

NJPSA Questionnaire for NJ Legislative Candidates of the 2023 GENERAL ELECTION

Thank you for your dedication to public service and for your interest in what is on the minds of the members of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA).

NJPSA represents over 7,000 active school leaders in New Jersey's public schools. Our members serve in the positions of principal, assistant principal, director, and supervisor. We are dedicated to providing a high quality education to every student in New Jersey schools.

The following questionnaire is designed for you to share your perspectives on issues of concern to the NJPSA membership. NJPSA will publish your responses on our special NJPSA Election Center website in October to inform our members in their Election 2023 decision-making process.

Thank you for taking the time to share your perspectives with us!

Candidate's Name: *

Christine Clarke

Office Sought: *

☐ NJ General Assembly

☒ NJ State Senate

☐ Other:

Party: *

☒ Democrat

☐ Republican

☐ Independant

☐ Other:

Legislative District #: *

25 ▼

Campaign Email Address: *

christine@clarkeforsenate.com

Campaign Phone Number: *

973-601-7878

Campaign Website:

http://www.clarkeforsenate.com

Campaign Mailing Address:

Clarke For Senate, P.O. Box 585, Lake Hopatcong, NJ 07849

Safe Schools

School principals and supervisors are directly responsible for creating a safe, secure, and supportive learning environment for our students. A student's feeling of safety and security is at risk where school buildings are not up to health and safety standards, where the risk of gun violence can threaten our schools, and where school buildings are not fully equipped with current security staffing and equipment.

If elected to the State Legislature, what will you do to address school safety and security in the broadest sense, not only to upgrade the physical structures and equipment in our schools, but also to safeguard our students from the threat of gun violence or other threats to their safety?

I stand with our teachers in that schools shouldn't be shooting ranges, nor educators and students targets! While I can't work on federal legislation regarding gun safety as a state legislator, I am proud of New Jersey's A rating on gun safety, and there's always more we can do here. For example, we can invest in mental health. We need counselors available for teachers and students, and we need to fight patterns and tendencies toward violence in society. But, that investment can't just be reactive. It has to be proactive. I've believed for a number of years now that social and emotional education should be included in curriculum, taught and repeated at age-appropriate intervals and levels, and inclusive of coping mechanisms for stress, conflict resolution skills, and personal stress management techniques. Let's help youth grow up with healthy life skills to carry into adulthood. Hopefully that means that at points of extreme stress later in life, they don't reach for weapons, they reach for connection or help.

I also think that we should move forward with creating a state bank toward the goal of making investments in infrastructure in our state, including repairs in our schools.

Student Mental Health

Even before the pandemic, school leaders grew concerned with the rising mental health needs of students. Post-pandemic, students have returned to school with a broad range of needs including mental wellness and academic needs. A recent CDC study found that the number of young adults with depression more than *doubled* from 2011 to 2021. School leaders and their staff do all they can to provide appropriate student support, but the inconsistent range of services and current case overload on service providers, mental health professionals, and outside mental health services is a great barrier. This school year, the Murphy Administration is launching a new network system called NJ4S to provide preventative and referral service options for schools. This, as yet untried, system is designed to replace the highly effective School-Based Youth Services Program, which provides direct funding to some school districts to offer mental health and related services directly in school.

As a state legislator, how will you prioritize, support, and fund student mental health issues in our schools? Will you advocate for continued funding for existing School-Based Youth Services programs in next year's budget discussions, as well as expansion for these tried-and-true SBYS programs?

I support funding for mental health programs in our schools. Yes, I would vote to maintain funding for School Based Youth Services, and see if we can expand it as well. As mentioned in the prior question response, I believe we should include life skills in public school programs such as coping mechanisms for stress, conflict resolution skills, and personal stress management techniques, at age-appropriate intervals and levels throughout a student's time in schools. I support efforts toward those goals. Let's help kids develop the interpersonal skills and the personal disciplinary skills to keep themselves healthy and keep themselves and others safe.

Staffing Shortages/Educator Pipeline

One of the top concerns of NJPSA members is fully staffing their schools in all school roles, including teachers. Once again, the pandemic exacerbated a rising problem in our schools - the dwindling number of young people entering the education profession as teachers, counselors, and other critical school staffing positions. The State Legislature has been working to address barriers to the teaching profession within the licensing code and teacher preparation system.

If elected/reelected, what new ideas will you bring to this issue to ensure that our schools are fully staffed with well-qualified and prepared teachers and education service professionals?

In general, I am inclined toward policy that benefits teachers and students by erring toward protecting the love of learning and the love of teaching. I think at some level we've lost that in society, and the staffing shortages reflect it. High stakes testing shouldn't dictate what happens in classrooms; we have to move away from teaching for tests, and let teachers foster a love of lifelong learning. Teachers should have an easier time with career advancement, including the ability to switch employers without starting over financially. Teachers shouldn't have to consider whether they are putting their lives on the line by going into this profession. Teachers shouldn't have to watch politicians, like my opponent Anthony M. Bucco, headline panels and events with extremist groups that corrupt our school boards; they should have elected officials who support them, support their professional workplaces, benefits, and career advancement; and support the idea that schools should be for every child, with books for every child. It should be easier for teachers to enter the field, too - I am glad New Jersey eliminated the edTPA requirement that stood in the way of teacher certification. As we consider pathways toward solutions, teachers and educational professionals need to have representatives that welcome them advising the legislative process concerning education. If elected, I would want and welcome educators' input on next steps.

Social Media Impacts on Students

The U.S. Surgeon General recently reported on the “profound risk of harm” that social media poses to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Recent tragedies in New Jersey, including the suicide of several young students, amplifies this danger. Social media frequently plays a persistent, negative role in bullying incidents both at and away from school. Principals face impenetrable roadblocks placed by social media companies in addressing these issues.

If elected/reelected, how will you work with NJPSA to develop legislation that protects the online safety, privacy, and welfare of our students; requires social media companies to develop safer products for student use; and requires social media companies to work with schools and law enforcement in cases where students are harmed by social media use?

Studies on the effects of social media on students find that only 1% of students' social media use is actually for learning; the rest is for connecting with friends, chatting online, using social applications and the like. Signs of social media addiction were shown by upwards of 57% of students in a study published in the Saudi Journal of Biological Sciences in 2021 and available through ScienceDirect online. I understand completely that a cell phone can be a life saving tool in an emergency, and also, that with bullying, the threat of violence in schools and other dangers of unpredictable timing, parents and students may want students to have their cell phones on them or available in the event of an emergency including social emergencies like bullying. I think schools should have, offer to students, and require, sleeves that block signals for cell phones, to keep them from use during the day. I think students should be allowed to hold onto the phones while inside the sleeves, and check inside the sleeves inbetween classes or class periods only, barring emergencies. I don't think they should be on their phones during lunch or study halls. I think this will help keep schools insulated from distractions due to cell phone use, help foster real interactions rather than digital ones between students, and let students and their parents have the sense that the phone is available in the event of an emergency while being turned off so that the phones aren't a disruption during class.

I also think parents should have parental controls in various social media apps that allow them to block usage during certain hours like when their kids are in class. Presently, Google allows family settings that can give parents the ability to set age groups for their children, connect their kids' email accounts to family accounts, and set usage timelines and hours. The same could be done for times when students are in class. I think the other social media giants should offer similar controls, and parents and educators should be able to have conversations about mutually agreeable time windows for app use accordingly. I would be happy to support such requirements in legislation. I also want strict prohibitions on companies tracking the data of minors' web habits; social media companies shouldn't be able to gather and sell the browsing habits or interests of young platform users, nor market ads to them using their data.

Learning and High Stakes Testing

NJPSA believes that student assessment is an integral part of the instructional process that is inextricably linked to a viable curriculum and strong instructional practice. Constructive and well-designed assessments provide on-going, actionable, and timely information to students, parents, and educators concerning what students know, understand, and can do in relation to our learning standards. Currently, New Jersey students are assessed in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science via standardized tests according to federal and state requirements during their elementary, middle and high school careers.

NJPSA believes that New Jersey must streamline its testing requirements to avoid over-testing, duplicative testing, and tests that students do not consider relevant to their futures, especially at the high school level.

What role do you believe standardized testing should play in a student's academic life? How would you assist educators in streamlining current requirements and eliminating unnecessary testing?

I have never been a fan of high stakes testing. Given the mental health challenges coming out of the pandemic for students and for teachers, as well as the fact that New Jersey has the third-highest level of autism in the nation with 1 in 34 students having some level of autism spectrum disorder, including one of my children, I know that high stakes testing creates stress and anxiety, and some students just don't perform well on these tests. I would much rather see us move to a system in which a student's performance, work completion, work ethic, and progress in personal learning are evaluated together in totality toward graduation. High stakes tests should not be weighted such that they hold back students' graduations, nor teachers' career advancement for that matter either.

Learning and High Stakes Testing

Will you vote in support of [S-3308/A-4639](#), legislation that would eliminate New Jersey's high school graduation exit test, a requirement that serves as a potential barrier to graduation for many students?

☒ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know/prefer not to say

☐ Other:

School Funding

New Jersey schools are reliant on state, federal, and local funding to support our programs and services. Many districts are facing higher costs to operate, staffing shortages with negative fiscal impacts, health care cost increases, and new costs resulting from health and safety needs post-pandemic. Federal funding has assisted districts in meeting some of these challenges, but those funds must be used by 2024. Additionally, some districts have faced significant additional cuts in state funding due to changes in the law which redistributed state aid (S-2).

How will you work with NJPSA and other education stakeholders to address these funding concerns moving forward?

New Jersey's school funding formula has created hardship for school districts that were considered overfunded, including in my town. I remember during the implementation of the new funding formula how contentious the discussions locally were over which programs and services might have to be cut. I think it's important that the governor has added additional school funding to offset the cuts in recent years, but I think that also speaks to a need to revisit the school funding formula. It shouldn't be at the whim of an elected official whether schools receive the funding they need to continue making New Jersey the best place to educate a student in the nation. I also think that we should consider shorter-term options to continue supplementary funding, including a state process to apply for additional aid.

School Funding

Would you vote to eliminate or modify the 2% tax levy cap on school budgets in certain situations?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know/prefer not to say

☒ Other:

I am hesitant to eliminate the 2% tax levy cap on school budgets. Presently, voters have to approve exceptions to the tax cap at the ballot box. There have been serious funding issues taxpayers have rejected help for recently in our district; Dover needs a new school which will cost approximately \$60 million and is trying to take advantage of state aid and grants, for example, but voters voted down financing the construction of a new school. However with the serious affordability issues some communities are experiencing, making up the budgetary differences in new property taxes without a vote on expanding the cap seems ill advised. I'd rather see the statehouse revisit the school funding formula.

School Funding

How would you work to address the funding needs of the S-2 districts since the fiscal world has significantly changed since that legislation was enacted in 2018?

It seems like the school funding formula we presently have is causing severe funding shortages in many school systems, and requires revisiting. I think the state should revisit the formula and the funding behind it, and see if we can make positive adjustments based on the impacts we have seen of S2.

The Right to Read – Book Bans

NJPSA is proud of New Jersey's strong student learning standards which have been highly rated across the country. A key component of all our learning standards is the goal of developing critical thinking and the analysis of multiple resources. Our members work hard to support student learning by working with our teachers to provide a rich curriculum aligned to these standards and the use of high-quality books and materials as support. We also partner with our parents to be part of their child's learning process. NJPSA is concerned about the rising incidence of demands to ban certain books from school libraries and the curriculum. While parents can surely direct the reading choices of their children, they should not be able to direct what resources and books are available to other students.

Will you commit to protecting a student's right to read and learn according to New Jersey's student learning standards (NJSLs) by opposing any legislation designed to infringe on those student rights? As a state leader, how can you assist educators in communicating this message to parents and community stakeholders?

I will support keeping libraries intact and books available for readers. So does my team. I do not agree with the calls to ban books. I do not agree with the far right's positions against inclusive policies for LGBTQ youth. I support Senator Zwicker's efforts to prohibit book bans by considering the possibility of connecting intact libraries to funding.

My opponent, Bucco, aligns with groups like Moms for Liberty, and has served on a panel with them encouraging far-right behavior in Board of Education meetings and races. He is the prime sponsor on S2483, the New Jersey version of the Florida "Don't Say Gay" bill. He has voted against LGBTQ rights throughout his time in the statehouse. His running mate Christian Barranco just last week testified in Jefferson Township against inclusive policies and protecting LGBTQ kids from forced outings. He was present in the far-right's attacks on an 11 year old girl changing in the girls' locker room with other girls. I was present and testified in defense of protecting inclusive safe schools, and protecting LGBTQ youth. The contrast in the District 25 race on these matters is extreme and clear.

Pension Funding

In recent years, New Jersey has honored its obligations to make the full actuarially required annual payment to the Teachers Pension and Annuity Fund (TPAF) and Public Employees Retirement System (PERS) under a schedule or repayment established by state law.

Will you continue to honor this obligation moving forward and fight to ensure that the public pension system for school employees is fully funded in next year's State Budget Process?

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I don't know/prefer not to say
- ☐ Other:

The End.

Thank you for sharing your perspectives with NJPSA members statewide!

Is there anything else that you would like our members to know about you or your candidacy?

Our race is happening in one of the most politically-fair districts in the state, with less than 2,400 voters separating the political parties in voter registrations. We are engaged in a turnout fight, and every vote matters! If elected, I would be the first woman to serve District 25 in the New Jersey State Senate. I hope to have the honor of representing the district and replacing my opponent's out-of-touch positions with servant leadership for the people. Thank you for the opportunity to provide answers to your questions. If you have additional questions, please reach out anytime to christine@clarkeforsenate.com.

.....



NJPSA
NEW JERSEY PRINCIPALS
AND SUPERVISORS ASSOCIATION

Google Forms