. It is a life goal of hers to create educational opportunities for all. Betsy believes that education is the most powerful tool we can give to our youth, and that strong economies need strong schools. She holds a JD from Temple University Beasley School of Law and a Master's degree in Education from Stanford University.



Oluwatobi "Tobi" Omotoso

Pronouns: He/They

Education Equity Fellow, ACLU of Delaware

Oluwatobi "Tobi" Omotoso joined the ACLU of Delaware in 2025 after graduating from Harvard Law School. While at Harvard Law School, they sought various opportunities to empower underserved communities. They served as the practice area head of the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau's family practice. For his efforts at the Bureau, Omotoso was honored with the Betty Allebach Award for commitment to public service by his peers and supervisors. Omotoso was also editor-in-chief of the Harvard Law Record newspaper for his 2L and 3L year, where he covered various issues related to free speech, public safety, equity, and campus activism.

EDUCATION IN DELAWARE

Civics, Desegregation, School Funding, and more!

ACLU Delaware

DELREC
DELAWARE Law Related Education Center

Discuss:

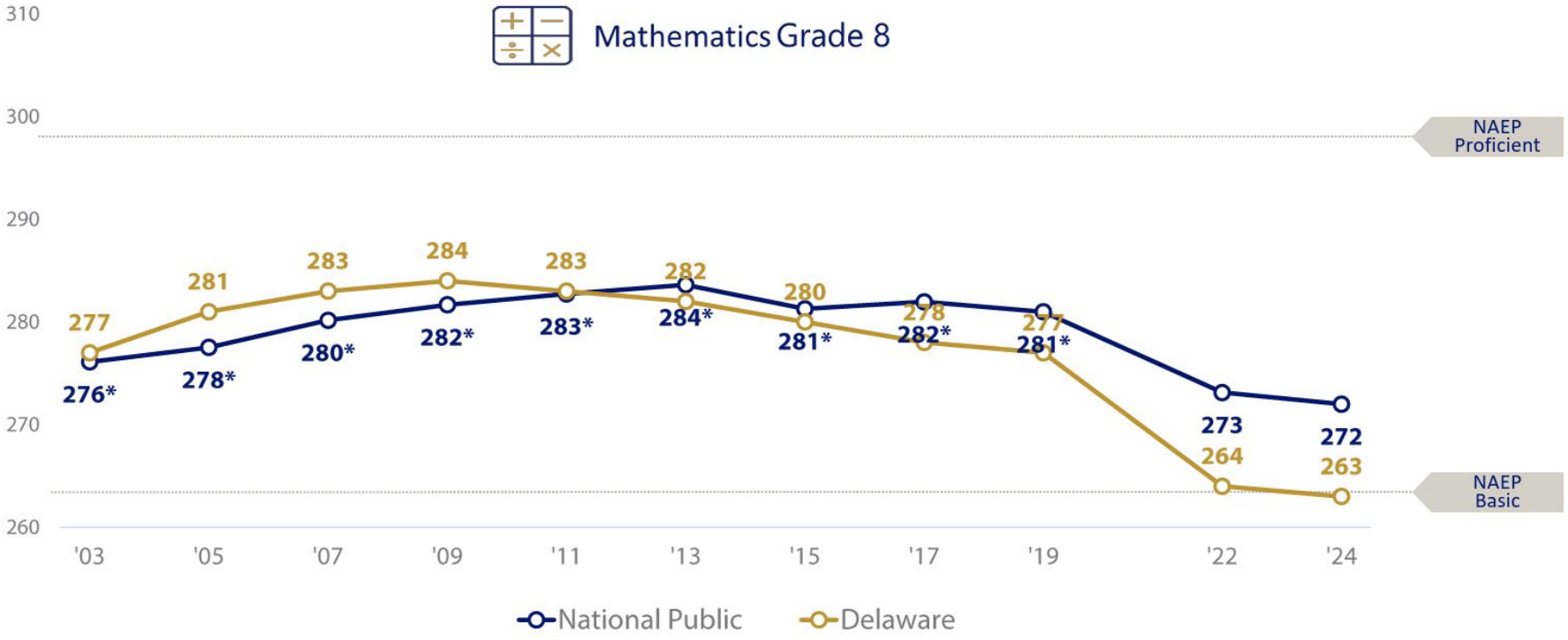
What do you think of K-12 education in our state?

How does Delaware rank compared to the other 49 states (math and reading combined)?

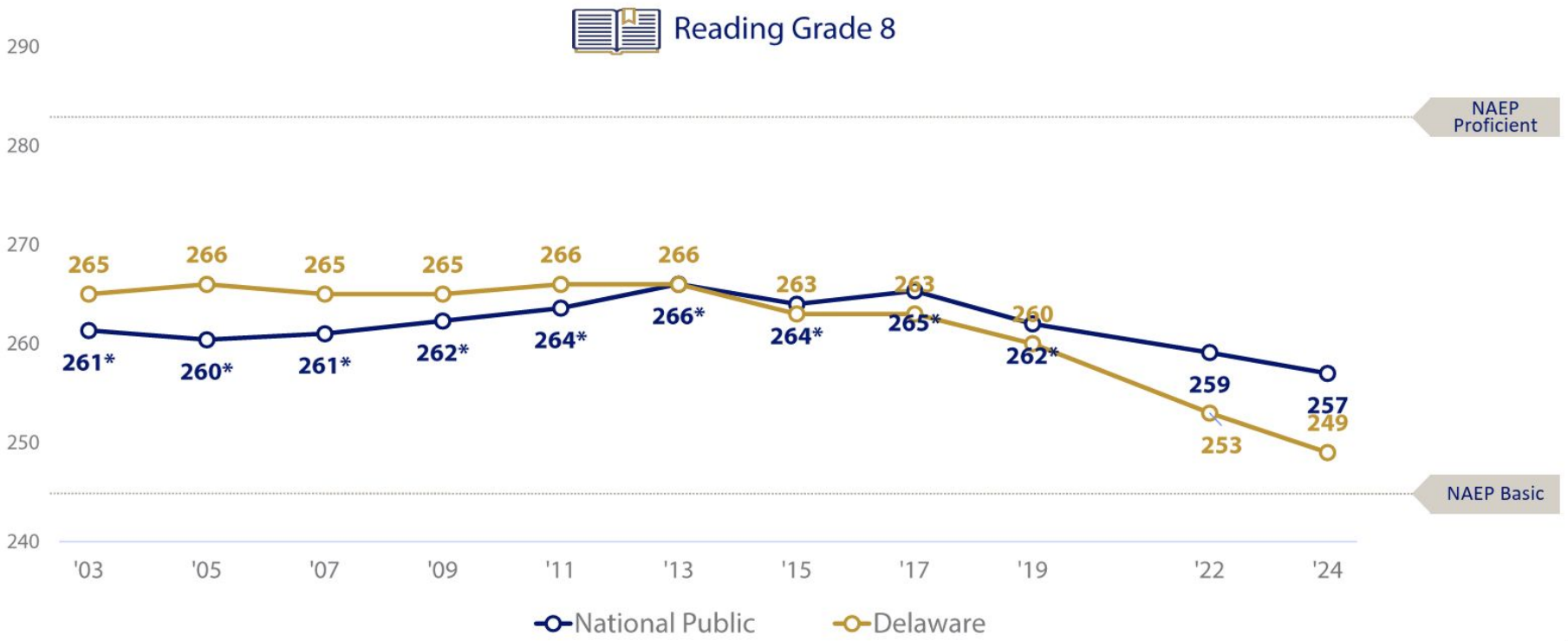
We are 45th in the Nation

Specifically:

- 47th in 8th grade math
- 46th in 8th grade reading
- 40th in 4th grade math and
- 45th in 4th grade reading



*Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2024.



*Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2024.

Why??

- Covid hit us hard (this is only part of the issue)
- It hit students hardest with highest needs
- Delaware has a high percentage of students with high needs
- We have a sizable equity gap in DE

RESULTS FOR STUDENT GROUPS IN 2024

REPORTING GROUPS	PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS	AVG. SCORE	PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE *NAEP* *BASIC*	PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE *NAEP* *PROFICIENT*	PERCENTAGE AT *NAEP* *ADVANCED*
Race/ethnicity					
American Indian/Alaska Native	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Asian	4	303	88	55	20
Black	33	245	33	8	1
Hispanic	19	257	43	12	2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	‡	‡	‡	‡
Two or More Races	5	267	55	22	5
White	38	277	66	29	6
Gender					
Male	52	265	52	21	5
Female	48	261	50	17	3
Economically disadvantaged status					
Economically disadvantaged	29	246	34	7	#
Not economically disadvantaged	71	270	58	24	6

Rounds to zero

So what's the connection between law and education?

- Segregation and desegregation
- Funding for schools
- Protected classes - high needs students
- Civics and Democracy
- Crime and Trauma
- Equity (desegregation, funding, IEPs, school choice, discipline rates, etc)

So what's the connection between law and education?

Let's start with Civics…

Civics in DE

- Only 28% of high school students test proficient in Civics
- We test it, we don’t require it
- High School History only requires 3 years, but they have to teach:
  - US History
  - World History
  - Geography
  - Psychology
  - Financial Literacy
  - Economics
  - Civics/Government

Civics in DE

- We asked teachers what obstacles stand in their way.
  - 83% scheduling/time
  - 35% resources/money
  - 27% lack of expertise
- We asked teachers what subjects they feel confident teaching within Civics
  - Many felt confident teaching about elections and the 3 branches of government
  - Only 18% felt confident in teaching law-related education or the judiciary

Civics in DE

- This is where we can help!!
- There are only 12 main civics standards tested across the 12 grades
- We have one-hour legal lessons to cover them- AND students get to meet a lawyer!

So what's the connection between law and education?

Let's talk about Desegregation…



THINK. PAIR. SHARE.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE AN EQUAL EDUCATION?

DESEGREGATION, SEPARATION, AND HOW WE GOT WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Over the past 70 years - what did Delaware try?

HOW DID WE TRY TO DESEGREGATE?

- ✔ Many states responded to desegregation with delay, avoidance, and resistance. At times, the same was true in Delaware.
- ✔ In 1971, Black students in Wilmington sued Delaware because their schools were, in fact, still segregated.
- ✔ As a result, Delaware decided to bus students from the city to suburban schools and vice versa.

BUSING IN THE 1970s

- ✔ This was called the 9-3 Plan. Students from the city had to be bused to the suburbs for 9 years, and students from the suburbs had to be bused to the city for only 3 years.
- ✔ But this put undue burden on the students from the city. They had long bus rides, didn't know their teachers, and were not always welcomed at their new schools.
- ✔ Many families asked to end the busing policy and for schools closer to home.

THREE SCHOOL LAWS - 1990s + 2000

- ✔ Charter School Act: Students can apply to independent, public charter schools as an alternative to traditional public schools.
- ✔ School Choice Act: Students can apply to any charter, vo-tech, or public school in their district (sometimes even outside of it) regardless of their home address.
- ✔ Neighborhood Schools Act: School districts must assign students to attend schools closest to their homes.

DISPARATE TREATMENT

- ✔ The other problem with forced integration is that you cannot force people to change as fast as the law

- ✔ Even with students of multiple races attending the same school, we continue to see separation within the schools (discipline, AP courses, etc.)

EDUCATIONAL FUNDING

- ✔ Now, our schools are largely segregated again (though they never truly desegregated)
- ✔ Without changing where people live, it's hard to truly integrate schools.
- ✔ In many ways, this takes us back to separate but unequal.
- ✔ This begs the question: if we cannot desegregate our schools, can we at least make them more equal? Many are currently arguing for more funding for our lower-income schools with higher percentages of students in need

The reality of the legacy of Brown in Delaware:

VIDEO

DISCUSS:

Can you desegregate schools without desegregating neighborhoods? And if not, what can we do about residential segregation?

Consider: Law created it, Law can fix it.

So what's the connection between law and education?

Let's talk more about funding…

Unit funding v. per pupil funding

- We are one of only 3 states that still does unit funding
- Ex: 30 students = 1 unit
- Doesn’t take student need into consideration (MLL, special education or low-income students

ACLU Case:

Delawareans for Equal Opportunity v. Carney, 2020

- ACLU, CLASI & NAACP challenged state funding formula
- Case settled, agreeing to $60M more in funding for low income and higher-need students
- This is what triggered the property tax reassessments (sorry and thank you)

Funding in 2026

- The $60M in opportunity funding is not enough
- About 75% of our public schools are Title I schools
- Right now, for special education students, the state gives over 200% of the per pupil amount- this allows for smaller classes/ratios
- By contrast, schools only get a 15% increase for MLL and low-income students.
- The new formula would provide much more support and flexibility for schools to take individual student needs into account.

To find out more, visit: https://tinyurl.com/fundinginDE

Pop Quiz!

How many students are there in Delaware Public Schools?

A. 312,000
B. 142,000
C. 267,000
D. 445,000

Pop Quiz!

How many students are there in Delaware Public Schools?

B. 142,000…. That's it!

- There are 2.6M people in Brooklyn alone.
- 200K students in Philadelphia's schools.
- And we have 2 Million businesses incorporated here.
- We have the resources

We have a duty to serve them better. And we can. It will help our democracy, our economy, and our neighbors.

So what's the connection between law and education?

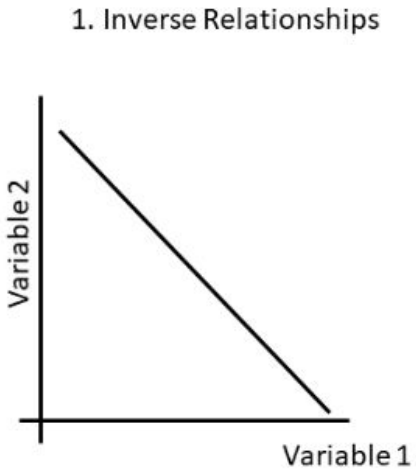
Let's talk about trauma, school, and crime

The Link between Education and Crime

- We start to see students losing self-worth around 4th grade
- If you believe that you will succeed, you generally come to school ready to learn and do the things that will help you succeed.
- If you do NOT believe you will succeed, we see students displaying evasive behaviors. These look like:
  - Falling asleep on your desk
  - Getting up to go to the bathroom 5 times in an hour
  - Making jokes
  - Not doing homework
  - Arguing with the teacher or disengaging altogether

The Link between Education and Crime

A little math (sorry, I know we're lawyers): there is an inverse relationship between believing you will succeed in life and juveniles committing crimes.



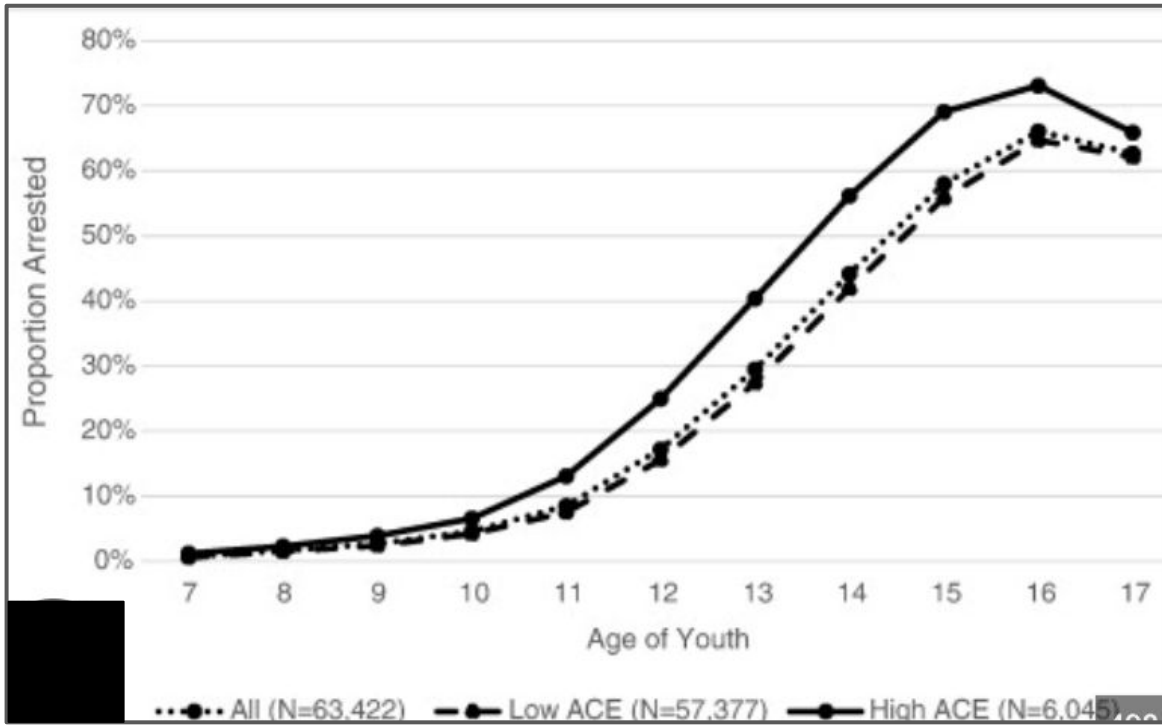
https://www.psypost.org/study-high-self-esteem-linked-reduced-likelihood-crime-delinquency/

The Link between Trauma and Crime

- We also know that there is a direct relationship between childhood trauma and juvenile delinquency.
- *"The proximal effects of childhood trauma include an increased risk for delinquency, fighting, dating violence, and carrying a weapon, as well as mental health issues such as substance use and conduct disorders, and suicidal ideation and attempts …*
- ***Between 75%-93% of youth entering the juvenile justice system have experienced traumatic victimization"*** *[compared to 25-34% of the general population].*

Evans-Chase, 2014; see also Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235215000446

The Link between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)s and Crime



Evans-Chase, 2014; see also Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010;
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0047235215000446

The Connection

- Students with high ACE scores struggle to feel confident in school and then engage in self-sabotage —-- BUT
- **Our ACEs do not need to determine our life outcomes**
- The presence of just ONE trusting adult can significantly reduce the long term harms of trauma.
- How many juveniles have you met who think their life is already predetermined by the age of 16?
- The criminal justice system is a reactive one. Education is proactive.
- How you interact with youth proactively will impact crime in our state
- **We need to deliver the message of self-worth as often as possible, from as many people as possible, and follow our words with actions.**

So what's the connection between law and education?

Many things.

What will you do with the information you now have?

Questions?

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