

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: *

Patrick Diegnan

Office Sought: *

☐ NJ General Assembly

☒ NJ State Senate

☐ Other:

Party: *

☒ Democrat

☐ Republican

☐ Independant

☐ Other:

Legislative District #: *

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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 am proud of my record as an advocate for school safety and security. As the former chair of the Assembly Education Committee and the father of a teacher, I know firsthand the challenges of protecting our students and staff while at the same time providing an environment that will not cause anxiety. During this legislative session, I introduced the School Safety and Security Task Force bill (S3079), which the full Senate unanimously passed, with the goal of ensuring a safe learning environment for students and school employees. I look forward to continuing to work with principals and supervisors to address this priority.

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?

This must be a top priority. Absolutely! I was privileged to tour and experience a highly successful School-Based Youth Services Program (SBYS) in my legislative district at Highland Park, which could serve as a model for others statewide. I fully grasp the value and need for these programs, which have my unwavering support. As part of the state's annual budget process for FY24, I co-sponsored a resolution that increased the appropriation for School Linked Services Programs, which includes 90 SBYS programs.

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?

I have sponsored and will continue to sponsor multiple bills to address this very issue.

I introduced legislation (S2594) the full Senate unanimously passed earlier this year that requires the state Board of Education to authorize an alternative means for teaching candidates to secure employment as a teacher with a school district while awaiting the issuance of a certificate of eligibility or certificate of eligibility with advanced standing from the Department of Education.

I am also the co-sponsor during this current legislative session of the following bills designed to address the need for school districts statewide to fill vacancies and retain existing teachers. The legislation includes bills that:

- S3883 - Require the State Board of Education to authorize a route to expedite the teacher certification of persons employed as paraprofessionals in school districts.
- S3890 - Prohibit limiting the number of county college credits that may be applied toward educator preparation programs and teacher certification requirements.
- S3884 - Remove obstacles to teacher certification for certain teachers.
- S3892 - Direct the state Board of Education to authorize issuance of new endorsements in certain fields.
- S3798 - Permit teachers and professional staff members who provide special services, who retired from the Teachers' Pension and Annuity Fund (TPAF) to return to employment for up to two years without reenrollment in TPAF if employment commences during the 2023-2024 school year.

The latter was signed into law this summer.

I look forward to continuing to work with the NJPSA and other advocates to find remedies to address school staffing shortages.

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?

As the grandfather of four grandchildren who are in first, third, sixth and ninth grades, I know firsthand how social media can be a weapon for bullies and predators. I look forward to working with your group, teachers, support staff, parents and law enforcement to address this challenge.

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?

As a bill (S3308) of which I am the co-prime sponsor states, “Studies have shown numerous flaws with standardized testing, including variation in student performance based on external circumstances, strong racial and socioeconomic biases, and inconsistency with material taught in class.” The bill would eliminate the high school graduation proficiency test. New Jersey is one of just 11 states that still maintains this exam as a testing requirement for graduation. As the bill states, “Studies have shown other metrics, such as grade point average, can predict the likelihood of graduation from college up to five times better than standardized test scores.”

I was also the proud co-prime sponsor of a bill (S2349) signed into law during the current legislative session which required the State to administer the New Jersey Graduation Proficiency Assessment as a field test for 11th grade students expected to graduate in 2023. The law has long-term benefits as it will help the State better understand the extent and severity of learning loss among students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The law also required the State to develop graduation assessments that are not only realistic and achievable, but appropriately rigorous.

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:

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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?

I believe every district should rely on prior year funding when preparing their budget. Only funding increases should be part of the state budget.

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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:

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?

Nothing is more important than properly funding our schools. The additional \$100 million provided in this year's budget is a first step. We must make proper funding of all districts a top priority.

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?

Yes. I believe providing reliable information to parents explaining the process will address this concern. I will be happy to be a part of that process.

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?

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